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Media literacy as a solution to the Edu-communicative challenges of the pandemic: Paradoxes, questions and alternatives

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Abstract

A revision is made of the central arguments that give substance and shape to media literacy as a conceptual proposal necessary to overcome the challenges related to the communication and educational crises produced by the pandemic.

The article is organised into three sections. In the first one, a media literacy review is done as a set of interdisciplinary knowledge that each time they gain more strength and relevance for the communicative and field practice; in the second part, the proposal of transmedia literacies is developed as a theoretical–conceptual update that wonders about the diversity of media experiences and the current Edu-communicative practices; and in the third, critical questions are displayed about the implementation of a media literacy strategy based on a set of paradoxes, questions and alternatives that problematise the intersection between communication and education in the pandemic context of the contemporary society.

Keywords: *Media literacy; digital literacy; media education; transliteracies; pandemic.*

Introduction

2020 will be a year remembered for the COVID-19 pandemic, a historical event that has impacted social life in multiple dimensions to millions of people. From this context of global emergency, various problems have emerged and aggravated on a large scale, in the educational field, two have made that the Media and Information Literacy (MIL) have become an increasingly relevant and necessary body of knowledge. On one hand, the growing disinformation has become a particularly urgent problem to solve, given the large number of stories and news that have circulated in the media and the socio-digital networks about the COVID-19 disease. On the other hand, the complex and laborious process has implied transferring the formal and informal educational practices to hypermediated virtual spaces in clearly unfavourable and unexpected contexts and conditions (Williamson et al., 2020).

These two issues involve ensuring the continuity of the educational work in a remote form and helping the general population to have better tools against misinformation (Melki et al., 2021). These two matters are examined here from the postulates of MIL, and a discussion is proposed as well as an update on its approach, and new questions that help to highlight the importance of MIL in the current context of the challenges imposed by the pandemic have been formulated.

On this matter, some of the questions that are tried to be answered in this article are: What is the conceptual origin of MIL and which are the approaches that give it current relevance? How particular and different is MIL compared to other similar concepts and approaches like the Edu communication and education for the media? How are the current media and informational contexts considered to give way to the transmedia literacies (Scolari, 2016; Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018)? and What are the main uncertainties and contradictions the pandemic crisis has raised in the educational field that can be solved from an updated version of MIL?

1. MIL: an unfinished journey

What is MIL? It is a concept that has evolved over the years. Today, it refers fundamentally to a set of competencies related to the interpretation and management of information and media and socio-digital content, which focuses on the

literacy development of different skills and knowledge that manage to transform the types of interaction that people make and have with the informational and mediatic of their environments (UNESCO, 2013).

Beyond a specific or univocal conceptualisation, the meaning of this concept encompasses several dimensions, which are all relevant. On the one hand, it implies a political dimension by openly declaring itself as part of an objective that nations should pursue and promote in their populations (UNESCO, 2011) and encouraging an openly critical sense of hegemonic visions; it also includes an educational dimension that implies the recognition that educational processes are not only exclusive to formal institutions (Buckingham, 2018), but they also depend on other relevant social actors such as cultural industries, plus a historical component that has made it clear how the media and the social experiences that result from them have changed.

Throughout various sources, it is suggested that some of the first efforts to reflect on the educational and learning processes that involve the media emerged in France during the first decades of the 20th century (Amar & Isola, 2014). Other historical reviews date their origin and development after the Second World War, especially due to the need to know and anticipate the effects of the media on citizens and prevent propaganda from being used for war purposes or repeating other fascist episodes (Fedorov, 2011). Especially in the USA, Great Britain and Russia, questions about the effects and influences of the media gave rise to theories and models that allowed a better understanding of the ideological formation and the distinction between the properties of radio, film and television.

In the 50s and 60s, the objective of making the population literate in terms of the media was still very limited and brief, and it was not until the beginning of the 80s that several universities in the world, especially European and North American, began to offer programmes related to the study of the media and its linkage with education (Wilson, 2012). Until then, talking about literacy fundamentally implied the ability to know how to read and write, which in many countries of the world remained a pending task and a priority objective. Over the years, this became one of the top educational priorities to minimise illiteracy rates in school-age populations.

It was not until 1982 that United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) first joined the international efforts on media literacy by signing the Grunwald Declaration, which recognises the need to promote political and educational systems that help in critical understanding of the citizens about the 'communication phenomenon' and their participation in the media (mass or digital interactive) (UNESCO, 2011). This Declaration fundamentally sought to recognise the media as determining institutions for citizens in the making of informed and conscious decisions.

In the Latin American context, unlike Europe and the USA, the development, implementation and investigation of media literacy cannot be assumed as a linear and constant process, since in each country, the contributions were relatively different. Some of the most relevant researchers in this matter, in the Latin American context, were Freire (1968) in Brazil, Martín-Barbero (1987) in Colombia, Kaplún (1998) in Argentina and Orozco (2001) in Mexico. The contributions of these researchers marked for several decades the rhythm of the approaches in Edu-communicative matters (Mateus et al., 2020). On the other hand, organisations such as the International Center for Higher Communication Studies in Latin America (CIESPAL) proposed assuming communication and its effects on education as a determining factor to promote discussion spaces capable of contributing to fairer and more equitable societies (Durán, 2016).

Arguing about the meaning of the concept, literacy allows us to recognise the variety of connotations that have emerged from the research carried out over the last few years. Research on media literacy uses a multiplicity of associated terms such as media literacies (Bennett et al., 2020), digital literacies (McDougall et al., 2018), digital citizenship (Milenkova & Lendzhova, 2021), productive literacies (Cannon et al., 2018), audiovisual literacy (Vesga-Pérez, 2019), third space literacies (Potter & McDougall, 2017) and others. These and other conceptualisations have facilitated an increasingly complex and accurate description of the subject and the processes associated with it.

According to Livingstone (2008), literacy is a word that can express acquisition and possession of skills in order to read and understand the world and that, with the transition from messages from printed to audiovisual format, encourages the possibility of media literacy. In this sense, it is proposed to recover some significant differences between the ideas of information literacy and media literacy and to then give way to literacies as a practical possibility to know what is learned in daily practices. Informational literacy emphasises the importance of access to information, evaluation and the ethical use of such information, while media literacy emphasises the ability to understand the functions of the media, evaluate how those functions are performed and rationally engage within the media for self-expression (Amar & Isola, 2014).

Informational literacy involves information-centred processes, while media literacy encompasses and refers to more complex processes focused on analysis, reasoning and decision-making. In both conceptualisations, the educational intentionality that precedes each learning is evident, but it is important to say that this intentionality is mediated and influenced by other factors unrelated to the defined or definable objectives of each modality (UNESCO, 2011). From these perspectives, in recent years, academic work has brought the subject to a set of approaches that creatively show the complexity of the process in terms of its application (Park et al., 2021; Potter & Thai, 2019), the relationship between technology and media (McDougall et al., 2018), audiovisual narratives (Djonov & Tseng, 2021), an activist perspective (Jenkins et al., 2016) and, of course, transmedia skills (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018; Scolari et al., 2020; Taddeo & Tirocchi, 2021).

In a great diversity of research and proposals on media literacy (Livingstone, 2008; Wilson, 2012; Pérez, & Martínez, 2013; Potter & McDougall, 2017) stand out the new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Bennett et al., 2020: Potter, 2021) and participation perspectives (Jenkins et al., 2016; Cannon et al., 2018). Concepts that are undoubtedly a permanent reason for reflection and examination, not only for communication and education, but also for other disciplines and fields of knowledge in different parts of the world. In the same vein, the book Media Education in Latin America (Mateus

et al., 2020) was recently published, which discusses media literacy from a Latin American perspective, with particular emphasis on the experiences of application and innovative conceptual proposals in the region.

If it is assumed that the communication outlook is changing in relation to the forms of consumption and production of information, it should be recognised that literacy cannot and should not be focused only on reading and writing practices, or under a model of teaching–learning; but rather in moving from media literacies to transmedia literacies, recognising in them other ways of perceiving their diversification based on the available media, platforms and interfaces, but also based on the multiple interactive possibilities that exist and that are developing. With the pandemic experienced this year, an update to this conceptualisation is more than relevant and necessary.

2. Update and conceptual proposal: Transmedia literacies

As it has already been explained so far, the concept of media literacy refers to a multifaceted phenomenon that, although observable, is very difficult to quantify and replicate in a uniform way. From the above, it is necessary that an epistemological review is conducted on the construction and appropriation of knowledge and skills that occur as a result of particular experiences related to media culture and to informational environments and not necessarily to formal educational processes. In this sense, the recognition of the multiple modalities of literacy is essential, since this implies an explicit process of teaching; but without learning, it can be considered an incomplete process.

The teaching–learning process, as a social and cultural continuum, makes it clear that educational processes transcend school institutions and training processes. Without learning, teaching is reduced to a set of articulated and planned situations that, although socially relevant, do not guarantee any type of significant effect on students.

Authors such as Lankshear and Knobel (2011), Buckingham, Kehily and Bragg (2014), and Gee (2015) have proposed moving from literacy to literacies because it is through these that it is possible to recognise the complexity of the cultural practices that promote learning beyond whether it is planned, verifiable or evaluated. In this sense, literacy must be understood as a social practice that does not depend on formal or projected conditioning, but on the daily action of subjects moved by their own interests, desires and possibilities.

The central proposal consists of going from literacy to literacies because literacy implies a direct connotation on reading and writing practices, meaning an educational intentionality which makes it difficult to have a systemic and in-depth approach towards the contexts and practices in which the most significant experiences of mediated people are carried out. Buckingham and Martínez (2013) describe it in terms of the need for a different definition that manages to overcome literacy, since it is usually concentrated in certain technologies or media and does not fully observe the practices that occur in the complex framework of culture and communication. For his part, Orozco (2010) proposes to take the reflection beyond literacy to achieve the integration of social reality, regardless of whether or not it corresponds to what is being done to educate people from formal educational institutions.

Going from literacy to literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) is a commitment to open recognition that seeks to overcome the traditional sense of education (understood as a planned, controlled and assessable process) and move into a model that incorporates the learning that happens beyond the scholarly, formal or institutional logic. With this, it would be possible to account for the complexity and diversity of the interactions that occur in multiple environments with online and offline digital mediatic meanings.

In this sense, I understand transmedia literacies from communicative and practical dimensions that are increasingly frequent in the context of the convergence culture. In order to differentiate literacies from literacy, I retake from Scolari (2016) six central characteristics and add a couple more:

1. Differences in the mediatic support
2. The semiotics of the environment
3. The type of interpellation that is evoked and encouraged
4. The objective of the actions carried out
5. The environments in which learning takes place
6. The theoretical references in which practices and discourses are analysed
7. The methodologies used to approach subjects and objects
8. The collaborative and organisational forms in which interactions take place

In this sense, transmedia literacies should focus their study on the practices that occur in extracurricular settings that are in favour of significant experiences and practices based on a culture of participation and collaboration (Jenkins et al., 2015). This proposal shares some of the main approaches developed by Potter and McDougall (2017) in their conceptualisation of third space literacies in the increasingly complex and diverse context in which sociocultural interactions take place.

The transmediality of this proposal stems from an interpretation that considers transmediality as a set of characteristics that are also the most important components of contemporary communication. The exploration of the educational uses and applications that can be made of transmedia narratives and transmediation has become a frequent topic of academic discussions in recent years (Conner-Zachocki, 2015; França, 2015; Rampazzo-Gambarato & Dabagian, 2016; Scolari, 2016; Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018). The approaches are diverse, and the vast majority account for the possibilities to enhance the effect of transmediality of communication in learning and education practices, emphasising the importance of

generating experiences based on interactivity and participation. These proposals also share a common heritage with the work published by Jenkins (2009) some years ago that emphasised the importance of participatory culture.

In the changing context of the current media and communication practices, transmedia logics have become an opportunity to systematise and adapt more efficiently to increasingly complex environments that include different discourses, technologies, narratives and ways of inhabiting the social world and participate in culture. In the pandemic context experienced during this year, wherein there is evident mediatisation and the overwhelming digitisation and virtualisation of formal educational processes, transmedia literacies have become an opportunity and possibility to show both the forms of collaborative creation and the learning that result from practices unrelated to institutional education.

Herein, we explore some of the key questions that MIL can help solve and understand in the pandemic context in which education occurs.

3. Questions, contradictions and dualities for MIL

This section develops some arguments that describe and explain the importance of MIL to understand and adapt to the circumstances experienced during the pandemic caused by COVID. The argument is raised from questions, contradictions and dualities that have grown worse with the massive withdrawal of students and teachers to family spaces and dynamics to continue with the educational processes of the most varied nature (Mateus et al., 2022).

The premises that give support to these questions and contradictions are the following: a) the school as an educational space not only involves teaching processes, but also develops forms of social interaction that are very relevant for all the actors involved (including parents and school authorities), not necessarily related to the objectives of formal education. b) Learning, as a desirable end result of any educational process, is not (nor should it be) exclusive to formal institutions, but it occurs in unexpected ways and in multiple ways in the experience lived by people, enhanced by experiences and forms of mediated and transmedial communication (Scolari, 2016; Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018; Djonov & Tseng, 2021). c) The relations between communication and education, as two central disciplines in the definition of social matters, are inseparable and complementary. In this sense, communication (mediated or not) implies a central aspect of any educational process, since it is through it that educational actors can construct and share meanings (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Bennett et al., 2020).

Next, some contradictions, dualities and questions are described and developed, seeking to make evident the importance of MIL for the current educational context characterised by pandemic uncertainty.

3.1 Acceleration–deceleration

One of the most dramatic and drastic decisions made during the 2020 pandemic was the massive confinement of millions of people around the world. This confinement forced the educational systems to look for emerging ways to continue with education. The quarantine meant an accelerated mobilisation of people and resources that had to continue operating despite the obvious risks that the disease brought. There was an acceleration of people, information, tactics and technological resources to allow the most relevant and essential systems of society to continue to function. This acceleration revealed several questions, especially regarding the effects, such as, for example, What is the impact of information overabundance on people? or How can teachers in an efficient, safe and healthy way be trained in the use of communication technologies that allow them to maintain interactions with their students and with other colleagues?

This artificial acceleration has brought some unexpected benefits, such as, for example, the fact that in many countries, educational authorities found it necessary to implement programmes and spaces dedicated to the massive use of new informational technologies to allow teachers and students to carry out their work, even if it is virtual and remote. Although this can be construed as something positive, it has negative implications due to insufficient training and the inevitable marginalisation of relevant actors who have not been able to adapt to the new conditions, either due to personal issues or, above all, due to structural circumstances (Mateus et al., 2022). These structural circumstances may be the lack of access to basic technology, the poor quality of the Internet connection, the limited free coverage of Wi-Fi networks, the excessive prices imposed by technology companies, the precarious conditions of families, insufficient spaces and equipment for ensuring the connection to students and many others.

The contradiction takes place when deceleration made evident the 'automatic pilot' in which many educational systems operated (and still do) and their inability to ask relevant questions about how educational processes and meaningful experiences of people occur. From MIL, this contradiction motivates the question, What are or should be the most important lessons that children and young people should be learning in such a situation, full of uncertainties? Couldn't the creation of reflections and academic activities that concern the well-being of the students be the priority? Clearly, the critical sense that MIL seeks to encourage so hardly should also promote a strong sense of self-criticism, which allows and enables methodologies that help people ask questions about themselves (Milenkova & Lendzhova, 2021).

In this sense, one of the basic premises of the proposal of transmedia literacies aims to know the contexts in which interactions mediated by technology take place and how this technology takes on such a relevant role for decision-making and for the construction of shared reference frameworks.

3.2 Misinformation–trust

As days and weeks pass by, information on the global emergency due to COVID-19 has become increasingly relevant due to the decisions that have to be made at the national, local, family and individual levels (Roozenbeek et al., 2020). We heard many stories and news about COVID, statements and assumptions that a relatively new event put millions of people in a situation of uncertainty, expectation and vulnerability (Austin et al., 2021) – statements as farfetched as that the health emergency was an international social experiment or that the virus was a Chinese weapon against the West. Journalistic work and the news flow became a true challenge to solve.

If one had to choose an ideal object of study for the updated version of MIL, a post-pandemic version, it would be related to disinformation. The pandemic implied a cascade of fake news and endless processes of verification. It could be even said that the virus brought with it an endless wave of disinformation, which has circulated, especially through the unknown environments of socio-digital networks (Williamson et al., 2020).

What is problematic about this situation is that this occurs within the framework of a general mistrust of institutions, such as educational, political and media institutions. Sectors that were once spaces for the creation and definition of certainties have become targets against which to claim.

Trust as a constitutive element of the teaching–learning process makes it possible to demonstrate the importance of defining strategies that go beyond the mere transmission of information, since for an education process to occur, there must first be trust in the one who intends to share and help us build something meaningful for our lives. Knowing how news production works or what the interests of the media are will help us to better understand the sources, the people and the institutions that make up the social fabric (Melki et al., 2021).

An argument that I maintain is essential in the construction of trust relates to the ability to articulate stories and narratives that develop not only an affective dimension, but also a logic based on scientific discourses. In this way, the relationship with the transmedia perspective of contemporary communication would become evident once again, given that the transmedia perspective of communication focuses a good part of its efforts on the description and understanding of the stories, their expansions and the forms of participation that they privilege.

3.3 Algorithms–privacy

Although it seems clear that these are two complementary rather than contradictory notions, this opposition aims to demonstrate the importance of knowing how algorithms operate and how our privacy has been violated with the increasingly widespread and massive development of systems and technological platforms that seek to offer technological solutions to educational problems (Mejías & Couldry, 2019).

The intensive use of video calling platforms and systems and educational applications has meant a huge risk that is yet to be known in detail in the coming months and years. Big data during 2020 has become the object of desire for companies and governments alike, especially since the possession of these leads to forms of control that, with the pandemic and quarantine, have supposedly been justified (Livingstone, 2018). An MIL that truly deserves to be called so will have to ask new and complex questions such as the following: How do platforms such as Google, Zoom or Facebook use the personal data of teachers and students? How trained and aware are educational authorities of the risks involved in the uncritical use of technology? How much could the operational logics of the algorithms that have been massively used to give continuity to educational practices be made transparent?

There is no doubt that it is necessary to develop effective strategies to massively document and educate users on technological platforms, so that they gradually make a critical and responsible use of applications and are able to value and enforce their digital rights (Pink et al., 2018).

In this matter, the role of the State is very relevant, especially since economic forces seem to have no limits when imposing logics of consumption and information management. In this sense, MIL has much to contribute by making visible both the risks and the possible solutions to the problems associated with privacy that have grown worse in recent months (Williamson et al., 2020). If MIL that dealt with traditional media sought to reveal how the mass media operated and the relationships it had with 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.

3.4 Evaluation–accompaniment

One of the main challenges that the pandemic has posed to educational systems in the world is related to the evaluation and accreditation of school courses and programmes, given that it has not been possible to directly transfer traditional evaluation mechanisms to remote environments (Potter & Thai, 2019). Authorities and teachers must ask themselves What do students want/need to learn? rather than What do we want to evaluate in them? These very basic and simple questions can make a huge difference in the way we understand the educational process and can lead us to prioritise the student body and not the adult-centred views that dominate the educational landscape.

From transliteracies, this is especially relevant because it is becoming increasingly clear that there is a set of knowledge that is not built in the classroom or under the tutelage of a teacher or parent. This knowledge and the skills can often be

more relevant and useful for children and young people than those who are learned in educational programmes. This is 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 exceed school timing (Mateus et al., 2022).

In this sense, it seeks to provide accompaniment rather than to evaluate. We must learn to accompany and listen to the students, their desires, needs and motivations. This perspective is not based on abandoning the priorities of formal education, but on the recognition that the apparent separation between competencies and skills at school and those that occur outside of it is actually an artificial separation. What happens in school is as relevant as what happens outside of it. And now, given that with the quarantine, the 'inside' and the 'outside' are not fully clear anymore, one realises that we are facing the opportunity to reflect in detail on what are the priorities that education systems are considering achieving.

Conclusions

The importance of MIL and transliteracies lies in the fact that the learning processes have become decentralised, that is, they have ceased to be located at the same time and space. Learning happens all the time and, in all places, we have to know how to identify it and value it in its proper dimension. Developing strategies that allow us to face misinformation and the need for health security without losing educational efforts are increasingly relevant.

In summary, transmedia literacies or transliteracies are considered a conceptual possibility that makes evident ways in which communicative and learning practices arise in the current context, where the confinement of thousands of people to their homes has meant a constant challenge to give continuity to academic and school dynamics. In the same sense, the concept of dynamic literacies (Potter, 2021) is seen as a really interesting opportunity to include other relevant domains of cultural interactions and daily practices of people, especially of young people and children, who increasingly demonstrate the importance of technological and media experience in the definition of identity and the construction of knowledge and meaningful experiences.

The change of the physical school space for the private spaces of homes has implied a resignification of the objectives and processes in which education takes place and the exchange and consumption of information and media content materialises. In this challenging process, the use of technologies has been decisive in enabling virtual spaces for millions of people who until before this year had little or no experience in virtual and remote education. Reasons why it is essential to recognise the value of MIL tenets and the opportunity to update some of its most basic premises.

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