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Media Literacy, unfinished business in the training of journalists, advertisers and audiovisual communicators

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Abstracts

Introduction. University communication courses in Spain should respond to recommendations by international organizations concerning the need for Media Literacy training to include future graduates within its scope. **Methodology.** This article analyses the content of subjects directly related to Media Literacy in the various communication degree courses in Spanish universities and compares them to perceptions of this area of expertise held by syllabus managers and the teachers who teach it, thus combining an analysis of the content of subject guides with in-depth interviews.

Results. The study reveals the insufficient incidence of specific subjects within Media Literacy and the overriding association of its content to the area of ideology and values, to the detriment of other dimensions such as aesthetics and interaction processes.

Keywords

Media literacy; media competence; university; journalism courses; audiovisual communication courses; advertising courses.

Contents

1. Introduction and state of affairs; 1.1. About Media Literacy and Competence; 1.2. Media competences in university training and in communication courses; 2. Method; 3. Analysis and results; 3.1. Presence and nature of subjects directly related to Media Education; 3.2. Dimensions and

indicators included in Media Education subjects; 4. Discussion and conclusions; 5. Notes; 6. References

Translation by **Annabel Jose**

1. Introduction and state of affairs

Educating nowadays can only be possible by reacting to shifts within the communication domain that have given rise to the digital environment. As several international organizations such as the European Commission, Unesco and the UN have indicated, we face an urgent need to address within education a process of multi-literacies that not only affect formal codes but also have a widespread impact on their political, economic, social and cultural connotations (Ferrés, Aguaded & García Matilla, 2012). For years the Commission and European Parliament in their guidelines and recommendations have been explicitly repeating the need to address education reforms that would introduce into the teaching curriculum a practical and multidisciplinary “Media Literacy” subject (2008; 2009). At the 2nd Congress on *Media Literacy in Europe: controversies, challenges and perspectives* (Italy, 2009), influential researchers such as Buckingham, Tisseron, Bazalgette, Carlsson, Bevort, Verniers and Piette also insisted that research into Media Literacy should be an additional motor for the assessment of action within education for the media, encouraging an integral development of quantitative and qualitative tools to evaluate practice efficacy, a position also adopted by other researchers (EAVI, 2009).

In response to these recommendations, an inter-disciplinary research group in Spain has been implementing an R&D&I project funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. The basic aim of the study is to detect requisites and omissions in media competence through an analysis of three key social sectors: communication professionals, compulsory education professionals and university education professionals in the area of communication (Audiovisual Communication, Journalism and Advertising and Public Relations) as well as in education (infant and primary education, pedagogy and social education). This article focuses on results obtained in the analysis of the teaching of Media Literacy in university communication courses.

1.1. About Media Literacy and Competence

As we indicated above, having a good command of encoding and decoding audiovisual messages is now a literacy skill as basic as the traditional reading and writing. Yet communication is a process of reflection that implies discussion (Alonso, 2004); communication competences within the sphere of social communication must include not only the ability to understand the structure and content of the media but also that of creating discourse (Martín Barbero, 2003; Buckingham, 2005; Aparici & Tyner, 2009; Jenkins, 2009). Critical consumption of discourses demands education on self-perception of these differences and an independent and conscious choice of communicative positions that guarantee appropriate comprehension of messages (Marta & Grandío, 2013). On the whole, education, information and communication are the pivotal long-term policies on which cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural changes hinge: policies that would need to respond predominantly to different forms of creation and expression of meaning, such as interpersonal, group, organizational or social (Aparici, 2010). These are the challenges currently facing Media Literacy.

During its epistemological and methodological development, the concept of media literacy has taken on a pedagogical and scientific inclination over the last three decades. In Spain, the concept of media

competence was initially defined by Ferrés (2006) with a group of Spanish experts. Later on, contributions were collected from recognized Ibero-American and other Spanish experts (Ferrés, 2007). Media competence is defined as a command of the knowledge, skill sets and attitudes related to six basic dimensions, each with their own indicators. The dimensions, updated by Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012), are language; technology; interaction processes; production and dissemination processes; ideology and values and aesthetics. The indicators' participation scope refers to people who receive messages and interact with them (area of analysis) and people who produce messages (area of expression).

Accordingly, the results of the investigation into media competences in Spain (2011) demonstrated that the technology dimension was the only exception in society's failings in five of the six dimensions that comprise media competence (Masanet & Ferrés, 2013). Furthermore, this situation occurs in an environment in which technology has furthered not only the dissemination of images to unimagined heights but also, and especially, their potential to seduce. The instrumental use of technological media has now become widespread, while it cannot be said that efforts to implement training into critical thinking, ethics and aesthetics have escalated to a comparable level.

1.2. Media competences in university training and in communication courses

Education that is engaged with social enhancement requires the reconstructing of communication policies that take into account the complex diversity of the human being and the many spheres of socialization. This is why the change must operate at every level of meaning creation and be the responsibility of all socializing authorities. However, it should also be configured from knowledge access mechanisms and shared activity among human beings. Thus, the development of media competences in the digital era should be approached as a complex and global phenomenon that maintains the principle of shared accountabilities.

Failings in these kinds of competences are not the sole responsibility of schools, communication professionals, families or political authorities and therefore the implementation of educational activities does not correspond to a single socializing agent. From a formal education perspective, Media Literacy must be integrated at all educational levels - infant, primary, secondary and sixth form. Likewise, universities should continue this education, particularly as they serve as arenas for training professionals directly linked to communication and education (Osuna, Marta and Aparici, 2013). López and Aguaded (2015) have already signalled that the media literacy process among university students is one of the most important issues when dealing with significant transformations in the education dynamics of universities themselves and in the potential incidence of communication courses in the perpetual transformation of the media reality.

Spain's track record in consolidating university teaching related to social communication shows its transition over the last 50 years from the old professionalizing schools to integration into the conceptual and institutional framework of universities. Nowadays, the challenge lies in developing programmes for scientific-pedagogical reform that are able to address changes brought about by the digital revolution and the globalized social system (Martínez, 2009). In this regard, a consolidation of theoretical and practical academic expertise and professional know-how in the fields of Journalism, Advertising and Public Relations and Audiovisual Communication today is bound to the need to respond to the proposal by the European Union to establish a European collaboration on higher education (Lisbon Strategy, 2000).

Modernization of communication university degrees in line with these European guidelines were based on criteria established by the White Paper drawn up for the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation in Spain (ANECA) by the Conference for Communication Faculty Deans in Spain in 2005. Its conclusions demonstrate the need to maintain a balance between a professional communication environment in constant transformation and the new university frame of reference cultivated by European integration and the forces of globalization. That this balance at the same time respects the mandatory ethics of a Media Literacy aimed at achieving critical and creative citizens would be down to the fact that institutions are committed to prioritizing the knowledge required to implement it, as opposed to merely instrumental or rote knowledge (Lozano, Francisco, Traver and García, 2012).

This challenge has a particular impact on the perspective of the content of subjects related to Journalism, Advertising and Public Relations and Audiovisual Communication degrees. On the one hand, the nature of a subject such as Media Literacy means it traverses other subjects, as students are immersed in a multi-modal communication reality through which they process any academic information. However, there is also the need to link specifically content and pedagogical processes that are directly related to media competences. The aim is to train future communication professionals, teachers or researchers in the critical implementation itself of quality communication activities that at the same time foster a Media Literacy within society.

2. Method

This analysis draws from the premise that several of the Media Literacy dimensions are already included- partially or transversely- in various communication course subjects. Therefore, the analysis focuses on the specific presence of direct Media Literacy subjects as they are considered to show the university's express desire to train future communicators in this area. We understand by direct subjects those that include 4 or more of the dimensions by Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012) described above.

Using a database from a previous study (Masanet & Ferrés, 2013), created from information extracted from the official page of the Ministry for Education, Culture and Sports, a census was obtained of all the communication degree qualifications offered in Spain. The study sample contained the information required from the 117 courses. The field work was carried out during the academic year 2012-13 and the data entered into the statistics programme SPSS. A univariable and bivariable statistical analysis was performed, adopting a signification level of 0.05. Common statistical resources were used: frequency and contingency tables.

After examining all the communication degree course syllabuses in all the Spanish universities, subjects directly related to media literacy were selected and then analysed¹ [1]. The data were validated by peer review.

Lastly, in-depth interviews were conducted with the lecturers of subjects directly related to Media Literacy and the managers responsible for communication courses. The resulting sample was 7 interviews with lecturers, from a total of 15 subjects, and 5 managers, deans, vice-deans or course coordinators. The selection of lecturers and managers to be interviewed was carried out according to the diversity of degrees, ownership of universities and autonomous regions. The interviews were performed face to face or via Skype and results were subjected to the triangulation method² [2].

Apart from 1 case, all lecturers had been teaching subjects directly related to Media Literacy for at least 5 years and 3 of them for over 10. They were, therefore, lecturers with solid experience and continuity in the area. Furthermore, except for 2 cases, they had for the most part voluntarily and specifically chosen to teach these subjects.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Presence and nature of subjects directly related to Media Literacy

Fifteen subjects directly related to Media Literacy were identified from among the 117 Communication degrees taught in Spain. From these 15 subjects, 9 were from Audiovisual Communication, 5 from Journalism and 1 Advertising and Public Relations. The subjects are taught over 5 years: 4 in the first year, 6 in the third year and 2 in the fourth. Ten of them constituted 6 credits, 1 subject representing 4 credits and 2 representing 3 credits. Most are optional (7), 3 are basic training and only 2 are compulsory³ [3].

Further to this apparent scarcity of subjects directly related to Media Literacy as reflected by the figures, the lecturers interviewed were split into those who thought that Media Literacy is sufficiently covered in their university (3) and those that did not (4). This divergence partly resulted from the interviewees' own disparity in the conception of what they understood and expected from Media Literacy, as can be seen in this sample of statements:

“I think so, although there's no subject actually called that, I think it's present, yes. I think we cover this ecosystem that is made up partly of oligopoly, market models and partly self-communication” (E2)

“In the case of the Journalism degree yes, because of course it's our daily bread. Every day we have to contend with traditional media and new media.” (E3)

“Not at all. It practically doesn't exist and I might be the only one who talks about these things. The predominant point of view is the need to adapt to the market, to produce campaigns, of being a community manager [...]” (E1)

Overall, the interviewees believe in a professional communicator who is also sensitive to the premises maintained by Media Literacy, although not all in the end see the communicator as an educator of society. Logically, this sensitivity can be seen in the unanimous importance they afford to the fact that their communication students receive specific training in this subject. In some cases they emphasized their facet as future professional communicators (“we mustn't forget that a media professional who has reflected on Media Literacy will look at certain matters in a more careful and responsible way”, E1), but particularly their scope as citizens and the importance for any person and any future professional to receive this training (“It's fundamental [...] I think for training nowadays of anyone, any citizen who lives in this highly technologized world”. (E3)

Regarding the managers of Communication degrees, all –except one who indicated clearly it was insufficient– agree that attention given to Media Literacy in the curricula “could be improved” but the transverse nature of the subject is defended; they therefore ensure that it is contemplated in different subjects and in the syllabuses of the 3 degrees under analysis. In one case they even confused Media Literacy with the use of information technologies and applied learning to the different subjects on the syllabus. In general, the subject's crossover is the justification given for the low presence in current or previous degree courses or to the lack of knowledge of how it is included in their own faculties.

3.2. Dimensions and indicators included in Media Literacy subjects

In the syllabuses analysed the predominant dimension is ‘Ideology’. This appears in 13 of the 15 syllabuses, followed by the dimension ‘Languages’ (12), ‘Interaction processes (7), ‘Technology’ (7), ‘Production processes’ (5) and lastly the dimension ‘Aesthetics’ (4) (Figure 1).

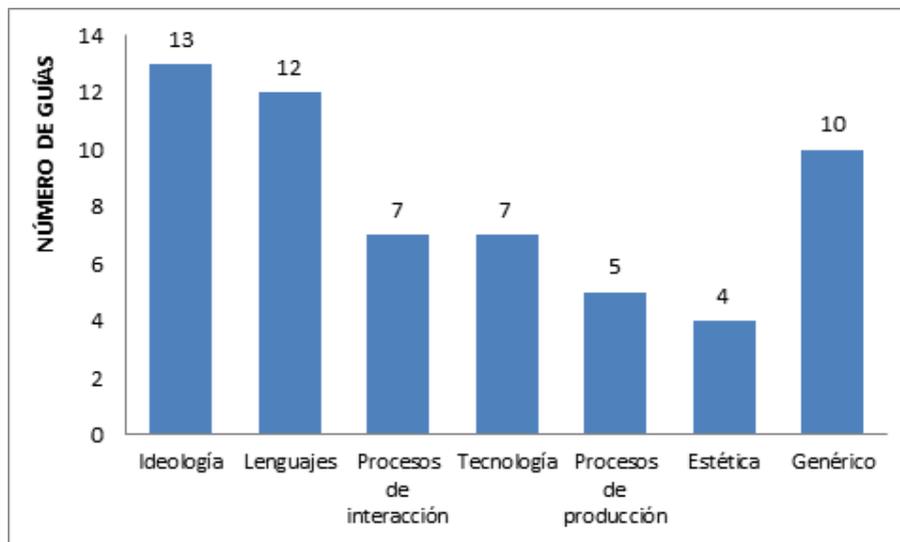


Figure 1. Number of syllabuses in which each Media Literacy dimension appears.

If we look in depth at each dimension we see that in some cases the same indicators of this dimension appear in most syllabuses. For example, for Technology, indicator I, which refers to ‘comprehension of the social function of technology’ appears in 7 of the 15 syllabuses while the remaining indicators only appear in a maximum of 3 (Table 2). However, this does not occur in all the dimensions; in the dimensions ‘Languages’, ‘Production and dissemination processes’ and ‘Aesthetics’, for example, there are a higher number of indicators (Tables 1 to 7).

Dimension	Areas	Indicators	Each indicator	Dimension globally
1. Languages	Area of analysis	I. Ability to interpret and evaluate codes of representation and their expressive function.	10	12
		II. Ability to analyse and assess narrative structures and conventions of genre and formatting.	8	
		III. Ability to establish links between texts – intertextuality–, codes and media.	5	
	Area of expression	IV. Ability for multi-modal expression	1	

Table 1. Presence of the dimension “Languages” and its indicators in syllabuses directly related to Media Literacy.

Dimension	Areas	Indicators	Each indicator	Dimension globally
2. Technology	Area of analysis	I. Understand the social function of technology.	7	7
		II. Ability to manage hypermedia, transmedia and multimodal environments.	3	
	Area of expression	III. Ability to handle multimedia and multimodal tools.	2	

Table 2. Presence of the dimension “Technology” and its indicators in the syllabuses of subjects directly related to Media Literacy.

Dimension	Areas	Indicators	Each indicator	Dimension globally
3. Interaction processes	Area of analysis	I. Ability to select and assess a media diet.	1	7
		II. Ability to understand and manage own emotional responses to tastes and for cognitive purposes.	2	
		III. Basic knowledge of the concept of audience and audience studies.	6	
	Area of expression	IV. Ability to interact with people and collectives in environments that are increasingly plural and intercultural.	0	

Table 3. Presence of the dimension “Interaction processes” and its indicators in the syllabuses of subjects directly related to Media Literacy.

Dimension	Areas	Indicators	Each indicator	Dimension globally
4. Production and dissemination processes	Area of analysis	I. Knowledge of production, programming and dissemination systems and their underlying interests.	3	5
		II. Knowledge of the regulatory and self-regulatory codes and possessing an active and responsible attitude to them.	2	
		III. Ability to collaborate in creating	3	

	multimedia and multimodal products.		
	IV. Ability to share and disseminate information through different communication environments	0	
	V. Responsible attitude to own online/offline identity and that of others.	0	
	VI. Ability to manage the concept of individual or collective authorship and be skilled in using resources such as <i>creative commons</i> .	0	

Table 4. Presence of the dimension “Production and dissemination processes” and its indicators in the syllabuses of subjects directly related to Media Literacy.

Dimension	Areas	Indicators	Each indicator	Dimension globally
5. Ideology and values	Area of analysis	I. Ability to evaluate the reliability of information sources and to search for, compare, prioritize and synthesize information from different environments.	5	13
		II. Ability to detect ideology and values, latent or patent, even in unnoticed communications and take a critical stance towards them.	8	
		III. Ethical attitude when downloading products.	0	
		IV. Ability to detect stereotypes and messages that go against human values and the environment.	6	
		V. Ability to manage own emotional responses when interacting with screens, according to the ideology and values being conveyed.	3	
	Area of expression	VI. Ability to use new communication tools to transmit values and contribute to improving the environment.	2	

Table 5. Presence of the dimension “Ideology and values” and its indicators in the syllabuses of subjects directly related to Media Literacy.

Dimension	Areas	Indicators	Each indicator	Dimension globally
6. Aesthetics	Area of analysis	I. Ability to enjoy formal aspects, that is, not just what is being communicated but also how it is being communicated.	4	4
		II. Sensitive attitude to media productions that do not satisfy minimum aesthetic requirements.	1	
		III. Ability to relate media productions to other artistic output and detect mutual influence.	2	
		IV. Ability to identify basic aesthetic categories, such as formal and thematic innovation, originality, style, schools and trends.	3	
	Area of expression	V. Ability to produce messages with minimum personal or collective levels of creativity, originality and sensibility.	2	
		VI. Ability to appropriate and transform artistic productions, boosting creativity, innovation, experimentation and aesthetic sensibility.	0	

Table 6. Presence of the dimension “Aesthetics” and its indicators in the syllabuses of subjects directly related to Media Literacy.

Dimension	Areas	Indicators	Each indicator	Dimension globally
7. Generics			10	10

Table 7. Presence of generic indicators that cannot be classified by their description in any of the dimensions established in syllabuses of subjects directly related to Media Literacy.

In a similar vein to the results obtained from the analysis of the syllabuses, in the interviews, “Ideology and Values” and “Languages” were also the two dimensions signalled as of greatest importance in Media Literacy teaching practice. In this case, Languages emerge one point above Ideology (5 to 4). “Aesthetics” is not highlighted by any of the interviewees as a priority and “Technology” in just one case (it is even the only dimension in which its priority is expressly rejected in two cases). Two of the interviewees highlight critical thinking as a priority objective, although it is not expressly classified as a dimension in our proposal. One interviewee associated it with the dimension “Interaction processes” and another to “Ideology and values”. In the case of “Languages”, the lecturers considered it largely a basis for being able to delve more thoroughly into the other dimensions (“I think that production or receipt processes can’t be learnt without knowledge of the language. And you can have ideology and values, but if you don’t know the

language, you can't interact in media", E4); or as basic knowledge simply to be able to analyse messages (E5).

The importance of ideology and values is largely associated with critical ability, but also to other more particular aspects that the interviewees consider important for their subjects, such as ethics (E5) or the creating of audiovisual stories ("stories are ideology and values, so I think they are a fundamental element.") (E4). It might be said that this dimension is therefore converted into a kind of receptacle for the classical concepts of communication sciences.

One of the interviewees justifies dimensions given less attention by referring to the fact that they rely on other subjects in the degree course already dealing with these dimensions (such as aesthetics or production processes, which are present in other subjects in the Audiovisual Communication degrees, for example, E1). This same interviewee also recognizes his own shortfalls in relegating attention to another dimension, such as Technology. Another of the interviewees uses the argument of how students are already prepared in certain dimensions (although this may be debatable from the Media Literacy perspective): one of the least discussed is that of Interaction processes "because, come on, no, not another thing for interacting through social media. I think they already know all about this and all too well." (E3). Interviewee 5 uses the same argument to relegate Technology as well as Interaction processes.

Regarding the areas of Media Literacy, together with the dominating area of analysis –which is still overwhelmingly the majority, as can be seen in the tables above that show there are 82 indicators related to the area of analysis compared to only 7 in the area of expression– all interviewees recognize including to a differing degree this other area of expression according to the experimental level of their subject: "as these subjects focus on a theory base, it requires double the effort to integrate analysis and creation processes, but at least a series of discussed and reasoned images do manage to be produced" (E1).

As regards course managers, even though one academic head affirms the importance of all the dimensions, the reality is that many dimensions are not seen as priorities:

"In my view they are contemplated in our current syllabus. The ones that receive most attention are those relating to language and technology and production processes" (E9).

Language and production dimensions are the most valued but all managers are aware that teaching them by themselves, in the same way as technology, is senseless if ideology and values are not worked on too ("the important thing is not technology but the use that is made of it", E9).

If we look at the analysis broken down by courses, and based on the results obtained, it can be seen that the Audiovisual Communication degree focuses most on Media Literacy transversely in its directly related subjects. Meanwhile, in Journalism the dimensions "Languages" and "Ideology" are particularly focused on and in the Advertising and Public Relations degree the most prominent are the dimensions 'Aesthetics', 'Interaction processes', 'Technology' and 'Languages'. In this case the dimension referring to 'Production processes' is completely neglected⁴ [4].

4. Discussion and conclusions

The incidence of Media Literacy in communication courses in Spain is irregular. The diversity of perceptions and information regarding the subject held by the people responsible for university degrees in Journalism, Audiovisual Communication and Advertising, as well as the teachers who

teach subjects directly related to it, prove how difficult it is to delimit its academic margins. Even though there might be a unanimous opinion that Media Literacy is fundamental for training citizens, there is disparity when translating this need into the training of future communicators. Thus, there are epistemological discrepancies about the purpose and scope of educommunication, which then becomes a discussion about the need to establish specific subjects or be committed to a transversality of the subject. This debate is particularly significant if we compare it to the discussion about the nature and characteristics of the very studies into communication. Buitrago, Ferrés and García Matilla (2015) signal the persistence of a very critical stance among media professionals in this regard. The need to articulate specific training for future professionals of Journalism, Audiovisual Communication and Advertising is still being discussed according to whether the focus is on the wholly professionalizing nature of its content or on a complex expertise more rooted in the notion of humanist teaching.

From the interviews we can conclude that in the minds of those who designed the current communication degrees there was no clear commitment to the specific nature of the subject. As the results from the study show, subjects directly related to educommunication exist more as a result of sensitivity and pressure from lecturers than by volition of the management. Of further importance is the fact that a subject that is not specifically entitled Media Literacy is not taught by a person from this speciality but by someone assigned randomly from among teaching staff with no consideration for their training criteria, dedication or prior interest in the subject. Meanwhile, we also found teachers who, without knowing much about the specific field of Media Literacy, are in fact subconsciously working on it by covering several of the dimensions adhering to the subject. Further to analysis of the teaching of subjects directly related to educommunication, this situation can also be seen among the teaching staff of university courses linked to Education, (López & Aguaded, 2015).

In the analysis of communication degree syllabuses in Spanish universities we have noted the limited presence of Media Literacy. Only 15 subjects directly related to this area in all the degrees is a tiny number if we look at it in global terms, although most managers interviewed considered the attention given to the subject to be sufficient in the context of their own universities. Of all the communication courses, it is interesting that the speciality that least covers training in this subject is Advertising, followed by Journalism, and the most is Audiovisual Communication. Undoubtedly, the delimiting of the boundaries between Advertising, Journalism and Audiovisual Communication advocated by the European Convergence process has contributed to differentiating competences that adapt increasingly to professional profiles required by companies from all sectors. Recommendations in the White Paper on undergraduate degrees in Communication drawn up by the Aneca (2005) are fervent in this regard, and demonstrate clear intentions to overcome what they call general training in favour of the implementation of specific expertise. This differentiation has proliferated in the varying positions of university communication courses when faced with a subject such as Media Literacy. In fact, by being able to form part of the scope of common areas within Communication sciences, the subject has taken a different path with regards to the social and professional expectations of the profiles of journalists, advertisers and audiovisual communication professionals. The latter appear to be the most bound to competences demanded by Media Literacy, judging by the incidence of the subject in the degree courses. This might also be explained by the tradition of these university courses themselves, which are associated more to an analytical and creative nature of communication than to mere technological or instrumental knowledge.

In relation to the content of subjects directly related to Media Literacy, we see that the dimensions Values and Ideology and Languages stand out as being priorities, according to evaluations by the lecturers interviewed as well as in the analysis of syllabuses. This coincides with a study of the bibliographical reference material used in these subjects, which pays particular attention to these

areas, to the detriment of other dimensions such as Aesthetics and Production and Interaction processes (López y Aguaded, 2015). Likewise, it is perturbing that theoretical progress in the cognitive-emotional mechanisms that intercede in the relationship with media messages (Ferrés, Masanet & Marta, 2013) are not included in the training agenda, neither is the importance of receipt and interaction in social communication (Orozco, Navarro & García Matilla, 2012; Marta & Grandío, 2013), nor the impact of ICT on the environment – something that must surely be an issue of paramount importance today (Tucho, Masanet & Blanco, 2014).

Probably the greatest challenge for education in the 21st Century is to approach the crossbreeding of communication and education from innovative, critical and participative parameters. Thus, university courses must respond to the persistent urging by international organizations for the implementation of training in Media Literacy (Osuna, Marta & Aparici, 2013), assuming that competences in this subject are fundamental for society and including them specifically in training for future communicators regardless of their area of specialization. This imperative may incite the definition and scope of this multifaceted concept as well as a reflection on the social, cultural and educational role of agents devoted professionally to communication.

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- start of research: 01/01/2011
- end of research: 31/12/2014

5. Notes

[1] Some of the directly related subjects do not have titles that initially appear to be aimed at Media Literacy. They have been classified in this category after an analysis of their syllabuses and confirmation through the interviews that in fact they are directly related subjects (for example, “The Basis of Audiovisual Communication”, “Cinematographic and television language” and “Audiovisual Expression”).

[2] Identification of the interviewees E1: lecturer, private university, Audiovisual Communication course; E2: lecturer, public-private university, Audiovisual Communication course; E3: lecturer, public university, Journalism course; E4: lecturer, private university, Audiovisual Communication course; E5: lecturer, public university, Audiovisual Communication course; E6: lecturer, public university, Audiovisual Communication course; E7: lecturer, public university, Journalism course; E8: Vice-dean private university; E9: dean, public university; E10: coordinator, private university; E11: coordinator, private university; E11: dean, public university.

[3] In some subjects not all the information could be found so this analysis of categories cannot be made over the total.

[4] The analysis of Advertising and Public Relations is only based on one subject as there are no other directly related subjects in Spanish universities.

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