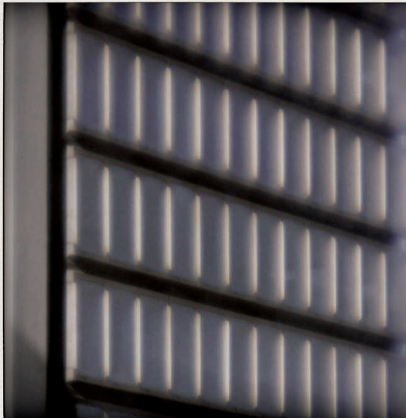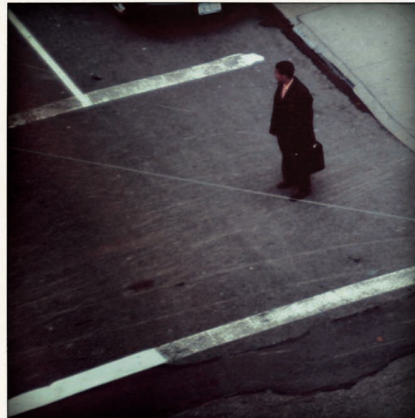# Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere

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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE EUROPEAN MEDIASPHERE

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The popularisation of media studies as a factor in media literacy

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The study of media and communication has not only proved to be rather an attractive field of inquiry in the humanities and social sciences; it has also been accepted and exploited by other academic fields. Furthermore, its results are also applied in many other fields of activity, starting with political communication and advertising and ending up with media education programmes that have become part of the curriculum in elementary and secondary schools in many countries. With the development of the concept of "media literacy", media and communication studies now faces a rather urgent task: to organise its knowledge and expertise in order to make them useful and understandable to a wider audience, including specific audiences (for instance children and seniors), to communicate chosen facts, concepts and findings in an acceptable way and, last not least, to restructure the academic activities of media studies to meet the needs of the general public.

In this chapter, I would like to offer some reflections on the challenges which media studies will face in the near future and are already facing – challenges which are connected with the contemporary advance of media education. I will also be considering the consequences that these developments have for the social, political and cultural status of media and communication studies. My first task will be to try to characterise media literacy and media education. I will then go on to provide a brief outline of the implications for media studies. My crucial question is focused on the present state of media studies *vis-à-vis* its readiness to provide a specific programme of media literacy education.

1. Media literacy, media education, media literacy education

In order to better understand the challenges that media studies are facing, it is useful to explain the terms "media literacy" and "media educa-

tion". The former deals more with acquired knowledge and skills, whilst the latter is more concerned with the process of acquiring knowledge and skills. Among many definitions of media literacy, this one seems to be quite comprehensive and useful: *media literacy* is thus an acquired ability. In the words of one critic:

> *"...[media literacy is the ability] to analyze news and advertising, examining the social functions of music, distinguishing between propaganda, opinion and information, examining the representation of gender, race and class in entertainment and information media, understanding media economics and ownership, and exploring ways in which violence and sexuality are depicted [...] With the rise of digital media, there are a range of important new media literacy skills..."* (Hobbs and Jensen 2009: 9)

Media education is a specific and complex pedagogical process of offering and acquiring the knowledge and skills that are considered to constitute media literacy. The process owes its complexity to the fact that media education is not just a planned, controlled and systematic process of teaching and learning within each country's educational system. Media education is also delivered from many other sources. Of course, media education as a "subject" or "project" in the school environment is a fundamental framework of media education, but there are additional extra-school activities which also display quite a high level of systematic planning (for instance media education topics in youth clubs and other organisations for young people). Media education "at school" and "outside school" is supported by a fairly strong framework of media pedagogy that serves as a useful interface between media and communication studies, pedagogy and educational psychology. Media education itself results from the interaction of all these fields. In many countries this interaction has led to the establishment of a strong field of media didactics. In Germany, for instance, "Mediendidaktik" has become firmly established (see Frederking, Krommer and Maiwald, 2008). One observer speaks of a "*field of didactics in which all ideas related to the question of how media and media messages can be used to achieve the goals* [of media education]" (Tulodziecki, 1997:4 5).

But media literacy is fostered not only via systematic school and extra-school activities aimed at young people as members of the general public (and in lifelong courses also targeting adults). We also have to take into account all kinds of specialised forms of media education, starting with university programmes in media studies and courses delivered by media education teachers, down to the professional education of media communicators (journalists, copywriters, public relations officers etc) on the one

hand, and, on the other, a variety of study programmes in humanities and social sciences into which some aspect of media studies is incorporated (literature, film studies, history, sociology, political science, etc.). Graduates of these programmes are "carriers" of a well-developed media literacy and disseminate it while working in variety of positions.

We have to take into account that there is also a strong, influential, though non-systematic (compared with the activities mentioned above) set of resources for developing media literacy, generated by many media, NGOs and by the general public itself etc. Using the general terms "further education" or "enlightenment", we can sum up many different kinds of activities. A fairly important factor in media literacy is any kind of "meta-media" messages offered by media themselves. From this point of view, media critiques form a fairly strong part of non-systematic media education. The awareness of a "media accountability system" (Bertrand, 2000) in a given country and on a supranational level is another one. Media accountability systems (media ombudsmen, codes of ethics, press councils, journalism reviews, normative requirements expressed in media laws etc.) are very important sources of knowledge about media and about media performance. They are consequently a very influential factor in the cultivation of media literacy in a given society. Media literacy is generated by the public itself – especially via a variety of civic activities (grassroots movements, NGOs).

All these activities constitute a specific "media literacy education" (see Figure 1 below) – the umbrella term for the formation and development of media literacy (as suggested by the title of one of the respected academic journals in the field, the *Journal of Media Literacy Education,* see http://jmle.org/index.php/JMLE).

Figure 1: The sources of media literacy education (Jirák and Köpplová, 2009: 374)
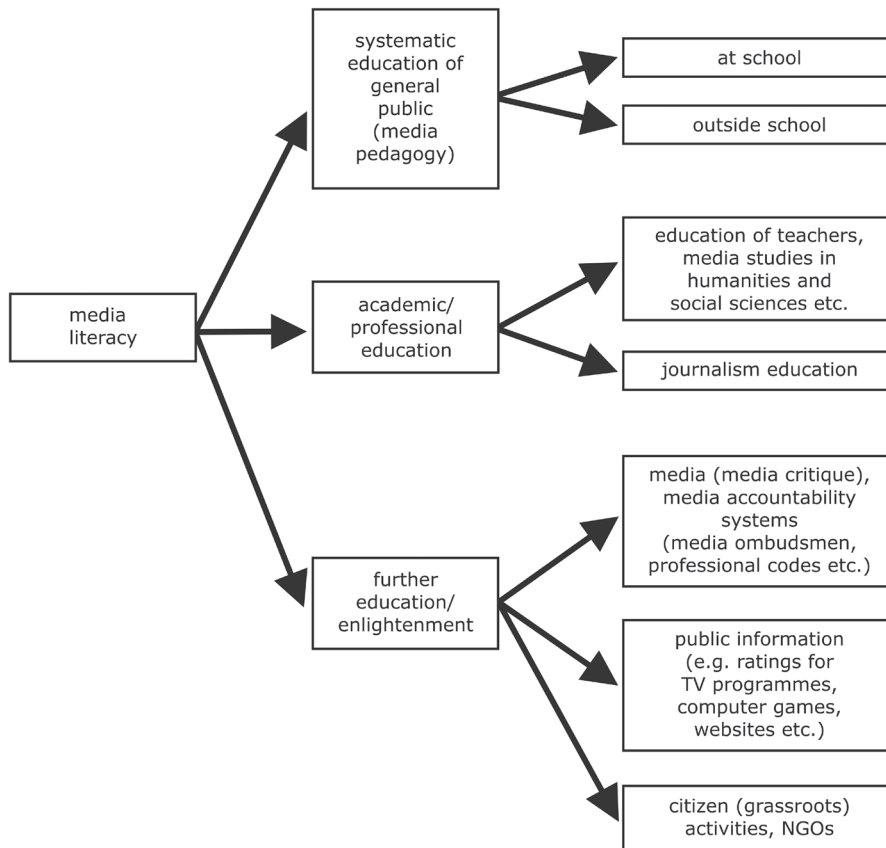
Media education is usually associated with two rather contradictory points of view which in a sense reflect the existing dominant paradigm in social sciences generally and in media studies specifically. On the one hand, there is the more traditional and older form of media literacy which is defended with a strong *protective* argument. On the other hand, there is the more recent form, underpinned by a strong *participatory* approach to media literacy education. The former is inspired by the traditional behaviourist approach to media (harking back to the stimulus-response model); the latter is embedded in more recent developments in media studies which have been inspired by cultural studies.

The recent position of media literacy is a fairly strong one, thanks mostly to increasing interest in political representation in various countries and in supranational bodies, especially the European ones. This interest has been fuelled by fears about the possible impact of the media and by developments such as the deregulation of broadcasting, the increasing number of television channels and by the increasing number of computer networks. It has a fairly strong protective aspect ("*educational measures are presented as alternatives to regulation*", McGonagle, 2011: 13) but it has helped media literacy to jettison its "*shrinking-violet status*" (McGonagle, 2011: 7). A typical example of the protective approach is the concept of "critical viewing skills". As one observer has commented:

> "... *one major component of media literacy, referring to understanding of and competence with television, including its aesthetic, social, cultural, psychological, educational, economic, and regulatory aspects. [...] Concerns focused on the impact of the media on children's educational advancement in reading and writing skills and critical thinking. Of further concern is TV's impact on creativity, on interpersonal activity during impressionable years, and on socialization with peers and others in the wide world outside the viewing room.*
> (Brown, 2011: 681-682)

Whilst media literacy stems from a protective concern, the participatory approach is evidenced in contemporary documents from the European Commission and the European Parliament on media literacy, starting with a document published in December 2007: *A European approach to media literacy in the digital environment*. This document was definitely inspired by the possibility of using media education as a substitute for media regulation and was, in fact, the result of a long process dating back to the Lisbon Agenda of November 2000).

Undoubtedly, the development of interest in media literacy and media literacy education is a challenge for media studies. Contributing to the development of media education means crossing the invisible but important line that separates academic discourse from the public sphere. It also means working on a new vocabulary, one that can help to deliver messages to people who are educated in other fields. The crucial question is: how do we integrate so many different factors (school, media, etc.) into more systematic lifelong learning strategies of "media literacy education", and how do we ensure that the "content" of these strategies can adopt and use the results of media research and analyses? The other question is: how should we organise media studies itself to enable it to communicate with the system of media literacy education? In other words, with the develop-

ment of media education and with the increasing importance of media literacy, media studies are facing an urgent need to establish its own "applied" level of popularisation.

2. The popularisation of media studies

The field of media (and communication) studies has gained a fairly stable position, both in individual countries and on a more international or supranational level. For decades, the fundamental task of media studies has been its emancipation within humanities and/or social sciences. This emancipation has been taking places on many levels – institutional, organisational, international etc. Departments of media studies, institutes for media research and specialised academic journals have been set up, while publishing houses have been putting out series focused on media and communication. Likewise, international organisations have appeared and have started to organise international teaching and research cooperation for media scholars, teachers and students. Further developments have seen the publication of international encyclopaedia on media and communication and the launch of comparative research projects and international study programmes. For decades, one of the important goals for people working in media studies was to prove that media studies was a full, self-supporting academic discipline equal to others in the importance of the topics covered, in its intellectual rigour and vigour and in its methodological soundness.

We can proclaim that this mission has been completed successfully and that media studies has become a well-established academic discipline. But of course, there is no such thing as a free lunch – the price that media studies has paid for this success is being forced to resort to some kind of "defensive strategy". Thanks to the media themselves, media studies as a subject has always remained closely connected with "real life" and has never locked itself away in the notorious academic ivory tower. Nevertheless, media studies has often had a tendency to go on the defensive and has not developed the proper tools for communicating with other disciplines and with the general public (a well-developed media pedagogy is still the exception in some countries). Rather surprisingly, only a few media scholars seem to be aware of this fact and to act accordingly. Even more surprisingly, media historians seem to be nervous about their lack of media studies skills in making themselves understandable and acceptable. As James Carey once observed:

> *The major problem with American social thought is its scientific and ahistorical character and our dual task remains a thoroughgoing critique of the behavioral science and the permeation of our studies and our students' thought with historical consciousness.* (Carey, 2011: 23, first published in 1974)

The reason why media historians display this sensitivity about the need to develop ways of communicating expert knowledge to a wider audience (students in Carey's example) is, in fact, probably quite simple. Media historians "live" on the border between history and media studies and are aware of the problems of "trans-disciplinary communication". There is another reason – history has a long tradition of self-popularisation. History courses have been part of elementary and secondary education throughout the world. There are numerous popular journals on history and, last not least, history has become a well- established theme in literature, theatre, painting, film etc.

Popularisation as a specific type of communication and as a self-expression of media studies is still a fairly important task for future. At present, there are grounds for optimism, since the importance of media literacy is increasing and the need for an increase in media literacy education is reasonably strong. The international community of media studies scholars and students, media education teachers, media critics, media professionals and many others working in media-related fields should be working on the appropriate tools (journals, websites, computer games etc.) to deliver knowledge and information about the media to the general public. Well-developed programmes of media education as a part of elementary and secondary school education, together with a range of extra-school activities, are a sound basis for accomplishing these goals.

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