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Media literacy, participation and accountability for the media of generation of silence

Alfabetización mediática, participación y responsabilidad frente a los medios de la generación del silencio

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to study the level of media literacy in a sample of elderly women, the so-called «silent generation», belonging to the Asturian Housewives Association, by means of a questionnaire to collect data on critical awareness in women. The questionnaire seeks information on the persuasive effects of advertising; the women's evaluation of the information conveyed by the media, and their training, commitment and participation as media consumers. The survey also tries to identify the women's demands and concerns, regarding the media they usually use, by conducting focus group discussions. Findings show that the women surveyed believe that advertising lacks credibility and claim that some TV stations offer information and content which is biased or has been manipulated to the extent that it goes against the law. Although such women know the channels for citizen participation, they do not know how to exercise their rights in the face of illegal content. In addition, certain training needs have been detected. This research points to the need to design a training plan for media literacy which will empower them with critical skills and foster participation as active and responsible consumers. It is also intended that such women will acquire specific knowledge about the media, as well as the psychological strategies, technical resources and audiovisual language the media use.

RESUMEN

La presente investigación, por un lado, pulsa el nivel de alfabetización mediática que posee una muestra de mujeres de la tercera edad o generación del silencio –integradas en la Agrupación de Amas de Casa del Principado de Asturias–, mediante un cuestionario que recaba información sobre su conciencia crítica a partir de: el efecto de persuasión que creen tiene la publicidad; su valoración sobre la información transmitida por los medios de comunicación; y su formación, compromiso y participación como consumidoras de los mismos. Y, por otro, recoge sus demandas y preocupaciones más acuciantes en torno a los medios que normalmente utilizan, obtenidas a partir de los debates generados en los grupos de discusión que participaron. Entre los resultados más destacados cabe mencionarse que las encuestadas consideran que la publicidad no merece credibilidad e indican que existen cadenas de TV que ofrecen información manipulada o sesgada y contenidos denunciados que vulneran la legislación vigente. Aunque conocen los cauces para la participación ciudadana, no saben reclamar sus derechos ante la exhibición de contenidos denunciados. Además, se detectan determinadas lagunas formativas. De la investigación se deriva la necesidad de diseñar un plan formativo de alfabetización mediática que potencie sus habilidades críticas y fomente su participación como consumidoras activas y responsables, al tiempo que les dote de conocimientos específicos sobre los medios, sus estrategias psicológicas, los recursos técnicos y el lenguaje audiovisual que emplean.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Critical consciousness, media literacy, civic participation, advertising, media literacy.
Conciencia crítica, competencias mediáticas, participación ciudadana, publicidad, alfabetización mediática.

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1. Introduction and overview

Pérez-Tornero and Varis (2010) define our civilization as a hypertechnologised era under progressive change in which culture is constructed from the convergence of the different media and the use made of these by citizens, who should consequently be versed in these languages, that is, become media literate. Hence, awareness of new media and promotion of critical consumption in citizens is one of the greatest challenges facing today's society, as evidenced by the UN's clear commitment to fostering the development of global policies aimed at citizen education (Aguaded, 2012). A new global paradigm of education has therefore appeared known as «media literacy» which aims at promoting responsible media use and the acquisition of the necessary competences to select, understand and discriminate information accessed through different channels (television, Internet, videogames, etc.) (Potter, 2011). Media literacy seeks to awaken citizens' critical awareness so that they demand a sustainable communication based on veracity of messages and accurate information.

The call for media literacy, and thus for the development of media literacy competences, is not new, there being several experiences and research projects which focus on training different sectors of society. In Spain, some of these have aimed at adult education (Correa, 1998; Bautista, Delgado & Zehag, 1999) as has the work of Iriarte (1999) in a Latin American context. Others, such as Núñez and Loscertales (2000), worked with women whilst Estebanell, Ferrés and Guiu (2004) focused on the child audience, etc. In the English-speaking context, research has also taken place into media literacy from different perspectives: its repercussions on higher education (Hobbs, 2007); its influence on child consumers (Eintraub, Kristine and Johnson, 1997); its capacity for empowering critical thinking (Feuerstein, 1999), etc.

Likewise, the need to provide basic audiovisual competences to a disadvantaged group such as senior citizen housewives fostered the development in Asturias of initiatives aimed at achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2010) in order to minimize the gap between a generation brought up viewing a single screen and the «multi-screen generation» of their grandchildren.

The older women taking part in the current study belong to a generation termed by sociologists as «the silent generation» (born 1925-1945). Rosen (2010) points out that these women spent their childhood without television, since television did not in fact become part of Spanish households until the mid-1950s. As

adults, they watched black and white TV with only one channel, and only later were able to view color TV and new channels. At the end of their working life, many have been overwhelmed by the increasing impact of technology (mobile phone, Internet, iPod, iPad and so on) as a result of which a new form of exclusion is appearing, especially for senior citizen housewives.

We therefore consider research into the knowledge and attitudes of this social group as regards the media to be relevant in identifying their level of media literacy.

2. Material and methods

Livingstone (2011) maintains that media literacy should be concerned with critical understanding, the creation of media resources and closely analyzing the media in order to guarantee objective observation of the world as well as creative self expression.

The term «critical media awareness» refers to the ability of consumers to analyze, question and evaluate information accessed through the media. Such higher order cognitive activity requires the abilities and skills necessary to adopt proactive attitudes achieved through actions, behavior and critical, committed and creative responses to the media in general and television in particular (Del Moral, 2010a). Therefore, the level of critical awareness is closely related to citizen participation through appropriate channels designated by society, claiming respect for their rights, acting coherently and assuming responsibility as citizens to ensure and demand enforcement of the General Law regulating Audiovisual Contents (LGCA, 2010).

2.1. Objectives of the study

The aim of this study was to identify the level of media literacy –through critical awareness, participation and responsibility– shown by a representative sample of the social sphere of women in Asturias, such as the Asturias Regional Housewives' Association (AACP).

2.2. Methodology

The methodology used in this study involved active, dynamic and communicative participation, in which the women taking part could intervene, discuss and communicate with their peers as regards their most pressing demands and concerns relating to the media they usually made use of (television and radio) whilst at the same time measuring their level of critical awareness. The following procedures were implemented:

- Initial diagnostic testing of the sample (n=64), via a questionnaire and posterior statistical analysis, before dividing into groups and starting the workshops.
- Setting-up of 5 work groups of 12 participants each to work on the topics presented: 1) the General Law regulating Audiovisual Contents (LGCA,) and viewers' rights; 2) Child Protection; 3) Formulas for citizen participation; 4) Critical analysis of advertising.
- Collection and processing of group contributions, using qualitative methodology supported with tools such as logbooks and observation guides characteristic of ethnographic research. The starting script was organized around the psycho-sociological, technical and aesthetic analysis of various audiovisual documents shown in order to record the comments made after viewing, identifying their interpretations, limitations, training needs, demands and concerns.
- Construction of general conclusions arising from data analysis of the questionnaire and inferences made by the discussion groups.

2.3. Data collection tool

The questionnaire had two parts, one of which gathered information on the descriptive parameters of the research subjects: age, gender, etc.

The other, with 12 items, was designed to verify participant level of critical awareness through analysis of specific aspects regarding:

- a) The persuasive effects of advertising: Degree of perceived influence on consumers. Degree of agreement that they had ever bought a product on seeing an advertisement; Degree of agreement in identifying key factors that might induce them to buy an advertised product.
- b) Evaluation of the information transmitted by media. Level of awareness of the emotional and rational components in television messages; Degree of reliability acquired by news items when accompanied by an image; Level of perception of bias and manipulation in news items broadcast on certain television stations; Degree of agreement in identifying the criteria used to choose TV and radio stations for acquiring news.
- c) Active participation. Awareness of the audience ratings system used by different programmes; Degree

of reflection on whether TV programming content gives reason for complaint; Awareness of the existence of institutions to protect viewers' rights; Degree of identification of these in order to assert their rights as viewers and demand accountability; Verification of direct action taken to show dissatisfaction.

2.4. Sampling method

A sample was made up of 64 women, all of whom were regional delegates for the different Housewives' Associations of the Principality of Asturias (AACPA), distributed as follows: aged 66-75 years old (41%), 56-65 years old (40%), over 75 years old (10%) and finally

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the minority group aged between 46 and 55 years old (9%). Almost all respondents have children –generally two (42%)– and also spend a large amount of time taking care of grandchildren. More than half of the respondents have completed Primary School education (59%) whilst 32% have Vocational Training or Baccalaureate qualifications. 6% of women have University Degrees and the remaining 3% have had no formal education.

3. Research findings and analysis

3.1. Persuasive effects of advertising

The role played by advertising as a catalyst and stimulus of consumption is beyond question. The media are aware of this and swamp programming with advertising aimed at drawing viewers' attention, attempting and persuading them to buy specific products or services, making them easy prey for attractive messages which are accepted unreservedly and uncritically.

a) Influence of advertising on consumers. Respondents were asked whether they believed that advertising has a real influence on consumers. Some convergence of opinion was observed as 86% agreed to a greater or lesser extent on this statement, as is shown in figure 1, whereas a marginal 14.5% of respondents were doubtful of such an influence, with 6.4% finding very little or little influence and 8% none whatsoever.

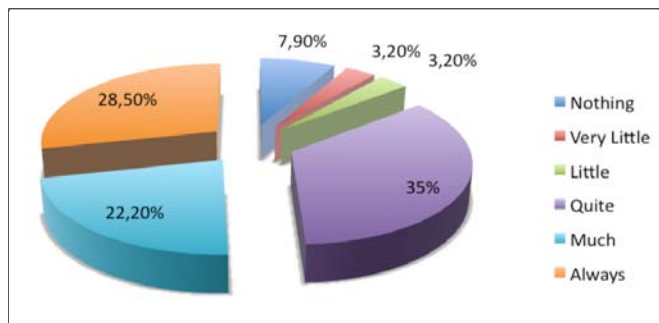


Figure 1. Respondents' beliefs as regards whether consumers are influenced by advertising.

b) Purchases are conditioned by advertising. Another item specifically highlighted the perceived persuasive effect of advertising on themselves as consumers and, surprisingly, 43% claimed never to have made a decision to try out a product based on advertising, 33% hardly ever and 8% rarely. Only 16% admit being persuaded to do so by advertising, of whom 13% claim to be quite frequently or frequently influenced and 3% state that they are always influenced.

These findings are insightful in that it would appear that the respondents do not consider themselves to be among the 86% of the population that is vulnerable to advertising's persuasive messages, as indicated previously. Two interpretations may, therefore, be possible: either that the cost of the product as well as these housewives' real needs are unquestionably more decisive factors than the attraction of the advertising message itself, which would point to the sample of respondents possessing a high degree of independence when making decisions, or, on the other hand, it could

indicate that they are not aware of being influenced and do actually buy advertised products under a greater level of pre-conditioning than they reveal.

c) Factors that might induce them to buy an advertised product. Nevertheless, although the respondents sampled claim not to be influenced by advertising—never (43%) or very occasionally (41%)—when asked to identify the key factor that might induce them to try a product advertised, they produced some interesting data, as shown in table 1.

Around 43% of respondents indicate that the factors that have the most influence on whether or not they buy a product are quite often, often and always the qualities and benefits of the product shown in advertising. Although there are also some conflicting opinions, since the remaining 57% that they were rarely, hardly ever or never convinced by the deceptive appearance of advertising. Whilst 70% of respondents find that advertising messages lack credibility, around 25% indicate that such messages are persuasive and condition their purchases.

On the contrary to what might be thought by advertising agencies, who opt for famous people or models as the star of the spot, 81% of respondents consider that they are rarely, hardly ever or never induced to buy a product because of the protagonist. Around 64% affirm that the originality of the spot is never, hardly ever or rarely a decisive factor towards consuming advertised products in contrast to the other 36% who state the opposite.

To sum up, after gathering the conclusions of the discussion groups focusing on critical analysis of advertising, it can be seen that in general the respondents mistrust advertising. Nevertheless, they recognize the fact that it may convince large sectors of the audience. Thus they feel that there is a need for the development of specific training to aid consumers to analyze each of the aspects that make advertising such a tremendous vehicle for generating consumption, to separate the packaging from the reality of the product, to perceive to what extent the products or services advertised are

	Never	Hardly ever	Seldom	Quite often	Very often	Always
The protagonist in the spot	52,4%	16%	12,6%	9,5%	4,8%	4,8%
The message conveyed	39,7%	12,7%	17,5%	20,6%	4,8%	4,8%
Originality of the spot	30,2%	16%	17,5%	19%	5%	12,3%
Benefits of the product shown	17,5%	9,5%	30,2%	16%	12,6%	14,2%

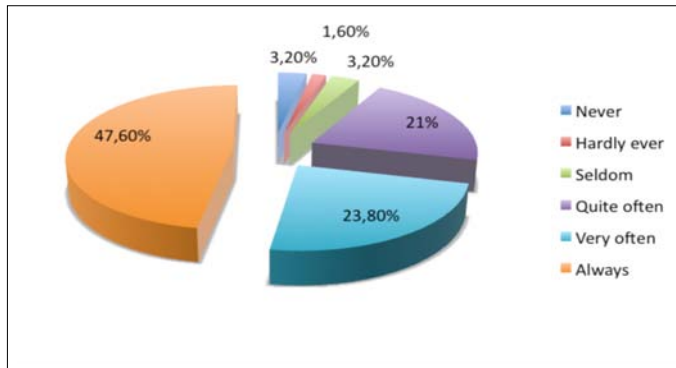


Figure 2. Respondents' evaluation of whether they identify the rational and emotive components pervading television messages.

really useful, to identify their benefits, advantages, disadvantages, etc.

3.2. Evaluation of the information transmitted by media

It is a well-known fact that the transmission of information is not impartial since it includes, on the one hand, objective elements linked to a description of fact, a statement of contents and concepts –within the framework of what is purely rational– and, on the other hand, elements which are open to interpretation and associated to ideological and ethical evaluation together with a strong emotional and affective component. The extent to which television messages are emotionally charged may condition viewers' freedom and decision-making. If rationality and objectivity are lost, the viewer may be moved to act through compassion, suffering, pain, hate, revenge, love, happiness, hope, etc. (Del Moral, 2010b).

Although expressive aspects and technical resources, such as the graphic illustration of news with images, can contribute to a greater degree of reliability for viewers, it is also essential to make the viewer aware that such aspects may also add ideological connotations or increase their interpretive or manipulatory value. Therefore, a viewer with a high level of critical awareness may be expected to have at least a minimum awareness of the psychological strategies used by the media to construct the messages which reach an audience, as well as being able to differentiate the rational and emotive aspects pervading these.

a) Level of awareness of the emotional and rational components in television messages. The housewives making up the current sample were therefore asked if they

were aware of and could distinguish between the rational and emotive components that usually pervade television message and the following responses were obtained: almost half the respondents (approximately 48%) claim that they always perceive this whilst another significant 44.5% often or quite often do so, whereas only 8% responded that they rarely, hardly ever or never perceive it (figure 2).

To verify their responses, the work groups were then shown a selection of news from various TV television stations, as well as dialogues from both foreign and

Spanish TV series. They were asked to separate the objective aspects of the information –or of the stories– from the emotive resources which might bias interpretation and induce certain attitudes. This demonstrated that it was not easy for them to separate these facets in spite of their claims to the contrary, thus highlighting that the plan to train media consumers in media competences should integrate activities which would develop the skill to distinguish between the rational and the emotive components of television discourse.

b) Degree of reliability acquired by news items when accompanied by an image. Similarly, when they were asked whether a news item accompanied by an image had a greater degree of reliability, the responses shown in Figure 3 were received. Around 43% appear to be quite sure that news items which are graphically illustrated have more credibility than those which are not, whilst 38% agree that they are often or quite often more reliable. A more skeptical 9% believe that they are rarely or hardly ever reliable whilst around 9.5% believe that they are never reliable, may be manipulated or not show the whole truth.

At later sessions, the work groups discussed how

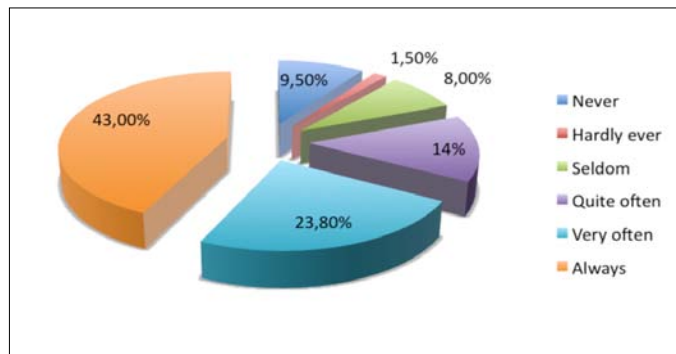


Figure 3. Respondents' beliefs regarding the reliability of news items when accompanied by images.

descriptions of specific news accompanied by dramatic images can charge them with such emotion that they become true dramas, thereby conditioning the audience's attitudes and behavior, with a serious risk of ideological manipulation of discourse, and occasionally modeling their thinking towards a specific fact or event. This led them to conclude that they needed to learn: 1) to identify the added value conferred on the news by images illustrating credibility, contextualization, ideological positioning, clarification, synthesis, complaint, prestige/discredit, legitimization/delegitimization, etc.; 2) to determine the feelings and emotions aroused by such images and the reactions they are capable of eliciting from the audience.

c) Detection of biased or manipulated information on some television stations. Very often everyday social facts and events have deep political and economic implications and the media undoubtedly report and interpret these from the ideological viewpoint to which they adhere. For this reason, some viewers complain that information is not objective, and that some TV or radio stations take a stance in line with the politico-ideological affiliations backing them, by highlighting certain aspects over others, by hiding the truth or only revealing half-truths, in short, by biasing information and confusing the audience.

Hence, the housewives were asked to state whether they thought that «some TV and/or radio stations offer biased or manipulated information», which generated critical data, as for 44.5% of respondents, some television stations always offer this kind of information and for 41.2%, this was often or quite often the case. Only 6.3% of more «reflective» respondents think that this is rare and only 8% consider that it hardly ever occurs, although no respondents maintain that this never happens (figure 4).

The discussion groups' conclusions in this regard are thus unanimous in demanding greater stringency and objectivity from the media when transmitting information. Equally, they, themselves, should be aware that they need to take on more responsibility for training if they are not to continue «listening only to certain voices» and should contrast the information given by different media in order to gain a viewpoint which is closer to the truth and thereby make their own judgments.

d) Criteria used to select media for acquiring information. As a result, it was thought that it could be of interest to have respondents reflect on the criteria they use, whether consciously or unconsciously, to

choose which TV and/or radio stations to get information from. So they were asked to indicate the factors that were most decisive when making their choice. 36.5% highlighted that the key factor, above all others, when choosing a TV or radio station for information concerned the professionals working in them. This was closely followed by the political independence of the broadcasting station, chosen by 30% of respondents.

46% of respondents consider that the political party or ideology supported by a TV or radio station never or hardly ever influences their choice, together with 21% who state that this is rarely their reason for choosing it. On the other hand, 19% point to this as the key factor in their choice as do 14% whose election is often or quite often dependent on this aspect.

Therefore, the political independence of the chosen television station would appear to be the fundamental factor taken into consideration when selecting a television station for information for more than half of the respondents (54%). It is surprising to find that 25.5% of these women prefer to be informed from a specific ideological point of view, which one supposes is in agreement with their own personal political affiliation.

Approximately 37% also indicate that quite often or often the presentation or the format –how innovative it is– of each television station's news programmes is another factor determining choice.

The respondents undoubtedly carried out an interesting exercise of reflection to enable them to be more aware of their decisions and to identify the real factors determining their choice of TV and/or radio stations when seeking information. Later, after the work group debates, we pinpointed a need to compare the information given by various media, in order to contrast these, judge divergent points of view, understand the ideological positioning underpinning them and high-

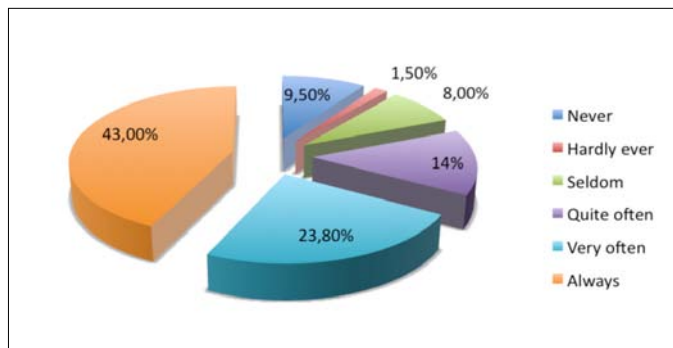


Figure 4. Respondents' opinions on whether some television stations manipulate or bias their information

Table 2. Degree of agreement that the choice of TV and/or radio stations for information is based:

	Never	Hardly ever	Rarely	Quite often	Often	Always
Political party or ideology	41,3%	4,8%	20,7%	3,2%	11%	19%
Political independence	25,5%	8%	12,5%	8%	16%	30%
Professionals working for the broadcasting station	12,7%	9,5%	16%	14,3%	11%	36,5%
Presentation or format of the programme	22,2%	6,3%	11%	22,3%	14,3%	23,8%

light significant differences when describing facts and events.

An additional conclusion was that for people to be properly informed and not manipulated, they should be aware of the different approaches to the interpretation of reality taken by the media, which is the only way to achieve a free, unbiased viewpoint.

3.3. Active participation

It is frequently the case that when citizens show a high degree of critical awareness towards the media – or to any of the programmes broadcast by the media – it might be directly related, on the one hand, to consistent active participation in forums or specialised sites where they are able to voice their opinion, agreement or disagreement with what is broadcast, or, on the other hand, to boycotting these and reducing their audience, thereby contributing to their disappearance from programming networks as being unprofitable amongst other reasons.

The media are concerned to substantiate to what extent they actually penetrate society and invest a large part of their budget on verifying audience ratings in comparison with their direct competitors since this has a direct influence on third party investment (advertising) and survival in the telecommunications market. As a result, we should be aware that audiences are truly empowered when they are aware of this and act accordingly, asserting their rights and ensuring that the laws regulating media consumption are complied with.

a) Awareness of audience rating systems. It should be pointed out that 67% of respondents have no knowledge of the system used by different programmes to rate audience fidelity. However, 25% of the women sampled show a good knowledge of these systems, with some having a device for this purpose on their own TV set and a subscription to the ratings program contracted.

b) Opinion on whether TV programming content gives reason for complaint. In addition, when asked specifically about whether TV programming

content gives reason for complaint, 43% hold that this is always so, followed by 27%

who believe that there are often or quite often reasons for complaint, which together make up a significant 70% of respondents showing general dissatisfaction. In contrast, 16% of respondents appear to be satisfied with televised content since they feel that these never give any reason for complaint, whilst another 14% are also less critical, reporting that they rarely or hardly ever find cause for complaint (figure 5).

We thought it would be useful in the discussion groups to contrast any programming elements that they subjectively considered might be susceptible to complaints with those that are specifically covered in the General Law on Audiovisual Content (2010). This drew attention to their lack of knowledge of their rights as viewers, which broadly explains the degree of conformity and tolerance regarding broadcasting, evidenced especially by 30% of respondents, as mentioned previously.

This is evidently another key point to be included in the training program, i.e. explaining and making an in-depth analysis of the GLAC (General Law on Audiovisual Content) to make it accessible to the participants so that they are aware of their rights and are therefore able to assert them.

c) Awareness of the existence of institutions to protect viewers' rights. It was then decided to verify whether they were aware of the institutions or agencies they could turn to should they wish to make a complaint if they were dissatisfied with television content and it was found that nearly 60% do not know

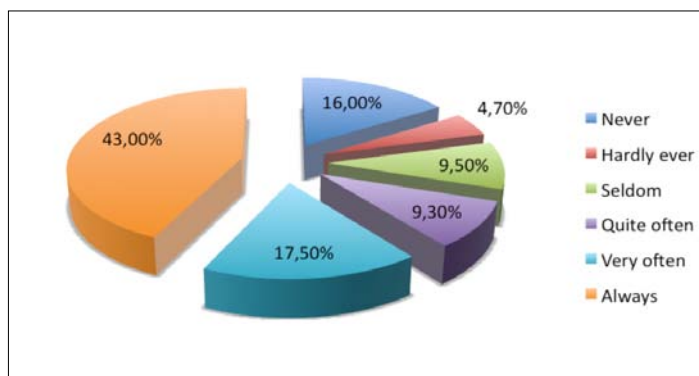


Figure 5. Respondents' opinions on whether TV programming content gives reason for complaint.

these. Only 40% said that they knew who to contact, pointing to the Viewers' Association as the main institution (59.5%), followed by Consumer Associations (36%) and lastly the Law Courts (3%) and the actual TV broadcasting station itself (1.5%).

Obviously, these data give cause for concern since they point to the fact that the dissatisfaction with certain television programme content expressed by a large number of respondents (70%) never materializes as a complaint, basically because of their lack of knowledge of the appropriate channels used by society to this effect.

It is evident that the key role now played by the different consumer and media user associations –also termed as viewers' or listeners' associations– after the passing of the General Law on Audiovisual Content (2010) goes beyond simply guaranteeing enforcement. Fuente (2010) highlights that these associations can actually function as agents of media literacy.

d) Filing complaints. Indeed, when respondents were asked whether they had ever personally contacted the institutions that they had named to express dissatisfaction or to file a complaint regarding their opinions on unsuitable content or messages broadcast on TV, findings showed that 94% had never done so whilst only 6% had ever contacted a Consumer Association to make a formal complaint about misleading publicity advertising certain services.

Nevertheless, although 40% of respondents do know where to refer complaints or voice disapproval about what they feel to be a breach of their rights, we perceive a lack of decision to break through the inertia of a *laissez-faire* attitude.

In line with the relationship of interdependence between citizen participation and quality television established by Bustamante and Aranguren (2005), the discussion groups underlined the need to show more commitment to active participation in forums or sites where citizens' opinions can be made public. In addition, socially recognized mechanisms should be urgently implemented to defend viewers' rights and citizens should be more aggressive in demands leading to greater quality of media in general and of television in particular, as noted by Boza (2005).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The sample taking part in the current study was made up of women, a majority of whom are grandmothers in charge of their grandchildren. These women's media competences and skills play a crucial role from the home environment in developing responsible and critical media consumption, hence our

interest in focusing on this particular group. The current research has produced some extremely interesting findings leading to the design of a training plan.

Firstly, the women surveyed affirm that they are not influenced by the persuasive messages of advertising. They feel that their consumer habits are mainly swayed by family and economic necessity and that they are not attracted by advertising messages. It can be inferred from their opinions that a high percentage of the women are able to identify the strategies used in spots to induce excessive consumption.

Secondly, they express their concerns that some media offer the viewer biased and manipulated information, and they criticize their lack of rigor and objectivity when transmitting information. It is not surprising, therefore, in the light of such distrust, that their choice of TV and/or radio broadcasting station to acquire information is based on two fundamental criteria: on the one hand, confidence in the professionals working for the broadcasting station and on the other, its political independence. Their responses allow us to infer that they do have sufficient ability to distinguish the ideological values present in news media.

Finally, although many of the women surveyed detect broadcasting which infringes the regulations of the General Law on Audiovisual Content (2010), such as showing gratuitous violence (Fernández, Revilla and Domínguez, 2011), or making an attack on personal integrity, etc., they have neither expressed dissatisfaction nor made a complaint to the agencies and institutions set up to this effect. Therefore, one of the lines of action to be incorporated in the media literacy training plan should aim at developing not only the acquisition of the necessary knowledge and skills for responsible media consumption but also at fostering active participation in reporting abuse and demanding responsibility from the media to comply with legislation, especially as regards child protection.

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