

2. Media Education beyond School

PhD Victòria Camps

Professor, Chair of Ethics. Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain)
Chair of the Commission on Television Contents, Spanish Courts, 1993
victoriacamps@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Education in and for the media is doubtlessly necessary and is very slowly slipping into regular education, but not very satisfactorily. This work must be fleshed out by the media sector efforts to take some responsibility for the educational work as well, not by educating directly, but by trying to match their broadcasts to the values that education is trying to convey. Audiovisual Councils can play a role in driving media education, helping the educational system meet its responsibility to educate children to use properly television, Internet and other screens habitually surrounding them. At the same time, these Councils can help media professionals enforce and construe legislation about audiovisual contents freely and responsibly, thereby facilitating self-regulation. This contribution, showcasing the experience garnered by the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia in promoting media literacy, provides insights on the balancing act of bringing multi-stakeholders around the table to discuss issues on which they don't necessarily have shared and convergent positions.

KEY WORDS

Media education, self-regulation, Audiovisual Councils, ethics, audiovisual legislation.

It is increasingly evident that educating in and for audiovisual media is an unavoidable imperative. Education as a whole must adapt to the new context of multiple «screens» and use techniques and instruments that schools will have to get used to. Without giving up on writing or even on traditional chalkboards, schools must learn how to get different sources of knowledge to complement each other, and tap the powers of pictures for the benefit of reasoning. However, above all, it is urgent to start educating people about a reality featuring advantages and also certain hurdles that are worth a closer look. The major values that ought to guide human conduct and enable us to coexist have always been in jeopardy. But the threats looming over them are different in each age. Nowadays, television, video games, mobile phones, and Internet build a media and entertainment complex that exposes children to more direct, more universal influences than the traditional media, granting them access to possibilities for entertainment and for information that are harder to control. Education cannot be addressed with any realism if we ignore this scenario –we must take it into account.

The media, in turn, dodge regulation and want no outsider setting boundaries on the freedom of speech they wield. This is no obstacle to asking those same media to teach viewers to understand and even watch them critically. This will be the best way to preserve self-reliance, both for media practitioners and for their audiences. This is also a way to get everyone involved, with moral maturity, eventually to demand and get more decent media, coherent with the basic ethical principles and values that are foundational to our democracies.

They say that bringing up a child takes the whole tribe. Education, in other words, cannot be a solitary or sectoral undertaking. Doubtlessly, schools play a major role, since they bring together and apply the guidelines they are given by society. However, schools find themselves powerless to accomplish their mission without help from the world outside the classroom: first of all, families, and then the array of audiovisual and electronic media that children learn to handle and use so quickly that they soon leave behind any adults who want to show them how they work.

Such help with education is hard to elicit from other stakeholders in society. Among other things, because there is regulated education with set curricula determining the minimal knowledge that it is mandatory to convey. Anything lying beyond those rules that apply exclusively to school –beginning with the family– depends on the goodwill of the different agents, and their capacity to shoulder responsibly the role they need to play in each case. Of course, families have the primary responsibility for what their children do and watch on television. But we have to acknowledge that families also need help, especially during those time slots when parents, whose workdays do not match their children’s school schedules, cannot directly meet their educational obligations.

Regarding the audiovisual media in general, and television in particular, it seems logical for their practitioners to be reluctant to assume educational responsibilities as their own business, especially if this is understood as making educational programming. Only public television has the obligation to do that part. Private television stations, in

turn, must accept a broader responsibility, derived from the conviction that, to say the least, they are inarguably a popular medium, highly influential in the way children learn to view the world. Therefore, they must be especially careful of the programming they broadcast during prime time for children.

Precisely because that responsibility is vague, hard to pin down as behavioural patterns or unmistakable best practices, educational administrators must do their part to get their teachers to meet the need to educate in and for the audiovisual media. The reality is that the administration seldom gets around to this. Media literacy is a new element, and we know how difficult it is to introduce innovations into administrative inertia. This element also entails teacher training and therefore a specific budget for it. It is also true that not all teachers see the urgency of audiovisual or digital education the same way, beyond the purely technical aspects taught by specialists in those subjects. We live in a society with experts for each problem, addressing our problems with blinders that make it almost impossible to find «cross-cutting» solutions. The same concept generates scepticism in view of the schools' failure in attempting to introduce cross-cutting knowledge into teaching.

That is where Audiovisual Councils can do interesting, timely work that fits perfectly with their more specific functions. These bodies are well positioned as mediators between the audiovisual media and society at large. At the same time, they are able to identify and support initiatives by schools. Regulatory authorities, if they understand their task, soon see how complex it is to oversee the audiovisual media. For one thing, they have to enforce a lot of rules about advertising timing, programme identification, respecting the schedule when children are watching, etc. But they must also know more about what is actually going on: what children prefer, how it influences their minds and develops their addiction to screens, when violence is going too far, what pornography is, what moral and non-moral values are broadcast by children's programmes, what identities they foster, and so many other questions that experts in education and communication have been posing for many years now. Audiovisual Councils are there to defend the rights of viewers –children and adults– from any abuse by the audiovisual media. Since they are the mediators of a basic good, namely freedom of speech and the right to information, any interference in their work immediately looks like censorship. Councils must often work indirectly, mediating among rights of different sorts: the right to freedom of speech, of course, but also the right to education. And the latter right cannot be guaranteed if the audiovisual media systematically undermine whatever families and schools try to convey through education.

1. Audiovisual Councils: the Spanish Anomaly

The situation of Spain's Audiovisual Councils is unique, to put it benevolently. I will explain this through my own personal experience, which gave me a close-up on the aborted initiative of creating the first Spanish Audiovisual Council. In 1993, I was elected senator to the Spanish Courts and charged with chairing a «commission

on television contents». The Commission was supposed to study the excesses of programming that had begun to go beyond the acceptable boundaries. The European Directive «Television Without Borders» had just been adapted to Spanish law and, for the first time, there seemed to be legal grounds enough to wield some control over the contents of television, especially to protect children.

To our surprise, we came across the existence of «Audiovisual Councils», with the mission of precisely supervising enforcement of the Law and defending viewers' rights from potential abuse by an industry mainly driven by advertising revenues. It was not difficult to reach a consensus among the political groups, to have a report assessing the dangers of television contents at that time, a report which very specifically recommended the creation of a Spanish Audiovisual Council.

Consensus was easily garnered in the Senate, because all political groups backed it, but little happened. When it came to drafting a law to create such a Council, the political parties –all of them– changed their minds. Private audiovisual companies pressured hard –and they have never let up that pressure– to keep the Council at the idea stage. No government since then (since 1996, when the report was submitted to and approved by the Senate) has had the will or courage to propose an Audiovisual Council for Spain.

However, the work done in the Senate was not wholly in vain. A few years later, the Catalanian Parliament passed a proposal by the autonomous government to create an Audiovisual Council. Although it started out as little more than an advisory council with little power, by the year 2000, it was fully on a par with the most independent European and international councils, with the greatest capacity for action. The French Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel was the model to build the first structure, which has expanded since then. At present, Catalonia's Audiovisual Council has full jurisdiction not only to enforce legislation regarding the audiovisual media, but also to decide on competitive selection processes and to grant sub-national radio and television frequencies. Not only was the Council created in Catalonia, and is in excellent health and well-recognized even by the audiovisual media that were so reluctant to let it exist, but in 2005, Catalonia passed an Audiovisual Law, absolutely indispensable to update all the regulations that had come out since Spain's first Broadcasting Statute in 1983. Catalonia's example of creating its Audiovisual Council was immediately followed by the autonomous community of Navarra, which created its own Council, and by the Board of Andalusia, which has had its own since 2006.

Notwithstanding this progress, the anomaly persists. It makes little sense for a medium such as television, with increasingly blurred boundaries, to be controlled in only a few of the territories of Spain. The Catalanian, Andalusian and Navarrese Audiovisual Councils oversee their local radio and television, but not national stations, which reach the homes of everyone in Catalonia, Navarra and Andalusia. This patchy jurisdiction is a comparative disadvantage for local media, and, more importantly, fails to defend the rights of viewers throughout the Spanish territory.

2. Audiovisual Councils and Media Education

The Audiovisual Council of Catalonia has, since the outset, been concerned with media education. The book for teachers, «How to Watch Television», was one of their first publications, with a second edition in both Catalan and Spanish, widely distributed among schools. In 2002, the «White Book» was prepared and published. «Education in an Audiovisual Setting» was intended to assess the situation in Catalonia in order to propose measures to improve it and correct existing dysfunctions. The text has been broadly distributed throughout the Spanish territory and has served as a benchmark to highlight the deficits in the schools' media education and to indicate some guidelines to remedy them.

An independent administrative authority such as the Audiovisual Council does not often seek to team up with schools. In Europe, only OFCOM has taken up the task of leading media literacy in response to a specific British Government mandate. From a merely intuitive standpoint, it would seem obvious for an agency that oversees the audiovisual media, and particularly television, emphasizing protection for children, to assume that education is part of its business. At the end of the day, regulation of television contents cannot go much further than the European Directive provision: prohibiting anything that could harm children's physical, psychic or moral health. Does this give the Council a mandate to prohibit any sort of programming that is not pure, hard-core pornography? The wording of the legal mandate –«anything that could harm»– establishes a sort of causal relationship between programming and behaviours of the child audience, which is impossible to prove, since human behaviours cannot be explained by isolating a single variable that might influence them. The difficulty of empirically verifying the actual influence of television programming on people's behaviour encourages broadcasters to deny any educational drawbacks in their increasingly banal shows. Consequently, we end up having to trust the goodwill of media management and their desire not to hurt children too much. And to trust that children, especially, will get enough information to counteract any potential harmful effects from careless programming that neglects children's needs.

We are not giving up on regulation, but making clear how difficult it is to legislate precise criteria to distinguish suitable programming from unsuitable programming. Such criteria would be rejected as invasions of the freedom of speech, as already pointed out. Censorship of freedom of speech is a millstone around the necks of Audiovisual Councils the world over, as they must be careful to avoid destroying the work already achieved that is also absolutely necessary. Councils are very well positioned to propose interpretations of legal norms and the resulting recommendations, and to end up persuading media practitioners to do their part in the ethical responsibility for construing and enforcing the law. Broadcasters must take the attitude of asking, regarding a show during children's prime-time: «Would I like my own children to see all this?» It goes without saying that this question is often far from the concerns of companies striving above all to seize children's and young people's attention, at whatever cost. Nevertheless, taking seriously the function that television ought to perform in order «not to harm» children means just that: reflecting on how it fits in with educational aims.

Overseeing audiovisual media is not just a question of levying penalties when the Law is broken. Such policing can be done, but only in quite exceptional cases. For this reason, more than a specific function of pure oversight, what Audiovisual Councils do is contribute to co-regulation, encouraging joint work between television companies and citizen organizations or societal agents, so programming improves and actually serves the viewership. Some stations have their own educational council to advise them. It would be good for them all to have such councils.

And it would also be good for those most directly responsible for education – family, school and teachers– to shoulder the obligation of teaching ways to understand audiovisual (and digital) language, and decode it adequately. This is not just a technical skill that children pick up before their parents or teachers do. This is a social, moral or citizenship-based competency. «Technological reductionism» is one of the dangers gripping the new media. Learning to use the media means more than just handling them technically; it calls for the ability to distinguish quality from junk, good information from hype, learning not to be swept up in advertising excitement, and to correct for the tendency to soak up media contents passively. To teach this ability, teachers or parents must first know what their children and students are exposed to, and give them the tools to react and defend themselves from potentially noxious influences.

This complex task requires physical means, some training, and the time to put one's ideas into practice. Generally, administrators agree to provide the hardware, but ignore the need to adapt teachers to the new situations they must face. Nor are teachers encouraged to do so. Generally, a few enthusiastic teachers manage to persuade the rest, investing their own generosity and good faith heavily. That is why assistance from Audiovisual Councils may be priceless. If Councils can understand that contributing to media education is also part of their mandate, they will mediate between school authorities, teachers and the audiovisual world.

3. The Experience of Catalonia's Audiovisual Council

The conviction that it is absolutely fundamental for Audiovisual Councils to partner with schools has accompanied Catalonia's Audiovisual Council since the beginning. In addition to publishing material for schools, the Council has led a series of measures to drive research and orient instruction toward media literacy. Accordingly, the Catalan Council has signed a series of agreements with different local universities to motivate researchers along these lines. As well as arranging specific studies with consolidated research teams, an annual contest, targeting younger researchers, makes special mention of media education as one top-priority line to pursue.

Moreover, the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia holds a yearly competition for elementary and secondary school students, and for their teachers, to present their work and experiences in audiovisual literacy training. The goal is to encourage classroom work and encourage teachers' imaginations, to find new ways and methods to teach youngsters how to watch television, to use Internet wisely, and the many other media now comprising children's natural environment.

A pioneering, far-reaching project in this area is the document prepared by a number of professors from several Spanish universities, led by Joan Ferrés, regarding «Competencies in Audiovisual Communication». The document and the body of writing sparked by its discussions have been published by the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia in a number of its «Quaderns». This document is serving its purpose as the starting-point for a long-term empirical study, sampling different ages, and ascertaining the degree of competency in using the media of Spain's population. For what it's worth, «competency» is a core concept in current educational discussions. In the field of communication, «competency» must include not only technical aspects but also –perhaps fundamentally– social, ethical and aesthetic dimensions. The idea is ultimately to see how well citizens can process images and information they receive «reasonably» and not contrary to what we may continue to call «the common good». It is also to see how well citizens can tell what is correct or not, what is good quality from bad production. Good and bad, right and wrong, fair and unfair are not purely subjective concepts, although subjectivity also plays a part. Overcoming the fear of falling into pure subjectivity and realizing that culture per se and the products culture offers can be assessed, is a fundamental step toward undertaking media literacy more rigorously and effectively.

A former director of the Federal Communications Commission in the United States ruled some years ago that «Television is always instructive. The question we have to ask is: What does it teach?» We won't have an answer to that question if we are unclear about the citizenry's community «competency» and what can be done in the educational system to help that competency progress and improve. At a time when ethical values seem to be driven aside by the values promoted by the consumer economy, we must ascertain whether the audiovisual media are helping or hindering the building of citizenship. The type of individual comprising the most developed societies is a consumer, not a citizen. But democracies need citizens. And one of the characteristics of a citizen is precisely not to be purely receptive or merely passive to messages and information that come along, but to have the necessary capacity to process them critically.

So it is paradoxical to see how, in the so-called «Knowledge Society», one of the most vulnerable values is knowledge itself. Receiving plentiful information, but superficial and fragmentary, about all imaginable topics, is not the same as acquiring knowledge. To know something, mere receptivity is quite insufficient. Regulated education cannot ignore this truth if it expects even minimally satisfactory results. Obtaining information about what is going on is the first step to get one's bearings in reality and take charge of it –but the second step is learning to select among that information and judge its value. When the receiver judges a mediated reality, he or she is adding value to the messages –but this added value requires training, because reality does not judge itself.

This does not mean adopting a negative attitude, rejecting the new media environment, by any means. Like any innovation, it must be commended for the advantages it offers, but with safeguards against potential dysfunctions, which society

must address if it wishes to progress in human terms and not just in technological ones. Information technologies have great potential, which may be tapped for good or evil. Since these are technological innovations, it is easy to focus just on technical progress, without taking into account that this technology is only the vehicle carrying certain contents. Education, again, cannot focus solely on technical competency, but on communicational competency in the broadest sense of the term. Without a doubt, audiovisual and digital culture facilitates faster, more convenient, easier information and communication. The question is: Will it also represent progress for knowledge, for democracy, for solidarity and for personal self-determination? New ways to communicate can surely reinforce all these values and facts of citizenship. They can, if there is the explicit will to use them that way. Without such goodwill, the new technologies, which are blind, will have no way of knowing which way to go.

Media literacy must bear in mind, beyond technological and economic factors, key social, democratic and civic values. Technology by itself does not improve persons or perfect democracies, or even contribute to increasing knowledge. Technology is a chance and a means to make this all happen –which is why it is so important to learn to use it, and to have agencies devoted actively to encouraging that learning.

Note

Since this article presents the activities of the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia regarding media literacy, the bibliography is limited to the Council's publications in that area. They can all be found at the Council's Website: www.cac.cat.

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