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From Literacy to Skills Discussing Media Education and Its Goals

ABSTRACT

Digital media and accompanying forms of communication also affect risks and opportunities regarding media-related competencies. Since a broad basis of knowledge is required to understand the increasingly complex contexts in both mediatized and interpersonal communication, media literacy and media education must be considered crucial to meet these current challenges. However, media education is noticeably limited to digital skills aimed at preparing citizens primarily for the world of work. Understanding media literacy in this way means degrading the acquirement of competencies for democratic participation and debate to a mere nice-to-have. This paper aims to critically discuss the ongoing move of media literacy education and programs toward acquiring digital skills primarily. Therefore, we assessed Austrian governmental decrees and curricula in terms of their focus on both the promotion of citizens' employability and media education concerning democratic participation and deliberative communication. In addition, we conducted interviews with two leading Austrian experts in media education to gain insights from different perspectives.

KEY WORDS

Digital Agency. Digitalization. Digital Skills. Media Education. Media Literacy. Technological Determinism.

1 Introduction

Digital media and current forms of communication have *"considerable consequences for social organization and cultural change."*[1] These consequences also affect risks and opportunities regarding media-related competencies. Moreover, after the initially predominantly positive assessment of their societal potential, digital media increasingly challenge democratic and deliberative communication. Since a broad basis of knowledge is required to understand the growing complex contexts in mediatized and interpersonal communication, media literacy and media education are crucial for citizens to navigate this current situation.

Media literacy was a vital issue in the 1990s and early 2000s and the subject of various societal discussions and scientific studies.[2] However, today, the focus has shifted toward digital skills, aimed at preparing citizens primarily for the world of work.[3] Since media literacy is a broad category,[4] this current focus on digital skills is far too narrow to cover all aspects of media literacy. Thus, it runs the risk of overlooking essential aspects and neglecting the question of how to deal confidently and profitably with the entire range of digital challenges. Moreover, as Buckingham points out, *"media/digital literacy is often invoked in a spirit of 'solutionism'. When media regulation seems impossible, media literacy is often seen as the acceptable answer – and indeed a magical panacea – for all media-related social and psychological ills."*[5]

In Austria, the plethora of data on media-related competencies appears promising. Numerous recent studies as well as longitudinal studies contribute to this wealth of information. This data is credible and easily accessible in digital format, simplifying the process of collecting it. However, the challenge lies in the nature of the field itself. Defining media literacy raises questions, as does identifying the research areas that should be included. The scope of the research area must also be considered. The presence of experts and specialized research structures is generally favourable but requires a multidisciplinary approach.[6]

Research into media-related competencies is, therefore, well advised to include media education.[7] According to the shift of focus concerning media literacy, media education has also become increasingly limited to digital competencies and user skills in a similarly narrow sense.[8] Moreover, today, media education focuses on promoting digital skills to achieve better "employability" for the citizens,[9] respectively, for employers and entrepreneurs

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1   CASTELLS, M.: *Communication Power*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 55.

2   LIVINGSTONE, S.: What Is Media Literacy? In *Intermedia*, 2004, Vol. 32, No. 3, p. 18-20.

3   TRÜLTZSCH-WIJNEN, C., BRANDHOFER, G. (eds.): *Bildung und Digitalisierung: Auf der Suche nach Kompetenzen und Performanzen*. Baden-Baden : Nomos, 2020, p. 7; HELSPER, E. J., VAN DEURSEN, A. J. A. M.: Digital Skills in Europe: Research and Policy. In ANDREASSON, K. (ed.): *Digital Divides: The New Challenges and Opportunities of e-Inclusion*. New York, Abingdon : Routledge, 2019, p. 129.

4   See: BUCKINGHAM, D.: *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge, Malden : Polity Press, 2003. See also: POTTER, W. J.: Review of Literature on Media Literacy. In *Sociology Compass*, 2013, Vol. 7, No. 6, p. 417-435.

5   See: BUCKINGHAM, D.: Teaching Media in a 'Post-Truth' Age: Fake News, Media Bias and the Challenge for Media/Digital Literacy Education. In *Cultura y Educación,* 2019, Vol. 31, No. 2, p. 213-231.

6   EBERWEIN, T., KRAKOVSKY, C., OGGOLDER, C.: *Austria: Risks and Opportunities Related to Media and Journalism Studies (2000 – 2020). Case Study on the National Research and Monitoring Capabilities*. [online]. [2023-07-05]. Available at: <https://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/89280/austria.pdf>.

7   See: BUCKINGHAM, D.: *The Media Education Manifesto*. Cambridge, Medford : Polity Press, 2019.

8   See: CWIELONG, I., SOSSONG, S., PERSIKE, M. et al.: Daten und Data Literacy im Kontext der Wissenschaft. In *Medienimpulse*, 2021, Vol. 59, No. 3, p. 1-36. See also: OPPL, S., FUCHS, W., DOBIASCH, M.: Zur inhaltlichen Schwerpunktsetzung im Rahmen der verbindlichen Übung "Digitale Grundbildung" an österreichischen Mittelschulen. In *R&E-SOURCE,* 2021, Vol. 16, p. 1-16. [online]. [2023-08-30]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.53349/resource.2021.i16.a990>; SWERTZ, C.: Bildung, Verantwortung und digitale Daten. In *Medienimpulse*, 2021, Vol. 59, No. 3, p. 1-39. [online]. [2023-08-30]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21243/mi-03-21-12>; BRANDHOFER, G. et al.: Bildung im Zeitalter der Digitalisierung. In *Nationaler Bildungsbericht 2018*. Salzburg : IQS, 2018, p. 307-362. [online]. [2023-07-05]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17888/nbb2018-2-8>.

9   *Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)*. [online]. [2023-08-30]. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/piaacdesign>.

who follow a purely economic approach. Understanding media literacy in this way means degrading the acquirement of competencies for democratic participation and debate to a mere nice-to-have. Because of that, a considerable risk to democratic values is undoubtedly posed. Following Kellner, *"critical media and techno-literacies are an imperative for participatory democracy and citizenship because digital information communication technologies and a market-based media culture have fragmented, connected, converged, diversified, homogenized, flattened, broadened, and reshaped the world."*[10] However, this goes far beyond skills that primarily focus on correctly using software and applications, which ultimately only promotes employability.

This paper aims to critically discuss the ongoing move of media literacy education and programs toward acquiring digital skills primarily. Therefore, we assessed Austrian governmental decrees and curricula in terms of their focus on both the promotion of citizens' employability and media education concerning democratic participation and deliberative communication. In addition, we conducted interviews with two leading Austrian experts in media education to gain insights from different perspectives.

2 Methodology

Austria is a pioneer in implementing digital education in school curricula. Starting with the school year 2022/2023, the mandatory subject "basic education in digital skills" (*Digitale Grundbildung*)[11] has been implemented for lower secondary education (5th to 8th grade). However, this new subject also raises several questions regarding a holistic perspective on media education. Thus, we formulate the following research questions:

1. How does the implementation of the new subject "basic education in digital skills" relate to media education that supports opportunities for self-determined participation?
2. What are the aims of implementing this new subject?
3. How is the Austrian approach embedded in the international discourse on this topic?

To answer these questions, firstly legal texts and curricula were examined. In Austria, media has been part of education for a long period of time. However, the first media decree was published only in 1973. In its most recent revision, the "Grundsatzerlass zur Medienerziehung" (Basic Decree on Media Education) was published in 2012[12] and is the basis of Austria's legal regulation of media education. Hence, media education is still supported and shaped by the respective ministries responsible for education. In practice, however, it has been mostly dedicated teachers who devote themselves to media education or media didactics[13] as the subject matter was basically only dealt with voluntarily. This is hopefully going to change with the mentioned introduction of the new subject.

Secondly guided interviews have been conducted with two leading Austrian experts in media education. These interviewees represent two opposing approaches to media education and what media literacy should be about. Thus, one argues scientifically as a scholar for media education and the other speaks from an applied perspective as a teacher and responsible for digital education in schools.

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[10] KELLNER, D.: *Technology and Democracy: Toward a Critical Theory of Digital Technologies, Technopolitics, and Technocapitalism*. Wiesbaden : Springer VS, 2021, p. 261.

[11] *Digitale Grundbildung.* [online]. [2023-07-03]. Available at: <https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/zrp/dibi/dgb.html>.

[12] *Grundsatzerlass zur Medienerziehung Wiederverlautbarung der aktualisierten Fassung.* [online]. [2023-07-03]. Available at: <https://rundschreiben.bmbwf.gv.at/rundschreiben/?id=613>.

[13] See: BLASCHITZ, E., SEIBT, M.: *Medienbildung in Österreich. Historische und aktuelle Entwicklungen, theoretische Positionen und Medienpraxis.* Wien : LIT Verlag, 2008.

Both the legal texts and the statements of our interviewees were analyzed to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the actual developments in media education using Austria as an example.

3 Results

Based on the *Basic Decree on Media Education,* the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education Science and Research (BMBWF) claims that *"the goal for school media education is media literate students who can navigate the world shaped by the media and who have developed an understanding of the basic values of democracy and freedom of expression."*[14] Therefore, the goal of media education should be to enable students *"to use media and their tools self effectively, critically, and reflectively and assess the associated opportunities and risks. They know the rules of conduct and legal basis for safe and socially responsible action in and with the media."*[15]

These goals are based on traditional definitions of media competence, understood as communicative action that promotes self-determined opportunities for participation.[16] In contrast to the development of certain skills, abilities and knowledge, education in the pedagogical sense is understood as a reflective relationship to one's own actions and knowledge.[17]

Thus, the curriculum of the new compulsory subject "basic education in digital skills" refers to the "Frankfurt Triangle", which considers media education from the following three perspectives: a technological-media one, a socio-cultural one and finally an interactive one.[18] Accordingly, the core concept of the new curriculum considers the teaching content from these three perspectives: how do digital technologies work, what social interactions result from their use and what options for interaction and action arise for students.[19] Consequently, this means that technological aspects are only one of three parts in this model.

However, there are other BMBWF initiatives with a different focus, especially those that follow EU-wide digital education programs like the "Digital Education Action Plan"[20] or the "EU Youth Strategy."[21] Implementing the "Austrian Youth Strategy", the following goal, beside others, is formulated: *"Enhance and strengthen young people's digital literacy and qualifications and their media skills in the classroom so that they leave the education system with those skills that enable them to use technology."*[22] In this case, it becomes clear that the focus is on the technology and the ability to use it.

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[14] *Bundesministerium Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung. Medienbildung.* [online]. [2023-07-05]. Available at: <https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/schulpraxis/prinz/medienbildung.html>.

[15] Ibidem.

[16] BAACKE, D.: Medienkompetenz – Begrifflichkeit und sozialer Wandel. In VON REIN, A. (ed.): Medienkompetenz als Schlüsselbegriff. Bad Heilbrunn : Klinkhardt, 1996, p. 113; See: TULODZIECKI, G., GRAFE, S.: Media Competence. In HOBBS, R., MIHAILIDIS, P. (eds.): *The International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy.* Hoboken : Wiley-Blackwell, 2019, p. 1-14. [online]. [2023-08-30]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118978238.ieml0113>.

[17] SWERTZ, C., FESSLER, C.: Literacy: Facetten eines heterogenen Begriffs. In *Medienimpulse*, 2010, Vol. 48, No. 4, p. 4. [online]. [2023-08-30]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21243/mi-04-10-05>.

[18] BRINDA, T. et al.: Frankfurt-Dreieck zur Bildung in der digital vernetzten Welt. Ein interdisziplinäres Modell. In KNAUS, T., MERZ, O. (eds.): *Schnittstellen und Interfaces. Digitaler Wandel in Bildungseinrichtungen.* München : kopaed, 2020, p. 159. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:22117>.

[19] *Digitale Grundbildung.* [online]. [2023-07-03]. Available at: <https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/zrp/dibi/dgb.html>.

[20] *European Commission, Digital Education Action Plan.* [online]. [2023-07-05]. Available at: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>.

[21] *EU Youth Strategy.* [online]. [2023-07-05]. Available at: <https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en>.

[22] *Austrian Youth Strategy – Digital/Media Literacy.* [online]. [2023-07-05]. Available at: <https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/en/Topics/youth_strategy/digital.html>.

Thus, two competing concepts of media education can currently be identified, which is also reflected in the statements by the two interviewed experts. Of course, this does not only apply to Austria, but can also be observed in other countries.[23] As one of our interviewees declared, there is the industry and economy driven approach, fostering (digital) skills to obtain qualified employees. Incidentally, the EU has proclaimed the "European Year of Skills" this year.[24] Conversely, there are efforts by UNESCO regarding "Media and Information Literacy".[25] In contrast to the EU, the UN organization claims very clearly that it *"supports the development of media and information literacy for all to enable people's ability to think critically and click wisely."*[26] Moreover, UNESCO's understanding of media literacy goes far beyond digital skills, arguing that *"media and information literacy is an interrelated set of competencies that help people to maximize advantages and minimize harm in the new information, digital and communication landscapes. Media and information literacy covers competencies that enable people to critically and effectively engage with information, other forms of content, the institutions that facilitate information and diverse types of content, and the discerning use of digital technologies."*[27] In addition, the organization also clearly states that *"capacities in these areas are indispensable for all citizens regardless of their ages or backgrounds."*[28]

Coming back to the exemplary Austrian case, the different positions of our interviewees confirm the contrasting approach to the topic in this country as well. On the one hand, a representative of the ministerial initiative, the *National Competence Center eEducation Austria*[29] claims that *"when it comes to the use of media, no matter what kind you have this technical aspect, that is, how do I get along with handling."*[30] He emphasizes the basic idea of problem-solving skills that can be learned and trained within the framework of technology-centered media education. *"And that is a fundamental principle of software development: you try to understand what you want to solve and then approach that solution constructively. Furthermore, conveying this basic idea alone is what we see as problem-solving competence."*[31] This assumption is very common within groups of IT experts and software developers and underlines the claim that media literacy must also include coding skills or knowledge concerning digital security. Accordingly, one of our interviewees takes a similar view: *"It is still important to us that the basic technological understanding is conveyed further, for example when people work in social apps to know what that means and what happens to their data, for example."*[32]

On the other hand, the scholar of educational science we interviewed claims that the main problem with the approach mentioned above is *"that for 90% of the students, this [kind of knowledge] is entirely irrelevant. (...) I would even say 99% [of them] find it completely irrelevant because it has nothing to do with the digital culture they are experiencing. It doesn't help them to understand it, it does not connect with it."*[33]

[23] *Studies on National Media Research Capability as a Contextual Domain of the Sources of ROs.* [online]. [2023-08-30]. Available at: <https://www.mediadelcom.eu/publications/d21-case-study-1/>; *Country Case Studies on Critical Junctures in the Media Transformation Process in Four Domains of Potential ROs (2000−2020).* [online]. [2023-08-30]. Available at: <https://www.mediadelcom.eu/publications/d21-case-study-2/>.

[24] *European Year of Skills.* [online]. [2023-07-05]. Available at: <https://year-of-skills.europa.eu/index_en>.

[25] *Media and Information Literacy.* [online]. [2023-07-05]. Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy?hub=750>.

[26] Ibidem.

[27] *About Media and Information Literacy.* [online]. [2023-07-05]. Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy/about>.

[28] Ibidem.

[29] *National Competence Center eEducation Austria.* [online]. [2023-07-10]. Available at: <https://eeducation.at/en>.

[30] Information obtained from personal communication (anonymous) on September 2nd 2022.

[31] Information obtained from personal communication (anonymous) on September 2nd 2022.

[32] Information obtained from personal communication (anonymous) on September 2nd 2022.

[33] Information obtained from personal communication (anonymous) on July 5th 2022.

In addition, he mentions the "Media and Information Literacy" initiative of the United Nations, which has already been described above. He claims that this approach to media literacy and media education *"is based on human dignity, the right to self-determination and the right to informal self-determination. In other words, in this case it's not about me operating machines, (…) it's about being able to use machines. The goal is that I use the machines for my purposes."*[34]

4 Discussion

Concerning our first research question, how does the attempt at the Austrian compulsory subject "basic education in digital skills" relate to the traditional and broader approach to media education, i.e., acquiring media literacy beyond the knowledge of how to use digital devices[35] makes it challenging to achieve satisfactory results. Based on the "Frankfurt Triangle", *"a well-thought-out connection between computer science, media studies and media education"*[36], this framework for the curriculum creates opportunities to delve deep into the subject. Accordingly, both interviewees emphasize this, *"especially considering the nonexclusively technical approach, the interaction with society, and what that means for the individual."*[37] However, one expert emphatically points out that, *"ultimately, the curriculum focuses on application fields that are most relevant for teachers."*[38] Thus, it will ultimately depend heavily on the approaches of the respective teachers, where the focus is set.

So, what are the aims of implementing the new school subject "basic education in digital skills"? To answer this question, recalling the EU initiatives mentioned earlier makes sense. These initiatives and programs overwhelmingly address digital skills. Therefore, it is fair to assume that the Austrian government has a considerable interest in producing tech-savvy citizens, who have good training in dealing with digital technologies and are therefore well prepared for the labour market. *"In this respect, the orientation is not surprising. With digital skills it is about preparing schoolchildren for the job market. It's not about the education. it's about preparing for the job market."*[39]

Moreover, ambitions considering the concept of deliberative democracy, empowering citizens, and getting them involved in democratic processes, thus, seem to play a subordinate role. *"Yes, of course, that is irrelevant,"* emphasizes one expert during the interview. *"Does it bring anything to the labour market? No, of course not. These points are not there: political participation, the ability to express political will, to assert one's political will, to assert one's political interests."*[40]

Finally, regarding the third research question, we can immediately follow up on the previous statement. Austria is very much guided by the directives and programs of the European Union.[41] Hence, the Austrian approach is well embedded in the international, at least European, discourse on the subject. However, UNESCO's position mentioned above of supporting a holistic, human-centred understanding of media education and, subsequently, corresponding media competence remains optional.

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[34] Information obtained from personal communication (anonymous) on July 5th 2022.

[35] BUCKINGHAM, D.: *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture.* Cambridge, Malden : Polity Press, 2003, p. 4.

[36] Information obtained from personal communication (anonymous) on July 5th 2022.

[37] Information obtained from personal communication (anonymous) on September 2nd 2022.

[38] Information obtained from personal communication (anonymous) on July 5th 2022.

[39] Information obtained from personal communication (anonymous) on July 5th 2022.

[40] Information obtained from personal communication (anonymous) on July 5th 2022.

[41] See: VUORIKARI, R., KLUZER, S., PUNIE, Y.: *DigComp 2.2: The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens – With New Examples of Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes.* Luxembourg : Publications Office of the European Union, 2022. [online]. [2023-07-06]. Available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/115376>.

5 Conclusion

Our study has shown that there are currently two fundamentally conflicting positions regarding media competence and media education. On the one hand there are economy driven approaches which identify the main goal of media education in preparing citizens for jobs. On the other hand, we have initiatives that position themselves against the neoliberal and economic stance and focus on people. However, this finding applies not only to Austria but to Europe and beyond, supported on the one hand by the OSCE and on the other hand by UNESCO.[42]

Similar to the widespread discussions on this topic, there are also representatives of the respective positions in Austria, which is reflected in the different opinions of our interviewees. Admittedly, the respondent who is broadly in favour of digital and coding skills is not so much a representative of business interests as more a representative of scientific and technical education.

Regardless, media education's importance continues to be emphasized by all sides, especially politics. A vital expression of the continuing importance of this topic is introducing the compulsory subject "Basic education in digital skills" in Austrian schools since 2022/23. Nonetheless, the assessment of the interviewed scholar for media education could be more pleasing: *"Developments during the last three years have made me very pessimistic. I am afraid that the stupid variant aimed at operating technology will prevail and that the main goal will be for people to get used to and accept the digital structure. (…) This structure boils down to adapting the environment to digital technologies rather than vice versa."*[43]

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