

41. Introduction Chapter: Policy

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the diversity of media education policies around the world. It argues that media literacy policy is both more and less than media education policy and identifies criteria for evaluating both.

Keywords: Media Policy; Education Policy; Digital Divide; Children's Rights; Media Literacy

Media literacy policy – an umbrella concept for multiple realities

Each year I invite my international master's students to find a national media literacy or media education policy and bring it to class for comparison and critique. The result is always diverse. After the inevitable and, in their way, fascinating discussions about defining "media literacy" and translating it into languages spoken around the world, several interesting points emerge.

Most obvious is that national policies reflect the state's priorities and even those of the ministry that champions the policy. For example, an education ministry wants children to gain digital skills to prepare for employment. A ministry of the family seeks to combat online risks of harm through e-safety measures. The culture ministry hopes to build a discerning audience for its heritage and culture industries. The business department is keen to lighten the burden of regulation on the industry by empowering citizens to adopt and safely use relatively unregulated technology. Adding to the mix, a national library association may promote information literacy to retain its relevance in the digital age. Politicians belatedly recognise that critical media literacy may ameliorate the problems of disinformation spread through social media (LSE Truth, Trust and Technology Commission, 2018). Even the technology companies – especially the big platforms – now promote educational resources to build public trust, albeit with an eye to their commercial interests. Some of these voices are louder than others, and some imperatives are more urgently expressed in the public sphere.

Regarding the dimensions of media literacy that policy promotes, let us recall the classic definition of media literacy as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages in various forms (Aufderheide, 1983). Our class discussions reveal that some policies support the development of functional skills to enhance access to and use of devices and connectivity to ensure digital inclusion and overcome the digital divide (Helsper, 2021)). These are generally informed by evidence, albeit most often from high-income countries, which tracks inequalities in the population's adoption of a range of media.

Fewer policymakers are interested in how people analyse media as texts and as culture. However, this dimension of media literacy has long been a priority among those designing media education curricula, keen that children from the early years through adolescence understand the social, cultural, historical and semiotic aspects of audio-visual media (including television literacy, advertising literacy, film literacy and, more recently, games literacy). Recently, the "fake news" debacle has raised the profile of critical and information literacies, and there has been a boom in resource production to support such literacies.

Yet, even now, governments are wary of the implication that this will encourage citizens to become more critical of themselves and their preferred media outlets, and so the ability to analyse media is generally taught with caution and within limits.

Finally, the ability to create media is rarely a priority for policymakers, surprisingly, even in countries where the culture industries make a valued contribution to the national economy (Frau-Meigs & Torrent, 2009). Yet pedagogy suggests that just as learning to write and express oneself is vital for learning to read, so too is learning to create digital media vital to understanding them (Buckingham, 2015). Consequently, creating media tends to be organised in nonformal learning settings and, unless strenuous efforts are made, it remains the preserve of the privileged.

While there are contested views about *what* media education is needed, less attention is paid to evaluating the effectiveness of media education policy. For this, clarity is needed not only on the purpose and nature of the intervention, as discussed above, but also on the target audience. Who is media education for? One policy may seek to educate school children while another is concerned with the adult population no longer in education. For others, particular population segments are prioritised, such as the youth in need of flexible employment skills or the older adults easily left behind in the rush to adopt digital innovations. Each of these target audiences poses serious practical challenges regarding outreach and implementation, necessitating cooperation with relevant professional and civil society organisations. While the practicalities of delivering media education often dominate the agenda, to resolve these satisfactorily, clarity is needed regarding the problem for which media education is proposed as the solution and, further, the outcomes expected from media education.

Regarding the outcomes, what do we expect a media-literate person to be able to do? And what does a media literate society look like? These are not easy questions to answer. The second question should be considered more often, for education is not a purely individual matter. If many individuals benefit from media education, there will be institutional implications. Governments are often keen that citizens can pay their taxes or register to vote online. Still, they may give less thought to how democratic participation, health provision, or neighbourhood policing should be reconfigured once the population becomes technologically proficient. Policy development is a normative enterprise - Given a lack of clarity about either the problem to be solved or the consequences of gaining media literacy, no wonder that few media education policies are formally evaluated for their effectiveness. For sure, they are evaluated on superficial metrics of reach and appeal. Still, it is less well-established which approaches to media education are or are not effective in improving individuals' life changes or collective outcomes, which makes it difficult to evolve better policies (Edwards et al., 2021).

Theoretical debates about media literacy and media education policy

During the pandemic, we witnessed an extraordinary rush to technology as work, education, commerce and our personal, social and civic lives moved online. As schools and workplaces closed their doors, the headlines were initially filled with the task of getting devices and connectivity to school children, making urgent the long-unresolved problem of the digital divide. As the population grew accustomed to “the new normal” of life online, concerns about the online safety risks to children of digital engagement were rightly highlighted. Policymakers could hardly advise children to limit their screen time when their

education depended on it, nor expect parents to monitor children throughout the whole school day. Yet the very same devices and software used to provide remote education could be and were abused by malign adults or hostile peers. Even more prominent on the public agenda was how the digital networks of mis- and disinformation promoted anti-Covid and anti-vaccine disinformation with dangerous results for the health of the whole world (Hantrais et al., 2020). Given how this was amplified in unaccountable ways by the algorithmic attention-maximising strategies of the major platforms and a host of "bad actors", including certain states, it is hard to argue (though many do) that better media education could have prevented such an astonishing flourishing of disinformation. But most likely, concerted policy efforts to promote media education, especially critical information literacy, would have helped if adequately resourced and, preferably, begun earlier than 2020.

We can make a theoretical distinction between media literacy policies and media education policies. Although these can be one and the same, this is not always the case. If we regard media literacy as the goal and media education as the means of achieving it, it might seem obvious that a significant investment is needed for the digital age to extend prior models of education, for example, by adding media studies to a curriculum that already contains mathematics, history, science, music etc. Yet this isn't proving easy in most countries around the world (Vicol, 2020). Education is a long and demanding process, typically encompassing an institutional setting, a pedagogy, a resource-intensive programme of instruction, and a learning process geared towards achieving set standards. While teaching media literacy might best be incorporated within already-established educational policies and practices, policymakers can be tempted by the "quick fix." Consequently, three less demanding policy approaches to media education are commonplace though their success remains contested.

The first applies primarily to schools and thus to children as the target audience: the policy regards media education as cross-cutting rather than a curriculum subject in its own right. Highlighting the influx of technology into classrooms or, more abstractly, the importance of information to learning, it is claimed that students gain media literacy throughout their school subjects (learning to express themselves using technology, to critique sources, to understand the underlying science, etc.). The claim is that media literacy is, in essence, critical thinking skills for a digital age. In principle, the argument for media literacy as cross-cutting all forms of learning is a good one. However, in practice, the effect is that no one champions media education at school, even that it becomes the "poor relation" by comparison with better-funded "proper" subjects with their own place in the curriculum (Polizzi, 2020).

The second approach is evident in the proliferation of nonformal and informal opportunities to learn that involve digital media in one way or another. These are among the most creative, diverse, expressive and inspiring instances of media education. Because they sit outside the formal education system, they tend to rely on student-led learning and can promote agentic, motivated and collaborative opportunities (Ito et al., 2020). However, their advantage – freedom from the demands of the public education system – is also problematic. Such learning opportunities struggle to provide secure routes for progression, they lack recognised forms of assessment, and they are challenging to scale and sustain over time.

The third approach all but divorces media literacy from the commitments of education entirely. Rather than conceptualising media literacy as gained through a sustained and progressive learning process, this approach harnesses the one-shot techniques of mass advertising or promotional campaigns. It seeks to

promote particular and short messages (change your password, watch your children online, be careful with your personal information, don't share information from unverified sources), which are usually highly instrumental in purpose, designed to protect against immediate risks rather than to empower citizens in the broader sense. Yet they can be effective in their own terms and reach a much larger population in practice than approaches that require people's persistent attention and effort to learn.

While this discussion may imply that media literacy policy can be less than media education policy, there is another sense in which it encompasses more than media education. While media educators may feel that they are striving to keep up with a moving target in terms of the ever-changing complexities of the digital environment, it is significant that the very concept of media "literacy" recognises its interdependence with that technology and the socio-historical changes in which it is embedded. Literacy is, after all, paired with the concept of legibility (Livingstone, 2004). The most literate reader cannot decipher an illegible text, while even the least literate reader can make sense of very clear and familiar infographics.

The history of literacy is intertwined both with the politics of education (who can access it and why) and, as Luke (1989) explains in her critical unfolding of the consequences of print technology, with the nature of that technology insofar as it shapes the demands on the reader and their broader culture. The geopolitical consequences of this are still unfolding. Notably, the digital interface has prioritised the English language, the Roman script and Western forms of knowledge to a greater degree than the audio-visual technologies that preceded it. Further, the technology behind that interface – the digital networks, applications, coding languages, data ecology, systems, business models and governance bodies – are far more opaque (or illegible) than any previous technology. In this sense, despite the rapid advance of digital connectivity and accompanying efforts at media education, society is far less media literate in the digital age than at any time since the advent of mass education following the printing revolution. In another sense, of course, as technology becomes more sophisticated and networked, even if the population is not entirely competent in accessing, analysing, evaluating and creating messages in a variety of digital forms, it has learned a great deal and benefited from some – though never enough - help from policymakers and practitioners.

What do we want from a media literacy policy?

Media literacy policies represent the formal response to a perceived problem. Yet the problem itself is not always clearly articulated. For example, is it the digital divide that media education may help overcome? Or is it that online risks threaten the profitable diffusion of innovations, undermining the potential benefits of the digital age? Or, again, is the problem that the economy lacks suitably skilled workers for the digital age? Identifying the problem matters for at least two reasons. First, it dictates what dimensions of media literacy are promoted or taught. Second, it sets the terms for evaluating the effectiveness of a media education intervention. Thinking through these issues helps us identify what to ask of a media education policy (UNESCO, 2013).

Many contributors to this volume would likely agree that a media literacy and education policy should include the following. A multidimensional policy that encompasses the key dimensions of media literacy. Clarity over the policy's purposes and the intended means of achieving them. A practical definition of the

beneficiaries (usually but not only the target audience for media education). An analysis of the real-world problem for which media education offers a potential solution, preferably formulated in direct consultation with the target audience and other beneficiaries. A robust evidence base that pinpoints the baseline level of media literacy disaggregated by audience segments against which media education interventions can be evaluated. A sensible pedagogy that sets out the proposed approach to teaching and learning, in principle and practice. Adequate and sustainable resources at arms' length from the media industry must be dedicated to the intervention, recognising that education takes time and must be meaningful in the context of people's lives. A strategy for independent evaluation of the intervention outcomes, where these are compared with the baseline and judged against the original purposes. A multistakeholder community of practice that both contributes to and learns from the development of the media education policy. Perhaps more.

How do we get what we want? Media education and media literacy policies can undoubtedly learn from each other and the rich resources provided by UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy initiative, as several contributions to this volume advocate. For further insights, read the chapters that follow.

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