"Positionality" and "Performativity":

Feminist theory and gender studies' contributions to the construction of the concept of media literacy

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, educational reforms have been carried out in many different countries with the aim of expanding the concept of literacy in order to respond to challenges posed by the mass media and the new technologies of information and communication technologies and thus was born the concept of media literacy. Even though some activists consider this kind of education a human right, there is still no consensus over its meaning or even over what objectives such educational policy should seek. This paper aims, therefore, to clarify the most important current debates on the area, to emphasize media literacy's role in improving the quality of people's political participation in today's democracies and to highlight important contributions from feminist theories and gender studies in the construction of this concept, such as the concepts of "positionality" (as developed by Linda Alcoff) and of "performativity" (as proposed by Judith Butler).

Keywords: education, media literacy, perfomativity, political participation, positionality.

Introduction

This paper is part of an ongoing research that seeks to elucidate the debate surrounding the construction of the concept of media and information literacy, specifically identifying the contributions of feminism and gender studies for the area. In particular, the concepts of "positionality" (as developed by Linda Alcoff) and of "performativity" (as proposed by Judith Butler) are then highlighted in the literature in relation to the policy and practice of media literacy. More specifically, it also examines how the gender perspective on this educational policy has been adopted within the United Nations (UN), and especially within the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Among the methods employed are, in the first place, an extensive literature review in the area of media and information literacy. Secondly, an analysis of the discourse of UNESCO and its activities on the theme is carried through an extensive analysis of documents published by the organization. Special attention will be given to the latest policy guide published in the area: "Media and Information Literacy: Policy and Strategy Guidelines", from 2013. UNESCO was selected for being recognized as the organization that does the most systematic and enduring work to globally promote educational policies in the area of media and information literacy (Altun, 2011).

Although it is considered by some as a "public value of respect for democratic and social value of all types of public communication" (Bauer, 2011, pg. 16) or even as a basic human right by some activists (Moeller, 2009), the concept of media literacy is still the subject of many debates over its meaning and purposes, the field of study is quite recent, research on the impacts of such policy are still scarce, and indicators for its evaluation are still in the development phase. Several authors point to the need for greater effort towards conceptualization of this phenomenon, so that its practice becomes more informed. This paper aims to contribute in order to map the debate on the issue and to deepen the study on specific theoretical contributions to the area.

Presentation of the debate on the concept of media literacy

In recent decades, educational reforms have been undertaken in several countries with the aim of expanding the concept of literacy in order to respond to the challenges posed by the mass media and new information and communication technologies (ICTs). These challenges range from fundamental issues such as access and developing basic skills to deal with the technology, to the development of more complex skills, such as the media and information literacy, which involves not only the ability to access different types of media, but also the ability to interpret, criticize and produce media messages in different contexts. The movement for media literacy has taken the proportion of a movement organized internationally. In all continents there are groups

working in this field in the form of educational associations and formal institutions that are gaining visibility and interacting together, sharing goals and strategies and spaces as college meetings, scientific conventions, magazines and publications, even if they have sometimes different styles of action (Tornero & Varis, 2010).

A wide range of concepts with different meanings and terminologies arose therefore to embrace this necessary revision of educational practices, in view of the enormous expansion of the use of ICTs. Along with these comes media literacy, whose broader definition would involve the idea of developing the skills to access, analyze, evaluate and create content across different media types (Martinsson, 2009). UNESCO, condensing diverse perspectives on the latest curriculum for teachers published, adopts the concept of media and information literacy. On the one hand, media literacy involves the skills of understanding the role and functions of the media in democratic societies, the necessary conditions for the exercise of its functions, plus the ability to critically evaluate media content and also to produce media contents through a variety of means. On the other hand, information literacy consists of the ability to define and articulate information needs, locate, access, organize, communicate and use information ethically, besides being able to use ICTs in information processing (Wilson et al. 2013). Although some authors criticize this unified approach, others point out that due to the increasing convergence of different media types, both capabilities are needed for active democratic participation, and therefore should be treated the same in a unified manner in order to promote participation more effectively (Martinsson, 2009). Other authors also point out that the existence of several types of concepts of "literacies" would be counterproductive since this could lead to unnecessary competition for space in the school curriculum and for resources. However, UNESCO's unified concept is fairly recent, and as the literature on the subject has used more widely the terminology of "media literacy", this is the term employed in this work.

We can identify similarities between the various definitions of media literacy, as the following assumptions: the media have the potential to exert a wide range of effects on individuals; the media have an influence not only on individuals but also on the broader social structures; because the influence of the media is constant and subtle, people are more susceptible to it when they are passive; the goal is to not only help people protect themselves from the potentially negative effects, but also to enable them to achieve their own goals through ICTs; media literacy should be developed, is multidimensional and the expansion of this capability involves more than just acquiring knowledge (Potter, 2013). Media literacy also should not be understood as a binary concept, where someone can be classified simply as literate or illiterate, but rather as a

continuum, which involves several stages of learning from the development of basic language skills to the development of a more critical thinking and a more responsible social position (Potter, 2011).

The French author Jacques Gonnet argues that, although in recent years there has been widespread adoption of the concept of media literacy in educational policies around the world, the broad adoption of the term conceals great controversies - "to refer to a single media education is an illusion" (Gonnet, 2001, p. 5). Gonnet adopts Len Masterman's timeline of the evolution of the concept of media literacy, which ranges from a more protectionist position initially, fearful of the effects of media, to an a more critical approach on the 1960's to then reach a stage of "decoding" the media, from the 1970s onwards, with the contribution of areas such as semiotics. However, the author points out that throughout this evolution there was a certain forgetfulness of the political role of media literacy, and even believes that the most pressing and cross-cutting controversy within this educational policy is over two distinct views regarding the objectives of media literacy: on one hand, those who believe that the goals of media literacy should not be so ambitious and should be treated as classical school discipline, starting with defined goals and objective ratings that students learn to decode media messages; and on the other hand, those who take media literacy as a political project, and to understand it as an education for democracy, fundamental source of regeneration of democratic practices, with emphasis on student participation.

The debate on media literacy also falls within the debate on critical pedagogy. Henry Giroux (1991) argues that modernism, postmodernism and feminism represent three of the most important theoretical contributions to the development of cultural policy and pedagogical practice that can substantially advance democracy, providing educators with the opportunity to rethink the relationship between the school and democracy. Incorporating these three theoretical perspectives the author posits some principles of critical pedagogy: education must have as a purpose the production of political subjects; ethics should be a central concern; focus should be given to differences in an ethically challenging and politically transformative way; critical pedagogy should give space to other discourses which are not reducible to a hegemonic narrative; critical pedagogy should be seen as a cultural policy committed to creating a sphere of empowered citizens; critical pedagogy must propose a revision of the Enlightenment notion of rationality, proposing alternatives, combining a language of critique and possibility; critical pedagogy must understand teachers as intellectuals with transformation power that occupy specific political and social positions; and, finally, the central notion of critical pedagogy is the

combination of the postmodernist idea of difference with the feminist emphasis on the primacy of the political. Pedagogy should thus be understood as a form of cultural production intrinsically historical and political.

Following the same line of thinking, Kellner (1991) argues that one of the most important contributions of postmodernism for pedagogy, and for the expansion of the concept of literacy towards the notion of media literacy, was the dismantling of barriers between "high" and "low" culture (or "popular culture") and the extension of the notions of textuality, which make popular culture an object of study. Several feminist studies have had as their object the popular culture, which is considered significant to this theoretical current for being a space of struggle and negotiation of meanings. Two assumptions are common when it comes to feminist studies of popular culture approaches: women have a relationship with popular culture that is different from the one that men have; and the understanding of how popular culture works is essential for women to take control over their identity and have the ability to change and to intervene (Storey, 2008).

In this sense, some authors use the concept of critical media literacy to highlight this political and transformative aspect of learning, focusing on the need to develop a critical view of the discourses and of the media representations, and emphasizing the importance of using different media for self-expression and social activism. However, it has been warned that media literacy programs that focus on developing critical thinking without a context of empowerment that addresses the fundamental rights of free expression can make students too cynical and disengaged towards institutions such as the government or the media, being therefore essential that the connection between media literacy, freedom of expression and civic engagement is emphasized so that it becomes an educational response aimed to encourage political participation (Mihailidis, 2009).

Policy advocates for media literacy therefore press for its inclusion in school curricula and for policies to ensure that everyone has access to this type of education, because the differential access to media and information leads to the expansion of opportunities for the already privileged at the expense of the marginalized population, since certain uses of ICTs can result in more human, financial, social and cultural capital leaving those who are left out of the learning process at a disadvantage. There is a wide spectrum of "exclusions" that operate when it comes to the use of ICTs, and thus, to understand the various inequalities around the use of ICTs, one must take into account factors such as differences in age, gender, race, ethnicity, special needs and education of users (Hargittai, 2008). Henry Jenkins, therefore, opposes educational

approaches of the "*laissez faire*" kind, which ignore gaps in participation with regard to three challenges posed by ICT: access to opportunities for engagement that technologies represent, the issue of transparency of messages transmitted and the ethical challenge of dealing with a complex and diverse social online environment (Jenkins et al, 2009).

The transparency problem of messages is also crucial and occurs both because of its apparent naturalness, which obscures everything behind its construction, and because of the representation and non-representation issues embedded in them (Luke, 1994). Thanks to the ubiquity of media, young people are exposed to their influence early on, but often they do not receive appropriate education to perform a systematic analysis of its contents. Starting from the assumption that neither the media nor the education are neutral or impartial, and cannot be separated from questions of power, politics and history, researchers argue that the school should be a place where students can reflect the powerful media representations and critically examine them (Boske & McCormack, 2011).

Furthermore, media literacy education can be understood as a method of teaching citizenship and human tights values. As the scholar Divina Frau-Meigs (2008) put it:

"Human rights need to be made explicit again, with strategies of high and low cultures within our nations, with a combination of school and media, via communities and individuals alike. There is a need for a global repositioning of values considering our increasing connectivity -an explicitly technical word, that means nothing without a human sense of connectedness. Media education and human rights are about connectedness. Hence, it is essential to identify some of the major disconnects that undermine them" (Frau-Meigs, 2008, p. 54).

Finally, recent trends towards e-government and also provide justifications for this type of educational policy, as points the report of a survey recently published by the United Nations, "United Nations E-Government Survey 2014 - E-Government For The Future We Want":

"There are clear opportunities for the future improvement of e-participation, including technology trends towards, for example, social media and mobile devices/technology which are inherently interactive, as well as crowdsourcing. There are also severe challenges, including the digital divide, low user take-up and the lack of incentives to participate. These opportunities and challenges call for effective strategies to create an enabling environment for e-participation, including appropriate legal and institutional frameworks, capacity-development for digital media literacy for citizens and a seamless integration of online and offline features for public participation. (…) Digital media literacy can facilitate e-participation by increasing the capacity of people. In order to be an effective e-participant, the inclusion of digital media literacy and lifelong learning efforts should become a social norm. Such literacy also includes the

formation of relevant attitudes, development of skills and transfer of knowledge" (United Nations, 2014, p. 6 and 72).

The gender perspective and media literacy

Contributions of the feminist theory to the debate

Since media content can be highly symbolic, several theories are sometimes necessary to perform its reading and interpretation, which resulted in the influence of several different theoretical perspectives in the field of media studies and in the very formulation of the concept of media literacy such as critical theory, post-structuralism, postmodernism, semiotics, multiculturalism and feminist theory (Agger, 1991; Luke, 1994; Kellner &Share, 2005). In particular, feminism postmodern and post-structural analysis of discourses promoted from the gender perspective, focusing on the different positions of power and influence in the writing and reading between men and women, concluding that the presentation of structured knowledge in discourse reflects power struggles (Agger, 1991).

Feminist epistemologies contribute, in this sense, since they seek to denaturalize what is taken as common sense, or hegemonic thinking, showing how the same message can be interpreted in various ways, which is essential to building a more pluralistic and representative democracy. Therefore, the school should be in charge of making visible the power structure behind the production of information, and how it benefits certain groups over others. For some authors that learning is linked to a project of a more participatory democracy, being other more "neutral" approaches considered innocuous in order to really generate more civic engagement through education (Kellner, 2005).

According to many feminist arguments, throughout history there was something very close to a repression of female voices. The representation of women was mostly left in charge of men, and this historical silencing of women "led to a fetishization and objectification of 'the feminine'" (Luke, 1994, p.32). Furthermore, it has already been attested in many studies that there are more negative female stereotypes than negative male stereotypes run primarily on television; men are usually portrayed with positive characteristics such as competence, leadership and bravery, while women are framed in basically two stereotypes, either as the sexual object or as the mother/housewife, and those profiles do not seem to have changed much since the beginning of television programming (Potter, 2011).

To illustrate this point more clearly, it is useful to review some data collected in the largest and longest longitudinal research on the subject of gender and media, and more specifically on news media, which, after all, remain the major and most influential source of information worldwide, despite the rise of social media. From the most recent report on "Who makes the news?", carried out by the Global Media Monitoring Project (2010), it seems clear that while there has been some small progress in the presence of women as subjects of news stories (GMMP produces reports from five to five years since 1995), the world as depicted in the news is still largely male: 76% - more than 3 out of 4 – of news subjects are male and the small rise in women's visibility in comparison with the last studies produced by GMMP is largely due to stories on 'science & health', which is a topic with the least space on the news agenda. Furthermore, women's role as spokespersons or experts in the news is still low (19 and 20%, respectively); female news subjects' ages are mentioned two times more than male subjects' and women are identified by their family status 4 times more than men. As for the news content, only 13% of all news has a specific focus on women and, while only 6% deal with gender equality or inequality, a large amount of stories (46%) reinforced gender stereotypes. Finally, the overall picture of Internet news production and content shows similar numbers.

For Carmen Luke (1994), the different media provide a "public pedagogy" that influence and shape the perception of each of us about gender roles, identity and social relations. Therefore, in a classroom where critical literacy is practiced, it is possible to challenge such representations and understand how they reinforce or weaken the power of certain groups. This education should go beyond the understanding of how meaning is constructed to also examine how these constructed senses relate to broader systems of cultural, gender and class domination. In this situation, the knowledge and common sense that students bring to the classroom are used as a learning tool, which implies a multidisciplinary approach. The experience of students must therefore suffer a critical reappraisal so that assumptions and prejudices about themselves and about others are put in discussion and challenged.

The contributions of the field of feminist standpoint theory propose that the different subject positions (determined by class, race, gender, sexuality, etc.) produce different readings, being therefore important that media messages are interpreted from different perspectives so as to make education more conducive to a pluralist democracy. The theory of the feminist perspective in this type of analysis contributes by proposing that all reading seeks to apprehend subordinate perspectives, thus undermining the hegemonic reading and understanding them as just one of the possible interpretations of a message. In this sense, opening spaces for groups that do not

normally have the opportunity to express themselves is important, but this must be accompanied by the development of a critical analysis that exposes the structures of oppression (Kellner & Share, 2005).

In a similar vein, the concept of the subject as positionality is proposed by Linda Alcoff (1988) to supply the debate on the subject of feminism with an alternative, which is neither an essentialist conception nor deconstructed until its last consequences, as proposed by certain currents of post-structuralism. The concept of positionality developed by the author, therefore, is a non-essentialist conception of the subject and also inseparable from the external environment that surrounds the subject, taking into account objective, cultural, ideological and economic conditions etc. Carmen Luke (1994) then states that to feminist theories in general, and for feminist pedagogy in particular, this conception of the subject as positionality is critical, since women have complex and multiple identities that cannot be reduced to principles universally applicable, but it must be developed from the individual voices expressed from their particular positions. Here, therefore, the subject is understood as a cultural product of hegemonic discourses, but also as a cultural agent, able to negotiate and contest meanings assigned. This non-universal understanding of the subject combined with this notion of agency is, therefore, an essential contribution on the debate over media literacy policies.

Finally, the last contribution to be analyzed is that of performativity, as developed by Judith Butler (1990), whose post-structuralist and anti-essentialist concept of identity describes gender as a cultural performance or discursive practice performed by each individual. This theory is relevant to media literacy as it reinforces the idea of the capacity of individual agency in a participatory media culture. Butler's concept of gender performance is also one of the founding landmarks of queer theory, which in its relation to studies of popular culture seeks to criticize its "heteronormativity" and question the naturalness of gender roles (Storey, 2008).

Although, according to Butler, it is not possible that individual agency be situated outside the speech system to oppose or change it, the dominant system is open to intervention and reframing, processes that enable the existence of individual transformative action. This theoretical contribution, therefore, implies a revision of the policy objectives of media literacy towards a more participatory culture and more active citizenship:

"From this perspective, individuals' participation in media culture provides opportunities to perform the self in hegemonic or variational ways and particular types of media education activities may encourage (or discourage) performative variation. The media education classroom potentially provides the cultural space and technological access through which the "DIY citizen" can experiment with identity by performing

the self is less regulated contexts than usual, and in which they see others performing "citizenship" in unexpected and provocative ways. The need for this to occur in local contexts suggests that a singular media education discourse is unlikely to be successful and participation should not be constructed as a specific set of strategies that are universally applicable. Viewed this way, media education's aim is not to 'empower' young people through particular disciplinary strategies, but to provide localised opportunities for democratic participation. In such contexts, hegemonic media representations and institutional processes may potentially be negotiated with in creative ways. This may lead to a form of social proficiency that is essential for successful citizenship" (Dezuanni, 2009, pg. 41).

UNESCO and the gender perspective on media literacy

UNESCO and the European Union are the two international organizations that most systematically promote educational policies of media literacy. Following them, the Alliance of Civilizations of the United Nations (UNAOC) also supports some projects related to the theme. Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa are also regional exponents in media literacy. The United States, the largest exporter and consumer of media products, is ironically relatively behind many other countries in this area, although all the country's states have a minimum standard of media literacy established in the school curriculum. On UNESCO's latest publication in the area, "Media and Information Literacy - Policy and Strategy Guidelines", which outlines strategies for the development of this educational policy, the organization identified key conditions necessary for the development of a policy of media and information literacy, which involve briefly: resources, information and research in the area, presence of stakeholders in the country, and consensus both about the concept of media and information literacy as about the goals that this type of policy should follow. This partly explains the long delay on this educational policy in parts of Latin America, Asia and Africa.

UNESCO in particular had a significant and systematic role in the area by supporting and organizing conferences, symposia, seminars, research and publications. One important milestone is the Grünwald Declaration on media education, 1982, where the organization's position in relation to the adoption of an empowerment perspective is made clear:

"Rather than condemn or endorse the undoubted power of the media, we need to accept their significant impact and penetration throughout the world as an established fact, and also appreciate their importance as an element of culture in today's world. The role of communication and media in the process of development should not be underestimated, nor the function of media as instruments for the citizen's active participation in society. Political and educational systems need to recognize their obligations to

promote in their citizens a critical understanding of the phenomena of communication" (UNESCO, 1982).

Other landmarks are the international seminar "Youth Media Education" organized in 2002 and the Paris Agenda 2007 (which yielded 12 recommendations for educational policies of media literacy). In this last encounter, among other recommendations, the strengthening of the links between media education, cultural diversity and respect for human rights was proposed. Among the recent publications of the organization are: a guide to promoting user generated content for communicators (*Guidelines for Broadcasters on Promoting User-generated Content and Media and Information Literacy*, 2009), a global mapping of media literacy education policies (*Mapping media education policies in the world: visions, challenges and Programmes*, 2009), a curriculum of media literacy directed toward teachers (*Media and information literacy curriculum for teachers*, 2011), and a guide to educational policies and strategies for media literacy (*Media and Information Literacy: policy and strategy guidelines*, 2013). In 2013, the organization also launched the Global Alliance for Partnerships in Literacy and Informational media (Global Alliance for Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy), to coordinate efforts in the area, and the Global Alliance on Media and Gender (Global Alliance on Media and Gender), to articulate a systematic monitoring of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and its Platform for Action.

The Beijing Platform and its Plan of Action specifically addressed the relationship between women and media, positioning media literacy as critical to the advancement of women and development:

"The mass media are a powerful means of education. As an educational tool the mass media can be an instrument for educators and governmental and non-governmental institutions for the advancement of women and for development. Computerized education and information systems are increasingly becoming an important element in learning and the dissemination of knowledge. Television especially has the greatest impact on young people and, as such, has the ability to shape values, attitudes and perceptions of women and girls in both positive and negative ways. It is therefore essential that educators teach critical judgment and analytical skills" (United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, Platform for Action, article 77, 1995).

On the last guide on the topic published by UNESCO (*Media and Information Literacy - Policy and Strategy Guidelines*, 2013), the inclusion of gender in policy debates about media literacy would entail the principles of "Information Society" (or "Knowledge Society"), involving equitable and universal access to quality information and education, multiculturalism and freedom of expression. A public policy of media and information literacy that takes into account gender

issues should be developed and implemented equally between men and women, and recognize that access to information differs both in terms of access and in terms of operation and authorship between men and women, and this reality must be transformed, taking into account also the most vulnerable groups within the country that are at disadvantage. This approach is particularly important in developing countries where these inequalities are more pronounced - a gender approach is considered, therefore, a development approach. In the authors' proposal, gender inequalities are considered in combination with various other forms of inequality arising from other social categories such as age, geographic location (urban/rural), ethnic inequalities, among others, noting that one type of inequality in combination with others can cause its exacerbation (Grizzle et al. 2013).

Studies in the area face difficulties in accessing data and accurate statistics, since there is a lack of gender disaggregated statistics to analyze different uses of ICTs. However, we can say that in the world in general, the participation of women in society information is lower than that of men, particularly in poorer countries. Recent studies also indicate that old stereotypes continue to be played worldwide in various media and women remain under-represented. In addition, men continue to dominate most of the highest positions of command media companies, as well as middle management positions, management and technical level. The organization argues that while technological change has been in favor of expanding access to information and knowledge, it also eventually generates other inequalities, and concludes that policies and strategies for gender sensitive media and information literacy can help address inequalities and negative stereotypes propagated by information providers (Ibid., 2013).

Within the UN, therefore, the issue of media literacy seems to be closely linked to the struggle waged by various women's movements. Media and information literacy is therefore considered a human right and it is also linked to the issue of development and as an instrument for overcoming various inequalities.

Conclusions

Feminist theories and gender studies represent important contributions to the debate on media literacy education policy and cannot be ignored if the goals of this educational policy aim at building a more egalitarian and participatory democracy. Empirical studies on media literacy are still fairly recent, research on the impact of this type of educational policy is still scarce, and indicators for evaluation are still in the development phase. However, it seems clear that to have a positive transformative impact, it is necessary that educational policies such as this take into

account the diverse range of inequalities that are present in all classrooms. Being considered a human right in itself, but also an instrument for the promotion of human rights, media literacy education is considered fundamental for the empowerment of women and other groups in disadvantage, as the Platform of Beijing stresses and as UNESCO operationalizes it. Therefore, this kind of educational policy seems to meet the demands for a more inclusive education and may contribute for the universalization of human rights.

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