

The importance of Media Information Literacy in the context of a pandemic: an update proposal and new questions

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Abstract

This paper presents a review of the main postulates of Media Literacy, a proposal to update its main premises and objects of study, and a set of questions that seek to demonstrate the importance of Media Literacy in the educational context of the pandemic experienced in 2020. The article is organized into three sections: a review of Media Literacy as a disciplinary area that is increasingly gaining strength and relevance in the world, the Transmedia Literacies as a conceptual update that incorporates the diversity of current communicative practical media experiences, and some questions about the importance and current urgency in the context of a global pandemic of a number of contradictions and dualities on the intersection between communication and education.

Kew words: Media Literacy – pandemic – education – transliteracy – COVID-19.

Introduction

2020 will be remembered as the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, a history-making event that has had an impact on multiple dimensions of the social life of millions of people. Out of this context of global emergency a number of large-scale issues have arisen and some worsened. In the field of education, two of them have made Media Information Literacy (MIL) an increasingly relevant and necessary body of knowledge. On the one hand, the increase in misinformation has become an especially urgent problem to be dealt with given the large number of stories and news that have circulated in the media and social networks about COVID-19. On the other hand, a complex and painstaking process has been required to move formal and informal educational practice into hyper-mediatized virtual spaces, in clearly unfavorable and unexpected contexts and conditions.

These two issues have involved guaranteeing the continuity of teaching at distance and helping the population at large to have better tools against misinformation, both of which are examined here through the postulates of MIL. We propose updating the discussion on how to

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approach them, as well as asking new questions that help to demonstrate the importance of MIL in the present context of challenges brought upon by the pandemic.

Some of the questions this paper seeks to address are: Which is the conceptual origin of MIL and what are its proposals that make it relevant now? What makes MIL particular and distinct vis-à-vis other concepts and similar approaches such as *edukommunikation* and *education for the media*? What are the current media and information contexts we must consider to give way to transliteracies like? Which are the main uncertainties and contradictions posed by the pandemic to education that may be solved through an updated version of the MIL?

Media Information Literacy: an unfinished journey

Media Information Literacy is a concept that has evolved over time. It refers basically to a set of competencies related to the interpretation and management of media and social network information and contents that focuses on *literacy-building*, developing skills and knowledge that can transform the kinds of interaction that people create and have with the media and information in their environments.

Beyond a specific or univocal conceptualization, the meaning of this concept encompasses several dimensions, all of them relevant. On the one hand, it implies a political dimension by openly stating that nations should pursue, encourage and foster in their population an openly critical view of hegemonic visions. It also includes an educational dimension that involves acknowledging that educational processes are not an exclusive to formal institutions, but also depend on other relevant social actors such as cultural industries, and finally, a historic component that shows how the media and the social experiences that result from them have changed.

Several sources suggest that some of the earliest efforts to reflect on the educational and learning processes that involve communication media emerged in France in the first decades of the twentieth century (Amar, Isola, 2014). Other historical reviews date its origin and development in the period following the Second World War, especially due to the need to learn about and anticipate the effects of the media on citizens and prevent propaganda from being used for warlike ends or fascist episodes from being repeated (Fedorov, 2011). Especially in the United States, Great Britain, and Russia, questions on the effects and influence of the media gave rise to theories and models that allowed us to better understand ideological indoctrination, as well as the distinction between the properties of radio, film, and television.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the goal of public literacy about the media was still very brief and limited, and it was not until the early 1980s that a number of universities around the world, especially in Europe and in the United States, began to offer programs related to the study of the media and its links to education (Wilson, 2012). Until then, literacy meant basically the ability to read and write, which in many countries was still an ongoing task and a priority goal. Over the years this became one of the main priorities in education: reducing the levels of illiteracy in children of school age to a minimum.

It was not until 1982 that UNESCO first joined the international efforts on media information literacy by signing the Grunwald Declaration, which recognizes the need to foster political and educational systems that promote in the citizens a critical understanding of the “phenomenon of communication” and their participation in (mass or digital-interactive) media (UNESCO, 2011). This Declaration basically sought to have the media recognized as determining institutions for citizens to make informed and conscious decisions.

In Latin America, unlike in Europe and in the United States, the development, implementation and research of media literacy cannot be assumed to be a linear and continuous process, since contributions have been relatively different in each country. Some outstanding Latin American researchers on this issue were Freire (1968) in Brazil, Martín-Barbero (1987) in Colombia, Kaplún (1998) in Argentina, and Orozco (2001) in Mexico. Their contributions set the pace of approaches to educommunication for several decades. On the other hand, organizations such as the CIESPAL (Centro Internacional de Estudios Superiores de Comunicación de América Latina) in Quito proposed regarding communication and its effects on education as a determining factor to promote spaces for discussion that can contribute to more fair, equitable societies (Durán, 2016).

The differences are not only conceptual and methodological but also linguistic. In the UNESCO documents available where the term ‘Media and Information Literacy’ (MIL) is used, the most adequate translation to Spanish is *Alfabetización Mediática e Informativa* (AMI). The concept ‘media literacy’, out of which came its Spanish version *alfabetización mediática*, requires a punctual characterization insofar as it is used in different contexts and may be interpreted in different ways. Something similar happens with the concept ‘literacy’, which refers to mastery of the alphabet, the signs and symbols required to read and understand texts. However, over time its meaning has become more complex and has been broadened to refer to the knowledge that enables individuals to understand and relate their environments based on the messages and contents available to them.

Discussing the meaning of the concept ‘literacy’ allows us to recognize the variety of connotations that have arisen from research conducted in recent years. Research on media literacy uses multiple associate terms, such as ‘digital literacy’, ‘computer literacy’, ‘cultural literacy’, ‘information literacy’, ‘audio-visual literacy’ and others (UNESCO, 2011). These conceptual possibilities often result in confusion and generalization, contributing to the loss of explanatory power of their empirical referents.

According to Livingstone (2008), ‘literacy’ is a word that may express the acquisition and possession of skills to read and understand the world and that, with the transition of messages in a printed format to audiovisual formats, suggests the possibility of ‘media literacy’. Thus, it seeks to recover some significant differences between the idea of informational literacy and media literacy to give way to ‘literacies’ as an actual possibility to know about what is learned in

everyday practice. Informational literacy underscores the importance of access to information as well as the assessment and ethical use of such information, whereas media literacy highlights the ability to understand the functions of the media, evaluating how they fulfill these functions and making a rational commitment to self-expression media (Amar, Isola, 2014).

Informational literacy entails processes centered on information, while media literacy encompasses and refers to more complex processes centered on analysis, reasoning and decision-making. The educational intentionality that precedes each form of learning becomes manifest in both conceptualizations, but it must be pointed out that such intentionality is mediated and influenced by other factors outside each modality's defined or definable objectives (UNESCO, 2011).

A great deal of research and proposals on literacy (Area *et al.*, 2012; Pérez, Martínez, 2013; Wilson, 2012) highlight learning, empowering, and participation, concepts that are undoubtedly a permanent focus of reflection and examination not only for communication and education but also for other disciplines and fields of study. In Mexico and Latin America, Orozco's (1996, 1997, 2004) ongoing work represents one of the most significant and consolidated efforts on media literacy, not only reflecting on the role of the media in educational environments but also encouraging concrete actions to improve educational practices and make them more visible vis-à-vis the different media available.

If we assume that the realm of communication is changing in regard to the ways to consume and produce information, we should recognize that literacy cannot, and must not, be focused only on reading and writing practice or a teaching and learning model, but on moving from media literacy to transmedia literacies, recognizing in them other ways of perceiving how they are diversifying through the media, the platforms and the interfaces available, but also depending on the multiple interactive possibilities that exist and that are being developed. With this year's pandemic, an update of this conceptualization is more than relevant and necessary.

Update and conceptual proposal: transmedia literacies

As explained above, the concept of *media literacy* refers to a multifaceted phenomenon that, although it is observable, is very hard to quantify and replicate uniformly. For this reason, it is necessary to conduct an epistemological review of the construction and appropriation of knowledge and skills produced as a result of particular experiences related to media culture and informational environments, and not necessarily to formal educational processes. Thus, it is essential to acknowledge the multiple modalities of literacy, since this implies an explicit process of teaching, without regarding learning as an incomplete process.

The teaching and learning process, as a social and cultural *continuum*, shows that educational processes transcend schools and formative processes. Without learning, teaching is reduced to a number of articulated and planned situations that, although socially relevant, do not guarantee any significant effect on students.

Authors such as Lankshear and Knobel (2011), Buckingham, Kehily and Bragg (2014), and Gee (2015), have proposed moving from the concept of literacy to one of *literacies*, because it is through the latter that we can acknowledge the complexity of the cultural practices that propitiate learning, regardless of whether such learning is planned, verifiable, or assessed. Thus, literacy should be understood as a social practice that does not depend on formal or projected conditionings but on the day-to-day actions of individuals moved by their own interests, desires, and possibilities.

Our central proposal is to move from *literacy building* to *literacies*, because literacy building implies a direct connotation of reading and writing practices; that is, an educational intentionality, which makes it difficult to address systemically and in depth the contexts and practices in which the most significant experiences of people who are exposed to the media take place. Buckingham and Martínez (2013) view this as the need for a different definition that goes beyond literacy building, since the latter usually focuses on certain technologies or media and does not contemplate all the practices that take place in the complex interweaving of culture and communication. Orozco (2010) proposes taking this reflection beyond literacy to include the social reality, regardless of whether it corresponds or not with what is being done to educate people through formal educational institutions.

Going from literacy building to literacies is a bet on open recognition, seeking to go beyond the traditional meaning of education (understood as a planned, controlled and assessable process) into a model that incorporates the learning that takes place outside formal or institutional schooling rationales. This would make it possible to account for the complexity and diversity of the interactions that take place in multiple environments regarded as offline and online digital media.

Thus, I understand transmedia literacies as the result of the communicative and practical dimensions that have become increasingly frequent in the context of a culture of convergence. To differentiate literacies from literacy building, I adopt Scolari's (2016) six central characteristics and add two more:

1. The differences in the media support.
2. The semiotics of the medium.
3. The kind of appeal evoked and encouraged.
4. The aim of the actions conducted.
5. The environments in which the learning takes place.
6. The theoretical referents in which the practices and discourses are analyzed.
7. The methodologies employed to approach their subjects and objects.
8. The collaborative and organizational ways in which the interactions take place.

Thus, transmedia literacies must focus their study on the practices that take place in out-of-school scenarios in which meaningful experiences and practices based on a culture of participation and collaboration may be prioritized.

The transmedia focus of this proposal stems from an interpretation that regards transmediality as a set of features that are also the main components of contemporary communication. The exploration of the educational uses and applications that can be made of the transmedia and transmediation narratives has become a frequent topic of academic discussion in recent years (Conner-Zachocki, 2015; França, 2015; Lugo-Rodríguez, 2016; Rampazzo-Gambarato, Dabagian, 2016; Scolari, 2016; Tejeiro, Pelegrina, Gómez, 2009). Their approaches are diverse, and most of them account for the possibilities to potentiate the effect of the transmedia aspect of communication in the learning and education practices, highlighting the importance of generating experiences based on interactivity and participation.

In the changing context of today's media and communication practices, transmedia rationales have become an opportunity to systematize and adapt more efficiently to ever more complex environments that include different discourses, technologies, narratives and ways to inhabit the social aspect and participate in the culture. In the context of this year's pandemic, with the evident mediatization and overwhelming digitalization and virtualization of formal educational processes, transmedia literacies have become an opportunity and a possibility to evince both collaborative forms of creation and the learning that results from practices outside those exclusive of educational institutions.

We will now explore some key questions that Media Information Literacy may help to answer and understand in the context of the pandemic in which education is taking place.

Questions, contradictions and dualities for MIL

This section elaborates on some arguments that describe and explain the importance of MIL to understand and adapt to the circumstances experienced during the pandemic. The argument is presented through questions, contradictions and dualities that have worsened with the massive withdrawal of students and teachers to household spaces and dynamics to provide continuity to multiple kinds of educational processes.

The premises that support these questions and contradictions are: *a)* The school as an educational space does not only encompass teaching processes; many forms of social interaction that are very relevant for all the actors involved (including parents and administrators) but are not necessarily related to the goals of formal education take place in it; *b)* Learning as the final and desired result of all educational processes is not exclusive to formal institutions, but takes place in unexpected forms and multiple ways in the experience lived by the persons; *c)* The relationships between communication and education as two disciplines central to the definition of social life are inseparable and complementary. In this respect, communication (mediated or

not) implies a central aspect of any educational process, since it is through it that the actors of education can build and share meanings.

Some contradictions, dualities and questions that seek to evince the importance of MIL for the current educational environment marked by the uncertainty of the pandemic are described and elaborated on below.

1) Acceleration – deceleration

One of the most drastic and dramatic decisions made during the 2020 pandemic was the massive lockdown of millions of people all over the world. This lockdown forced educational systems to search for emergency measures to continue training and education as it had been taking place. Quarantines required an accelerated mobilization of people and resources that had to continue operating despite the evident risks brought upon by the disease. There was an acceleration of people, information, tactics and technological resources to allow the most relevant and essential systems of society to continue functioning. This acceleration led to several questions, especially relative to its effects, such as what was the impact of an overabundance of information on people, or how teachers could train in an efficient, safe and healthy way in the use of communication technologies that enable them to maintain their interaction with their students and colleagues.

This artificial acceleration has brought with it unexpected benefits such as, for instance, the fact that educational authorities in many countries have had to implement programs and spaces devoted to the massive use of new information technologies to allow teachers and students to do their work, albeit virtually and at distance. Although this could be interpreted as something positive, it has had negative implications due to the insufficient training and inevitable marginalization of relevant actors who have not been able to adapt to new conditions, whether for personal reasons or especially because of structural circumstances such as the lack of access to basic technology, a poor quality internet connection, the limited coverage of free wireless networks, the excessively high costs demanded by technology companies, the conditions of poverty some families live in, insufficient equipment and spaces to guarantee that students can connect to the internet, and so on and so forth.

Contradictions arose when the deceleration exposed the “autopilot” under which many educational systems operated (and still operate), as well as their inability to inquire on relevant issues about how educational processes and people’s meaningful experiences take place. From the standpoint of MIL, this contradiction begs the question of which are or should be the most important things that children and teenagers should be learning in such an extreme and uncertain situation, and whether the creation of academic activities geared towards the wellbeing of students should be prioritized. Clearly, the critical outlook that MIL has sought so hard to find should also encourage a healthy self-criticism that allows for and enables methodologies that help people ask questions about themselves.

In this respect, one of the basic premises of the transmedia literacy proposal aims to learn about the contexts in which the interactions mediated by technology take place, and how this technology assumes such a relevant role for decision-making and for the construction of shared frames or reference.

2) *Misinformation – trust*

As days and weeks have gone by, information about the global emergency caused by COVID-19 has become increasingly relevant due to the decisions that individuals, families, as local and national governments, have had to make. A great deal of stories and news have been heard about COVID, statements and assumptions around a relatively new event that have put millions of people in a situation of uncertainty, expectation and vulnerability. There have been claims as wild as those that suggest that the health emergency was an international social experiment, or that the virus was a weapon of China against the West. Journalism and the flow of news became a really puzzling challenge to be solved.

If we had to choose an ideal subject to study for an updated version of the MIL, a post-pandemic version would be about misinformation. The pandemic brought with it a cascade of fake news and never-ending processes of contrasting and verification. It could even be stated that the virus brought with it an interminable wave of misinformation, which has circulated especially around the unknown environments of socio-digital networks.

What makes this situation problematic is that it takes place in a context of widespread mistrust of educational, political and media institutions. Sectors that were once spaces for the creation and definition of certainty have become the targets of every kind of abuse.

Trust, as a constitutive element of the teaching and learning process, demonstrates the importance of defining strategies that go beyond the mere transmission of information: in order for an educational process to take place there must be, before anything else, trust in those who seek to share and help us construct something meaningful in our lives. Learning about how the news is produced or which are the interests of the media will help us know better the sources, the people and the institutions that make up the social tissue.

One of my main arguments about the building of trust includes the ability to articulate stories and narratives that develop an affective dimension, but also a rationale based on scientific discourse. This would show again the link to the transmedial aspect of contemporary communication, since it focuses much of its effort on the description and understanding of stories, their expansions, and the forms of participation they prioritize.

3) *Algorithms – privacy*

Although it seems evident that these are two complementary – rather than contradictory – notions, I have opposed them to show the importance of knowing how algorithms operate and how our privacy has been encroached upon by the increasingly widespread and massive

development of technological systems and platforms that aim to offer technological solutions to educational problems.

The intensive use of platforms, video-call systems and educational applications has involved a great risk that is yet to be known in detail in the coming months and years. Massive amounts of data have become an object of desire for companies and governments alike in 2020, especially because their retrieval entails forms of control that have been allegedly justified by the pandemic and its attending quarantines. Any informational media literacy worthy of its name should ask new and complex questions on how platforms such as Google, Zoom or Facebook use teachers' and students' personal data, how well trained and aware educational authorities are on the risks implied in an uncritical use of technology, and to what extent the operational rationales of the algorithms that have been used massively to provide continuity to education can become transparent.

There is no doubt that it is necessary to develop effective strategies to document and educate users of technological platforms so that they can gradually make critical and responsible use of applications and can assess and defend their digital rights.

The role of the State in this issue is very relevant, especially because economic powers seem to have no constraints when it comes to enforcing rationales of consumption and management of information. In this respect, the MIL can make an important contribution by making visible both the risks and the possible solutions to problems associated to privacy, which have worsened in recent months. If the media information literacy that dealt with traditional media sought to reveal how the media operated and their links to other relevant actors, it is the task of transmedia literacies to map the characteristics that condition the communicative practices and interactions of millions of people connected to the internet.

4) Evaluation – accompaniment

One of the main challenges posed by the pandemic to educational systems worldwide has been one related to the evaluation and accreditation of school courses and programs, since it has not been possible to move traditional evaluation mechanisms directly to remote environments. Before evaluating, teachers and administrators must ask themselves what their students want to and need to learn. Such basic and simple questions can make an enormous difference in how the educational process is understood, and how to give priority to students instead of the adult-centered visions that pervade the panorama of education.

This is especially relevant from the standpoint of transliteracies because it has become increasingly clear that there is a body of knowledge and skills that are not constructed in the classrooms or under the tutorship of a teacher or parent. This knowledge and skills can often be more relevant and useful for children and teenagers than those included in educational programs. This can be justified with a detailed and in-depth understanding of the informational

dynamics that take place in socio-digital and media environments, where the rhythms of access, appropriation and production surpass the time spent in school.

Thus, we favor accompaniment rather than evaluation. We must learn to accompany and listen to our students, their desires, needs and motivations. This view is not founded on abandoning the priorities of formal education but on acknowledging that the apparent separation between school competencies and skills and those that are acquired outside the school is in fact an artificial separation. What happens in the school is as relevant as what happens outside it. And now that quarantines have made the difference between outside and inside much less clear, it has become manifest that this is an opportunity to reflect thoroughly on the priorities that educational systems aim to achieve.

Conclusions

The importance of MIL and transliteracies lies in the fact that learning processes have become de-centered; that is, they have ceased to be located in the same time and space. Learning takes place all the time and everywhere. We must learn to identify it and value it in its right worth. Developing strategies that allow us to deal with misinformation and the need for health safety without giving up our educational efforts has become increasingly important.

In short, transmedia literacies or transliteracies are regarded as a conceptual possibility that sheds light on the communicative and learning practices in a current environment in which the withdrawal of thousands of people to their homes has involved a constant challenge to provide continuity to academic and school dynamics.

Withdrawing from the physical space of the school into the private spaces of homes has led to a resignification of the objectives and processes through which education happens and the exchange and consumption of information and media contents is materialized. In this challenging process, the use of technology has been decisive to provide virtual spaces for millions of people who until this year had had little or no experience in virtual and distance education. For these reasons, it is essential to acknowledge the value of the postulates of MIL, and the opportunity to update some of its most basic premises.

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