



MEDIA EDUCATION AND MEDIA LITERACY: BETWEEN LAW, ETHICS, AND CRITICAL THINKING

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, media play a central role in shaping public opinion and social behavior, while simultaneously increasing the risks of manipulation and disinformation. This study examines media education and media literacy as an integrative framework linking law, ethics, and critical thinking. Drawing on Len Masterman's concept of critical autonomy and UNESCO's media and information literacy initiatives, the article highlights the importance of legal awareness and ethical responsibility in contemporary media environments. It argues that media education is essential for fostering informed, responsible, and critically thinking citizens capable of navigating complex information landscapes

In the contemporary information environment, media play a central role in shaping public opinion, political attitudes, and social behavior. The rapid expansion of digital platforms, social networks, and algorithm-driven content distribution has significantly increased the risks of manipulation, disinformation, and violations of ethical and legal norms. Under these conditions, media education and media literacy emerge as essential instruments for developing critical thinking, legal awareness, and responsible participation in the public sphere.

The theoretical foundations of modern media education were systematically developed by the British scholar Len Masterman, who defined media education as a process aimed at fostering critical autonomy. According to Masterman, media education should not be reduced to technical skills or passive media consumption. Instead, it must focus on developing individuals' ability to analyze media texts, reveal their ideological, political, and commercial dimensions, and understand how media representations construct social reality (Masterman, 1985). In this sense, media education functions as a tool for empowering individuals to make independent and informed judgments in complex information environments.

At the international level, the importance of media education has been actively promoted by UNESCO, which considers media education a global development strategy aimed at strengthening peace, international cooperation, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. In the Grünwald Declaration on Media Education (1982), UNESCO emphasized the decisive role of mass media in modern societies and underlined that comprehensive and systematic media education constitutes an integral part of the overall educational process (UNESCO, 1982).

This understanding was further elaborated at UNESCO's international conference "Education for the Media and the Digital Age" (Vienna, 1999), where media education was defined as encompassing all forms of media—print, audio, and visual—in connection with new technologies. Media education enables individuals to understand how mass communication functions within society and to acquire competencies necessary for meaningful interaction in the media environment. These competencies include the ability to analyze, critically evaluate, and create media texts; identify the political, social, commercial, and cultural interests behind media content; interpret media messages and the values they disseminate; create and distribute media content responsibly; and ensure free access to media both as consumers and as producers (UNESCO, 1999).

Within this framework, media literacy is conceptualized as an "umbrella concept" integrating information literacy, digital literacy, internet literacy, and civic literacy. This multidimensional model highlights that media competence goes beyond technical skills and includes critical thinking, legal regulation, and ethical responsibility as core components.

A crucial dimension of media literacy is its legal foundation. Freedom of expression and the right to seek, receive, and disseminate information are recognized as fundamental human rights in international law. These principles are enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and further elaborated in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), which guarantees freedom of expression while emphasizing that its exercise entails special duties and responsibilities (UDHR, 1948; ICCPR, 1966). Similar provisions are contained in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), which reflects the balance between freedom of expression and social responsibility (ECHR, 1950).

Closely connected to the legal dimension is the ethical dimension of media literacy. Professional ethics regulate media practices in areas where legal norms may be insufficient or overly general. Ethical standards emphasize accuracy, impartiality, accountability, respect for privacy, and the protection of human dignity. These principles are articulated in the Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists adopted by the International Federation of Journalists, which defines ethical journalism as a cornerstone of democratic societies (IFJ, 2019). In the digital environment, where the boundaries between professional journalism and user-generated content are increasingly blurred, ethical competence becomes particularly significant.

In conclusion, media education should be understood not merely as a pedagogical discipline, but as a comprehensive social and civic project. By integrating critical thinking, legal knowledge, and ethical responsibility, media education equips individuals with the skills necessary to navigate complex media environments, resist manipulation, and participate responsibly in democratic processes. Strengthening media education is therefore essential for protecting societies from misinformation and for fostering informed, active, and ethically responsible citizenship in the digital age.

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