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# Empowering Media Citizenship through Educommunication

Empoderar a la ciudadanía mediática desde la educomunicación

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the different meanings of the citizenship concept (political, legal, social, economic, ecological and intercultural) in order to justify the current media citizenship concept, which is particularly useful and valid for media education. The ultimate goal is to rebuild the social, ethical and political dimension of educommunication on a practical and philosophical foundation. With this in mind, we have analysed two very powerful and current approaches, the ethics of dialogue and ability, mainly because of their links to communication and their contribution to the human development concept, which is on the media education agendas of international organizations such as UNESCO or the European Commission. From the philosophical foundation proposed, the criteria for evaluating and reconstructing the practical dimension of educommunication are: civic participation, freedom as development and critical autonomy, which are also considered goals of the educational systems in pluralistic and democratic societies, especially from a model of deliberate and participatory democracy. The paper concludes with a positive evaluation of interdisciplinary approach in the study of media education, an educational project that is crucial for the revival of civil society and the empowerment of citizens in the current communicative context.

## RESUMEN

En el presente artículo se analiza el concepto de ciudadanía en sus diferentes significaciones (ciudadanía política, jurídica, social, económica, ecológica e intercultural), con el fin de justificar la actualidad del concepto de ciudadanía mediática, sobre todo por su validez en el ámbito de la educomunicación. El objetivo último es reconstruir la dimensión social, ética y política de la educomunicación a partir de un fundamento filosófico práctico. En esta tarea de fundamentación, cabe apelar a dos enfoques muy potentes en la actualidad como son la ética dialógica y el enfoque de las capacidades, por su vinculación con el ámbito comunicativo y por su contribución a la noción del desarrollo humano, presente en los programas de educación mediática de organismos internacionales como la UNESCO o la Comisión Europea. A partir de la fundamentación filosófica ofrecida, los criterios para evaluar y reconstruir la dimensión práctica de la educomunicación son la participación cívica, la libertad como desarrollo y la autonomía crítica, consideradas asimismo como fines de los sistemas educativos en sociedades plurales y democráticas, sobre todo desde un modelo deliberativo y participativo de democracia. Tras esta argumentación, el artículo concluye a favor de la interdisciplinariedad en el estudio de la educación mediática, un proyecto educativo que es crucial para la reactivación de la sociedad civil y el empoderamiento de la ciudadanía en el actual contexto comunicativo.

## KEYWORDS / DESCRIPTORES

Media education, educommunication, media literacy, citizenship, participatory democracies, development, critical thinking, freedom.

Educación mediática, educomunicación, alfabetización mediática, ciudadanía, democracias participativas, desarrollo, pensamiento crítico, libertad.

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## 1. Introduction. The social and ethical dimension of educommunication

The theoretical framework of this investigation is directly influenced by an ethical viewpoint that is radically democratic and civic in nature, as befits the times we live in, since each time has its fundamental task (Ortega-Gasset, 2003), and ours is to provide an ethical and citizen-based explanation of the information and technology societies we live in. How can we develop a broad conception of citizenship in today's world from a media literacy perspective?

The main statement of this article would be that educommunication cannot be understood in its entirety unless it has a civic purpose, that is, it must be endowed with an ethical, social and democratic base that empowers citizens in their dealings with the media. Citizen empowerment means strengthening freedom, critical autonomy and participation in political, social, economic, ecological and intercultural affairs based on the correct use of the media and communicative technologies. What is the true meaning and reach of this statement? The answer lies in rediscovering the various dimensions of the concept of citizenship in democratic settings and showing the close link that exists between this concept and the action made possible by the media or communication technologies. This link leads the way to an acceptance of a new notion of citizen: media citizenship. Our article is based on this double challenge as an in-depth study of the more practical (social, ethical and political) side of educommunication.

## 2. Civic aspects of educommunication: of political citizenship to media citizenship

The notion of citizenship has recently made a comeback in response to post-industrial society's need to «generate among its members an identity they can recognize and which makes them feel they belong» (Cortina, 1997: 22). To talk of citizenship is more than just a reference to an administrative category related to the legal and judicial recognition of a person by the State. It is a call to a certain condition: to be an independent being in possession of freedom, acting with responsibility and as protagonist in the various spheres or dimensions of public life. It assumes liberation from the servitude and submission that can prevail in different settings in our lives in society today.

So, to live as a citizen with full rights means activating the idea of our political citizenship which first appears in Ancient Greece and which currently amounts to the active participation in public affairs, helping to shape the democratic ideal of «isegoría» (in

the sense of among equals). It means defending and strengthening our legal and judicial condition as citizens, equal before the law and entitled to its protection. It also means reinforcing our social citizenship with the understanding that life in society cannot develop with dignity without the guarantee of a minimum of social justice in education and public health, a standard of living based on social rights such as the right to work, to education, health and housing (Ibíd.: 66). To be a citizen in today's society means making our economic citizenship a reality, that is, to be free to participate actively in our economic environment via responsible and informed consumption or via a business activity governed by a sense of social responsibility that this entails. Economic citizenship derives from «the need to redirect economic activity by means of moral parameters such as justice, responsibility and solidarity» (Conill, 2004: 28). And this immediately leads to another form of citizenship, ecological citizenship (Dobson & Bell, 2006). Ecological citizenship means assuming those civic virtues needed for a sustainable society, for an environmental sustainability which is an ethical requirement of and a responsibility towards our and future generations (Dobson, 2005: 53).

In this short summary of the current dimensions of citizenship which is unavoidable in any exploration of the ethical and civic dimension of educommunication we cannot ignore cosmopolitan citizenship (Nussbaum, 1999; Benítez, 2010), a notion that comes from the old ideal of stoic philosophy which through philosophers like Kant emerges today with real force in the idea of interculturality. The new world context, characterized by the processes of economic globalization and communicative connections between countries, explains the reflection on the need for a globalization of human rights and in the field of ethics, in which the defence of the equality of dignity for all peoples is associated to the acknowledgment of cultural diversity, with the aim of overcoming ethnocentric tendencies and extreme multiculturalism, that is, the tendency towards cultural imposition on the one hand and radical ethical relativism on the other (Cortina, 1997: 186).

Secondly, to live citizenship to the full in his day and age when so much is hypercommunicated and screened worldwide (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2009) means emphasizing the civic use of the media, in other words, that set of media actions that citizens have to learn in a democracy in order to be valid protagonists in the political, legal, social, economic, educational and intercultural fields, and to avoid sliding into new forms of servitude within these settings. To be a citi-

zen today is to be a media citizen, and that means cultivating and acquiring an education in those competences necessary in order to use the media and communicative technologies in their broadest and most integral sense. For example in law and politics, the Internet is being configured as a platform that enables direct citizen participation in various areas of public interest on a national and international level (Kahne, Lee & Feezell, 2012), via virtual participation in campaigns and mobilizations promoted by citizens themselves (Avaaz.org; Change.org), or via open consultations of reports on corporate crime and political corruption (transparency.org), etc. Media interaction is also an element of social citizenship in the sense that such interaction is a basic skill in the educational and work setting, just as the citizen who is informed through the media mobilizes to claim a health and educational system that is worthy of a society imbued with social justice. In the economic field, the Internet provides citizens with an infinite number of media to enable them to claim their rights in the face of abuse of those rights, for example, by financial institutions (a search for «forums against banks» on Google generated 22.3 million results, from «foroantiusura.org» to calls to mobilize those affected by the «preference shares» scandal in Spain), or as an instrument for active, demanding consumption (a search for «consumer associations» in Google found 6.08 million entries, while for English language users there were 38.6 million).

The civic use of the media encourages awareness of the environmental consequences of private acts of communicative consumption, for example the poor recycling of mobile phones or computers once they are discarded; media citizens also demand to be informed about and to stop the consequences of the extraction and commercialization of coltan, used to make mobile phone and computer screens... On another level, the intercultural citizen is enabled and strengthened by communicative interactions which are an authentic resource of intercultural dialogue (Pérez-Tornero & Varis, 2008) that breaks down frontiers and broadens the meaning of identity and dignity by giving voice and

visibility to someone who is a stranger and from a different culture.

In sum, a reflection on the civic use of the media and communicative technologies points to a new form of citizenship: media citizenship, which is citizenship in and by the grace of the media, be they traditional or interactive (Gozálvez, 2012). If today it is important to be a citizen in the political, legal, social, economic, educational and intercultural fields then it is no less so in the media, since the media and communication

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dimension undoubtedly defines our age and society, and in this sense the role of educational institutions is crucial. And here, the media citizen becomes one of the goals of educommunication since it is by no means removed from the values of freedom, critical independence or solidarity in our dealings with the media. However, to talk of ethical, civic and political values in media education requires a deeper philosophical base.

### **3. Philosophical base of educommunication.**

#### **Ethical theories for current media education**

To help us in this reconstructivist task we look to various philosophical references to enable us to evaluate the ethical and social dimension of educommunication. The current ethical landscape provides philosophical models that offer a solid operational basis in theory for the pedagogical construction of media citizenship. Firstly, we have the «ethics of discourse» or «ethics of dialogue», with their roots in Kant and linked to a «hermeneutic critique». Any pedagogical program for Educommunication would need to look to the ethics of discourse for a theoretical reference point for

its critical perspective, or put another way, a foundation based on the conditions of possibility for our acts of speech or communication given meaning. In recent times ethical dialogue has provided us with a broad reflection on the critical and prescriptive evaluation of all argumentation (Apel, 2007: 284); such evaluations help define communication performed in suitable settings, hence this philosophical approach is especially interesting for media education.

A key work on the ethics of discourse is Habermas' «The theory of communicative action» (1981), which presents a critical theory of society based on its

use of reason»; the media can play their part as an expression of «human social activity», with legitimate goals and internal resources that help to define how a citizen uses these media, one of which would be their contribution to enabling «mature, responsible public opinion» (Cortina, 2004: 20). So, we see the connection between proposals based on the ethics of dialogue and educommunication: the latter aims to use education to promote those values of communicative rationality crucial for criticism and social progress. We refer to values such as transparency and plurality, the freedom to discuss and argue based on being well-informed, equality in dignity and the respect for others as valid interlocutors, or the effort to reach agreement following best-argued case criteria. And of course, the call to citizen solidarity as a resource for propagating calls for justice.

Secondly, and from a neo-Aristotelian tendency, the «capabilities approach» promoted by Sen (1999; 2009) and Nussbaum (2012) represents another convincing model for today for setting the foundations of the social and ethical dimension of educommunication. The key to this philosophical

model (ethical, social, economic and political) is understanding that human development is based on freedom understood as the ability to carry out one's own life project in a way that is socially and humanely compatible. Sen says that «according to this approach, the extension of freedom is both the main aim of development and its principal medium. Development consists of eliminating those restrictions on freedom that leave individuals with few options and opportunities to exercise their reasoned agenda» (Sen, 1999: 16, 223). Obviously «agency» or people's free capability within a hypercommunicated environment requires guarantees of transparency regarding public information as well as access to «a free press and active political opposition».

For several years Sen (Nobel Prize for Economics, 1998) was director of the United Nations Development Program (UNPD) which published numerous development indicators for countries that went beyond the usual GDP. What interests us most here is the clear and close relationship between freedom, human development and the media especially in edu-

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participants' communicative relations which open up a space for intersubjectivity in the search for agreement on questions of truth, justice and social progress. In discourse ethics, the communicative action amounts to an interaction between subjects mediated by symbols, and which adjusts to the aims that the participants presuppose as the conditions of dialogue in their acts of speaking: truth in dialogues on reality, correction in dialogues on justice with a view to those interests that can be universalized, freedom to enunciate and interpret acts of speaking, equality or symmetry among the participants (in which the key lies in the force of the best argument and not in the position or privileges of the speaker), and truth or sincerity in the process of communication. These conditions of «communicative rationality» aim to provide an intersubjectively acknowledged validity which is required, out of a sense of responsibility, to resolve conflicts of action by means of consensus and to critically evaluate which acts of communication match the criteria of authentic dialogue and rational deliberation. With dialogue as a base, and in pluralist societies, it is vital to cultivate the «public

cation. Citizen empowerment in the media arena is one of the conditions for human development and freedom in the broadest sense; freedom which is the capability to search for and select information, detect its origin and intentions and to decipher meaning in the images and understand the values and emotions behind the audiovisual world in order to produce alternative channels and messages, etc. In the end, «it is clear that we have good reason to pay attention to the creation of those conditions necessary for individuals to take better-informed decisions and promote intelligent public debate» (Sen, 1999: 336).

Several UNICEF and UNESCO reports support this idea, which acts as a bridge between human development, communication, citizenship and educommunication. This link can be seen in the «Media Development Indicators» report in UNESCO's International Program for Development of Communication (2008), UNICEF's «Development of Capabilities for the Exercise of Citizenship» report of 2006 and the «Media as Partners in Education for Sustainable Development» report by UNESCO in 2008. These reports link media empowerment to the ecology of citizenship. The new communication technologies can also be very useful in reaching the UN's Millennium Objectives (Del-Rio, 2010). Frau-Meigs and Torrent (2009) have analysed various international reports as references for a new global policy on media education aimed at «the well-being of its citizens, the pacific development of civic societies, the preservation of indigenous cultures, the growth of sustainable economies and the enriching of contemporary social diversity».

Definitely, the social and ethical values of educommunication are not the mere subjective preferences of a researcher or group of experts but are supported by internationally prestigious initiatives and a solid philosophical framework that justifies or legitimizes the most axiological facet of media education.

#### 4. Educommunication and citizenship: freedom, critical autonomy and participation in media education

With this clarification of fundamental criteria, our interest now lies in reconstructing the ethical, social and political dimension of media education or educommunication as defined by international organizations such as UNESCO or the European Parliament (and by Spain, with its own Law on Audiovisual Communication). These educational proposals and recommendations declare for an education that foments reception and critical interpretation, and responsible civic production, in short, its aim is the correct

use of the media. This adds value to media education as a means to social and democratic progress and human development in line with the philosophical approaches explained in the previous section.

One of the main principals is to prevent the information society from becoming, as Brey, Campàs and Mayos (2009) put it, an «ignorant society». These authors state the vast quantity of information we are constantly bombarded with can induce «an attitude of knowledge-renouncement due to lack of motivation, a surrender and a tendency to tacitly and comfortably accept prefabricated and clichéd viewpoints. A lack of critical capability is just another sign of our growing ignorance» (Brey, Campàs & Mayos, 2009: 26).

In the face of this paradoxical ignorance Brey, Moeller (2009: 66) emphasize the urgency of teaching citizens to be autonomous from a critical perspective, inviting people to «evaluate what they read, hear and see, and also to teach them to take notice of what is left unseen and unsaid». This is «crucial» to enable citizens to exercise «their own rights as citizens and have access to economic, political and social opportunities available».

In response to these challenges, international public institutions have for many years been proposing that states and social institutions adopt measures to encourage media education in their regulated educational systems and also as part of an informal and continuous education of citizens. UNESCO and the Grünwald Declaration of 1982 urge states to assume «those obligations that correspond to them to promote a critical understanding of communication phenomena among their citizens» (Grünwald Declaration, 1982: 1). The Paris Agenda of 2007 also stated that «media education helps to empower people and offers them a sense of shared responsibility in society, and as such, is an integral part of citizenship and human rights».

Recently UNESCO's Braga Declaration (2011) urged the development of education for the free, intelligent and critical use of the media as a necessary dimension of instruction for independent citizenship. It also emphasized the need for politicians to incorporate this aim in their action programs in order to facilitate and foment this initiative among the social actors. For Gutiérrez and Tyner (2012: 36), the call to critical thinking by UNESCO amounts to the need to provide an education in «the knowledge of personal and social values and responsibilities derived from the ethical use of information, as well as participation in cultural dialogue and the preservation of autonomy against the possible threats to this that are often hard to detect».

In 2008 the European Parliament declared that

«media education is essential for achieving a high level of media literacy, which is an important part of the political education that enables people to better direct their behaviour as active citizens and to be aware of their rights and obligations». It also stated that «well-informed and politically mature citizens are the basis of a pluralist society...and by constructing their own content and media products they acquire the ability to reach a deeper understanding of the principals and values behind professionally produced media content» (European Parliament, 2008: 11).

In Spain, the General Law on Audiovisual Communication (7/2010) clearly refers to the possibilities of citizen participation via the media. For the first time in Spain, the state provides a legal framework for community media, or non-profit enterprises such as community radio. Article 32 specifies that these media's function is to «attend to the social, cultural and communication needs of communities and social groups, as well as fomenting citizen participation and the construction of an associative network». These media can act as open microphones for citizens to air their grievances, and as such they play an important role in the media education of citizens.

Chapter 2 of Title 5 of this law includes the media education of citizens as one of the functions assigned to Spain's State Council of Audiovisual Media (CEMA). This organization is obliged to «oversee the promotion of media literacy in the audiovisual field with the aim of fomenting the acquisition on the part of the citizen of the highest levels of media competence». Likewise, this body must also evaluate the level of media citizenship among citizens by referring to «those indicators used by the European Commission and other information that the Council deems worthy of interest». So, as stated by Gavara and Pérez-Tornero (2010: 7), this law understands educommunication and media literacy as a civic right.

However, Gavara (2013) doubts that all this can happen since a proposed law would abolish the CEMA and replace it with the CNMC (National Market and Competition Commission). The author says that this would mean that media education would «pass from one authority, the CEMA, whose aim is to guarantee civic rights, that is, an authority based on the protection of citizens, to another centered on the audiovisual market in which the public is treated as a mere consumer or user».

Despite these problems, there is clear international recognition of the need to boost real media education among citizens as a resource for inclusion in accordance with a model of democracy that is more purposeful

and participatory. This call for the reactivation of democracy leads us on to the most political dimension of educommunication. In this respect Masterman acknowledged that «in a world in which slogans are frequently taken more seriously than reasoning, and in which we all take political decisions based solely on what the media show us, audiovisual education is essential for the exercise of our democratic rights and to defend ourselves against the excesses of politically motivated media manipulation» (Masterman, 2010: 28)ii. So media education is a fundamental element in the «long march to true participatory democracy and the democratization of the institutions. Audiovisual literacy is vital if we want citizens to exercise their power, to take rational decisions, to be effective agents of change and to actively participate in the media». Similarly Sen declared that democracy must be valued in terms of the ability to enrich reasoned participation by increasing the availability of information and the opportunities for interactive debate: «Democracy must be judged not only by its institutions but also by how far the diverse voices of the various sectors of the population can be heard» (Sen, 2009: xviii).

Consequently, media education comes to be seen as a pillar of democracy, above all in its more purposeful and participative form (Macpherson, 2003). We talk of an education to achieve a form of communication that is an open, interactive and participatory process and not a one-way communication determined by the powers that be (government, religious authorities, media, business or financial corporations). As Sánchez Ruiz (2005) states, participative or purposeful democracy cannot be conceived as anything but «a multiple network of communication circuits in which public issues are discussed. The public arena is necessarily a space of communication...In modern democracies, the governed are increasingly demanding to be informed of the processes that generate political policies and about their consequences. But they also want to be heard and to openly define their problems, the issues that affect them and their priorities» (Ibíd.: 22-23).

The problem arises when the media cease to be of and for communication and become mere transmitters of messages, a vertical process that goes in one single direction. This would be the desired aim of the democratic elites (Cortina, 2010). Nevertheless, with the emergence of the Internet, Web 2.0 and the social networks, new technological and structural bases are being established to provide a more horizontal form of communication for the democratic redistribution of powers as a consequence of the redefinition of a

public space that is increasingly globalized (Castells, 2008).

Education needs to respond to these new communication relations and global powers in such a way that media education for citizens converges with an education for a global and deeply democratic citizenship. The way this new space for public deliberation is configured will be the key to the future of democracy. Media education, especially in the digital sphere, can develop crucial competences for an active, committed and participatory citizenship (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). To counter communication understood as mere message diffusion, society-the global network represents an opportunity for the creation of purposeful public opinion open to new forms of participation, the communication of ideas and projects.

In the words of Greppi, what is important is not to talk about democracy but to determine its quality and conditions. Democracy is about an education in the notions of participation, public commitment and social responsibility, ideas that require a communicative, dynamic and open space. Public opinion in a democracy based on quality in reality amounts to critical public opinion that is purposeful and reflective, and this requires a space for its citizens «that is endowed with sufficient resources to enable them to pronounce on the relevant political questions of the day» (Greppi, 2012: 16-36). It is easy to deduce from these proposals that educommunication in its social, ethical and political dimension is an education that makes a valid contribution to this public communicative space which is increasingly global. A space that is interconnected which welcomes a public that is attentive, committed and well-informed, a public composed of «citizens capable of understanding the ebb and flow of reasoning that constitutes the substance of the democratic process».

### 5. Conclusion: A media education to reactivate civil society and empower the citizen

This article analyses the theoretical link between educommunication, the ethics of dialogue and the capabilities approach in order to reconstruct a valid ethical and political base for media education. We have also investigated the keys that will empower citizens and convert them into protagonists in the media environment by extending the current theory of citizenship by means of the «media citizen».

The need to empower citizens in the media setting is aimed at reactivating civic society in democracies so that they can be more purposeful and committed to human development. Not only international public

institutions such as UNESCO are involved but also journals such as «Comunicar», which has provided a platform for socially committed scientific research dating back to Jacquinet (1999) and the more recent study by Culver and Jacobson (2012) and the contribution of Aguaded (2013: 7) on European recommendations for an integral media education whose aim is to «promote a citizenship that is more active, critical and participatory».

Initiatives for media education understood as a formative process through media literacy (Buckingham, 2005: 21) necessarily assume certain axiological references in their discourse. These practical and axiological references (ethical, political and civic) have been the focus of this study which is dedicated to explaining and interpreting them from the perspective of current philosophical approaches. Hence we insist on the need for interdisciplinarity in educommunication, in our case articulated as a means to legitimize this discipline from a social, civic and political viewpoint. To educate the media citizen is, reciprocally, and as we have argued throughout this article, a way of empowering citizens in plural, democratic and hyperconnected societies.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Searches carried out on 25-03-2013.

<sup>2</sup> This can be consulted on [www.cca.eca.usp.br/noticia/756](http://www.cca.eca.usp.br/noticia/756) (26-05-2013).

<sup>3</sup> A bill for the creation of the National Market and Competition Commission. BOCG. Congreso de los Diputados N°. A-28-1 de 19/10/2012. This can be consulted on [www.congreso.es/public\\_oficiales/L10/CONG/BOCG/A/BOCG-10-A-28-1.PDF](http://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L10/CONG/BOCG/A/BOCG-10-A-28-1.PDF) (26-05-2013).

<sup>4</sup> Originally published in 1985.

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