

## **The European Charter for Media Literacy: meaning and potential**

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### Abstract

*This paper offers a brief outline of the background, origins and purposes of the European Charter for Media Literacy. The Charter constitutes a new approach to the formation of a network of media educators in Europe. Rather than proposing a bureaucratic organisation with formal membership, it offers a consensual definition of media literacy to which organisations and individuals can demonstrate their affiliation simply by signing the Charter online at [www.euromedialiteracy.eu](http://www.euromedialiteracy.eu). The steady growth of registered visitors to this site, and the number of Charter signatories nearing 200, indicates widespread interest and support for the concept; however, the effectiveness of the Charter as a catalyst for debate and collaboration remains to be proved over the coming months.*

### **Preliminary Remark**

The main pursuit of the European Charter for Media Literacy is to provide an European discourse on media literacy. To this discourse are invited all players in the field of media education and media for children and young people, from school to media production, from instructional technology to protection from harmful context, from practitioners to scholars, producers etc. Of course the development of the concept of media literacy occurs under the condition of new media, multimedia and the widening of media modes e.g. internet and mobile communication technologies as well as the changing childhood like the increased of children in cultural and life contexts at risks are relevant issues. Nevertheless the European Charter's website is first of all a discursive device with an European emphasis. It begins with a charter, which provides a kind of ground level on media literacy for relevant persons and institutions within Europe. Education, school and other pedagogical institutions still are more or less framed by national cultural contexts, although the institutionalised media production and distribution works within international and national contexts, e.g. looking for national audiences and target groups for delivering global programmes. The trans-national media educational discourse sticks to projects within schemes and programmes of the European Commission. These projects have quite a short lifespan which is one reason that they do not enhance a reliable and

sustainable institutionalisation of a trans-national media literacy in Europe. But the websites of these EU-projects form a kind of starting point for a discourse across national borders. Additionally such a websites with a media literacy charter as basis should be able to lower borderlines within the cultural field of media and children respectively young people e.g. such lines between media educators and media institutions.

One can summarize the two emphasises of European Charter's websites, (a) to consider and develop the concept of media literacy in an European context, (b) to the integrate the quite large range of institutions in the field of media education and programme provider. The wide institutional range leads to a definition of media literacy which displays just relevant dimensions (see under point 1) such as reflexive responses to the development of the media, critical and formative skills as well as participation in the public sphere as citizen. These modest outlines should guarantee a open sphere for an unrestricted debate. Of course this debate should yield to the new media phenomena and different emphasis on media education and providing children and young people with media. The recent media phenomena like multimedia and multimodal representation, the conceptualisation of the internet and its descendants like chats or blogs proposes an orientation to a specific appearance of media literacy, which should or could be considered in its consequences on the website of the European Charter for Media Literacy. Probably the presentation of practical approaches and projects is the adequate way to consider the impact of *digital literacy* (see the paper of Manuela Pietraß in this issue).

## **1. Background**

The main aim of the European Charter for Media Literacy is to create shared aspirations for media competence and media education across Europe. National policies for media literacy are beginning to emerge in some countries, although in some cases, as for example in the German Federal States they exist only at regional level. Additionally in some countries, whether or not there is some kind of national policy directive for media literacy, the real drivers for media literacy development come from other agencies such as NGOs, cultural or religious organisations; and in some cases from the media themselves. Thus there is a wide range of approaches to, and definitions of, media literacy, differentiated by the motives and aspirations of the agencies concerned. The Charter exists to try and counter this confusing diversity by offering a potentially consensual definition of media literacy. It is hoped that Charter signatories will reformulate their programmes to demonstrate how they intend to work to achieve this agreed definition – agreed not by vote or diktat, but by the simple fact that they have decided to declare their public support for this definition, by signing the Charter.

This is an ambitious goal. In the field of media literacy, there are different academic traditions, national policy priorities, and trans-national sectoral and corporate interests, all of which tend to pull media literacy initiatives in different and sometimes contradictory directions.

If media literacy is developed and managed by regulatory bodies, it will tend to focus on the "critical skills" area to the exclusion of the others. If policy is strongly driven by hardware and software providers, then it's assumed that the creative skills are the only ones that matter – and even worse, those skills may well be seen as technologically based rather than as part of individuals' creative and imaginative development. And if media literacy is driven by media producers or national cultural institutions, then the emphasis is likely to be on an uncritical admiration of, and maximizing audiences for, cultural products; with no room for either critical perspectives or creative opportunities.

When we look at media initiatives around Europe, a dispiritingly large number conform to one or other of these tendencies. Their power to effect long-term change is also constrained by the funding regimes under which they exist. Far too often, media literacy projects obtain funding without having to explain how their work builds on that of others, what it contributes to longer-term sustainability, how credible evidence about its real learning outcomes is going to be produced, and what its exit strategy will be when funding ends. The latter is particularly important given the ridiculously short timescale in which most projects are obliged to operate. Most projects are also either very small, or spread very thinly, and are managed by relatively small groups representing a limited range of interests.

Until recently, the European Commission has offered little leadership on media literacy; instead, it has provided a large number of small, two-year grants to a plethora of initiatives, many of which were actually trying to do the same thing, namely, construct a European network for media educators. However, EC responsibility for media literacy has now passed into the new MEDIA Programme. MEDIA is the EU support programme for the European audiovisual industry: it co-finances training initiatives for audiovisual industry professionals, the development of production projects (feature films, television drama, documentaries, animation and new media), as well as the promotion of European audiovisual works. The new MEDIA 2007 Programme comprises a series of support measures for the European audiovisual industry focusing on training professionals, developing production projects, distributing and promoting films and audiovisual programmes, and supporting film festivals. The MEDIA programme is jointly run by the Information Society & Media Directorate General under the authority of Commissioner Viviane Reding and the Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency.<sup>i</sup>

In this new context, we are now seeing a more systematic approach, with the establishment in 2006 of a Media Literacy Experts Group, and a consultation process which has sought to identify priorities for the development of media literacy in member countries and what the most effective interventions by the EC could be. So far this has taken the form of a questionnaire sent out to all member states through their Media Desks, following which a study is to be commissioned (through a limited tender process) which will review all the evidence about the state of media literacy in Europe, including that gathered from the questionnaire, and produce recommendations for the ways in which EC interventions could “add value” to activities already under way at a national level.<sup>ii</sup>

However, while all this has been happening, the media themselves have continued to change at an accelerated rate. Features such as the development of person to person (p2p) messaging in the form of blogs, the rise of “pull” rather than “push” forms of consumption such as RSS feeds, the development of spaces for content-sharing such as YouTube and Flickr, are all in the process of changing long-established media theories about producers and audiences and the relationship between them, and indeed about the very nature of “text” itself. This process is happening faster than academic research can keep up with it. Digital literacy is therefore an important element of media literacy. Digital technologies are essentially a platform for media content. They continue to carry print, graphics, animation, still and moving images. Their radical features lie in their capacity to generate, rip, manipulate and circulate this material in startlingly new ways: being able to master these kinds of activity in the digital sphere is rapidly becoming an important aspect of media literacy, extending its current range of knowledge and skills. But it is not a replacement for media literacy, and the proliferation of new types of “literacy” can be

dangerous in the sphere of policy. Policymakers like simple messages, not complex ones: faced with multiple “literacies” all clamouring for attention, they are likely to see all of them as marginal and irrelevant to the traditional – and vote-winning – certainties of print literacy.

So media literacy continues to be the established term covering a wide portfolio of skills, knowledge and understanding in relation to modern media of communications, and the questions that media literate people know how to ask – “who made this? For whom? In whose interests do they speak? What has been included here and what has been omitted?” – are more important than ever. In addition, it is important to note that the European Commission will clearly be including cultural competences in its definition of media literacy, as evidenced in its initial commitments under the future MEDIA 2007 programme. This “has, among its operational objectives, the education and creation of an audience for European cinematography. The proposal underlines the importance of Media Literacy and Image Education initiatives and in particular those organised by festivals for a young public, in close cooperation with schools and other institutions. The full exploitation of the economic and cultural potential of the European audiovisual sector depends also on the integration of the European audiovisual heritage within the educational and cultural policy frameworks of the Member States”.<sup>iii</sup> Incorporating cultural objectives like these within media literacy will be new for many in the media education field, but it is already also built into the Charter.

## **2. Origins of the Charter**

The concept of the Charter for Media Literacy was first mooted in the aftermath of two international media education conferences: in Belfast (N Ireland, May 2004, as a part of the EC-funded Media-Educ project) and Karlstad (Sweden, September 2004, as part of the EC-funded AllMedia project). At both of these events, the concept of an international network of media educators was revisited. Many attempts have been made in the past to set up such a network, but all have encountered a central problem: what benefits can such a network provide to its members? The general idea that networks are “a good thing” is insufficient to guarantee the number of supporters that would be needed to sustain it. Membership organisations tend to need offices and staff, and the costs of even a tiny bureaucracy are likely to exceed the funding that could be extracted from the kinds of small, non-profit organisations that predominate in the field of European media education. And if funding is found, it tends to be limited to a two- or three-year period: not long enough to allow a membership organisation to grow.

At this point (late 2004), a UK “task force” comprising the UK Film Council, the British Film Institute, BBC and Channel 4, had been working on the idea of a UK Charter for Media Literacy, which would set out in simple form what it could mean to be media literate. By inviting a wide range of signatories, it was hoped that the Charter would help to form a growing consensus in the UK around a single version of media literacy, in a context where contending definitions were generating confusion and suspicion. The issue was a live one in the UK at that juncture, because the new media regulator, Ofcom, had been given a duty to promote media literacy in the 2003 Communications Act.<sup>iv</sup> Unsurprisingly, Ofcom’s interpretation of media literacy relates mainly to its duties as a regulatory body. Its definition of media literacy and statement of priorities, and its statements about research, show its focus on general access to media technologies and ensuring the protection of vulnerable groups against harmful or offensive content.<sup>v</sup> “Creativity” as an aspect of media literacy is acknowledged but

is not a current priority, while the concept of cultural breadth and extending the range of audience choice is not on Ofcom's agenda. The idea of the Charter was to propose a wider definition, which all stakeholders could support. Thus a lot of the groundwork had been done in creating a fairly generic text which would be acceptable to a wide spectrum of opinion.

A small group of experienced media educators, who had been involved in both the Belfast and Karlstad events, met in early 2005 to consider whether the Charter concept might work internationally as a catalyst that could grow a greater – and therefore more powerful – consensus around an inclusive, explicit and agreed definition of what it means to be media literate in 21<sup>st</sup> century European culture.

### **3. An Agreed Definition of Media Literacy?**

The text of the Charter was evolved by this group through discussions over several months, using as a basis a draft taken from the UK task force. Dialogue between the European and UK drafting groups was maintained, and by late 2005 an agreed version was achieved, which was later published on the Charter website.<sup>vi</sup> All those involved had considerable prior experience in drawing up similar documents in both national and international contexts. A significant feature of the Charter is that it focuses on outcomes: on what constitutes a media literate person, rather than on the content and pedagogy of media education.

In the center of the European Charter stands the English equivalent to the German concept of media competence, Media Literacy. There has been recent debate about whether “literacy” in English can be equated to “kompetenz” and whether a better translation might be “bildung”. Those in the German-speaking community who have got used to the term “media kompetenz” over many years are understandably resistant to this – and of course here we have in a nutshell the problems, and simultaneously the fascination, of trying to achieve international consensus around cultural concepts that actually have very deep national roots. “Literacy” is a contentious term in English, being used both for functional competence in reading and writing (as demonstrable in simple tests) and for a much wider portfolio of cultural skills, implying extensive reading and experience of life. In German, these two very different kinds of learning outcome are neatly divided between the two terms “Kompetenz” and “Bildung”. So which should be used to denote “media literacy”?

Although the Charter does not provide any specifics about the content and pedagogy of media education, it does include the following summary of what educational provision for media literacy ought to entail:

*We will contribute to development of a media literate European population by offering, or enabling others to offer, opportunities for people to:*

- *Broaden their experience of different kinds of media form and content;*
- *Develop critical skills in analysing and assessing the media;*
- *Develop creative skills in using media for expression and communication, and participation in public debate.*

It is worth unpacking these three types of provision in some detail. By putting them together, the Charter seeks to integrate what in many cases have been separate tendencies in media education: we could call them the Cultural, the Critical and the Creative. “Broadening experience of different kinds of media form and content” is significantly different from the kind of media education (derived from the academic

traditions of sociology and Cultural Studies, and strong in Anglophone countries) that focus on mainstream media forms, and closer to the traditions of film education in France, Eastern Europe and the Nordic countries. “Developing critical skills in analysing and assessing the media” is a strand that has been more fully developed in the Anglophone media education tradition. Approaches that focus on “developing creative skills...” have proliferated in recent years as the development of digital technologies has made it possible, but this rapid proliferation has tended to ignore the cultural and critical dimensions that make creative media work meaningful and satisfying to the learner. By asking signatories to agree to all three aspects of media education, the Charter is attempting to assert a more integrated, complete and effective pedagogic model – one that is in fact well-established in most other areas of arts education.

These three strands of cultural, critical and creative media education can be mapped on to the Charter’s list of seven key competences for media literacy:

*We believe that media literate people should be able to:*

- *Use media technologies effectively to access, store, retrieve and share content to meet their individual and community needs and interests;*
- *Gain access to, and make informed choices about, a wide range of media forms and content from different cultural and institutional sources;*
- *Understand how and why media content is produced;*
- *Analyse critically the techniques, languages and conventions used by the media, and the messages they convey;*
- *Use media creatively to express and communicate ideas, information and opinions;*
- *Identify, and avoid or challenge, media content and services that may be unsolicited, offensive or harmful;*
- *Make effective use of media in the exercise of their democratic rights and civic responsibilities.*

However, this would not be a simple or mechanical mapping exercise. The first competence (“be able to use media technologies effectively...”) is the general skill base for all the others: it is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself, and could be the main location for digital literacy. The next competence, “be able to gain access to, and make informed choices about, a wide range of media forms and content from different cultural and institutional sources” spells out the cultural entitlement statement more fully, making it clear that learners are not just expected to access more of the media they already know, but that they should be able and willing to broaden their tastes and interests. The next two competences, (“understand...” and “be able to analyse critically...”) spell out more fully the kinds of critical skill that learners should acquire. The last three competences indicate kinds of activity that media literate people should be able to undertake: using the media to express themselves; identifying – and perhaps challenging – media they don’t want or don’t approve of; and using the media as citizens in democracies. So in a sense, these seven competences are cumulative: they could approximate to the kind of learning progression that would create a fully literate and active European citizen.

At the same time it is of course essential that most of the wording of the Charter is as generic as possible, in order to include as many types of signatory as possible. The aim is to create an alliance of major stakeholders: not just universities and educational policy bodies, but also broadcasters, ISPs, software developers, cultural bodies, educational agencies, subject associations, and so on. The opening statement of the

Charter is thus very broad:

*We make a commitment to:*

- *Raise public understanding and awareness of media literacy, in relation to the media of communication, information and expression;*
- *Advocate the importance of media literacy in the development of educational, cultural, political, social and economic policy;*
- *Support the principle that every European citizen of any age should have opportunities, in both formal and informal education, to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to increase their enjoyment, understanding and exploration of the media.*

However, if the entire Charter were as generic as this, it would alienate those people and agencies who have made an explicit and sustained commitment to actions for the development of media literacy. The Charter gets round this by offering two optional clauses that cite more specific actions – selected because they were seen as the key actions for the development of an effective and sustainable movement for media education:

*We pledge to support or participate in research that will identify and develop:*

- *Better understanding of what it is to be media literate;*
- *Effective and sustainable pedagogy for media literacy;*
- *Transferable evaluative methods and assessment criteria for media literacy.*

*We agree to undertake, or enable others to undertake, the following:*

- *Build links with other signatories and contribute to the growth of a European network for media literacy;*
- *Identify and share evidence of the outcomes of media literacy initiatives which we undertake or are associated with;*
- *Work to make content legally available to be used for media education purposes;*
- *Publish an action plan on the Charter website at [www.euromedialiteracy.eu](http://www.euromedialiteracy.eu) by (date).*

#### **4. How does the Charter work?**

The Charter can be found on the website [www.euromedialiteracy.eu](http://www.euromedialiteracy.eu), which has been funded by small, one-off grants from the Hessische Landesanstalt für Privaten Rundfunk, the UK Film Council and the British Film Institute, which will support it for three years. The website is very modest: essentially it holds a searchable database of media education supporters and providers across – and in some cases outside – Europe. It can also function as a forum for debate and for sharing of news about media education developments in Europe. Visitors to the website can register simply as a user of the site, but many of those who register also sign the Charter to signal their support of its principles.

The Charter can be supported in three different ways. Those who simply want to state a public agreement with its principles can sign as supporters. Those who wish to signal their readiness to support media literacy initiatives can sign as sponsors. Those who offer provision for media literacy education can sign as providers. The website makes it possible for those who cannot commit to every action envisaged by the Charter to delete some of the specific items, while signing up to the overall principles. The Steering Group has thus tried to set up something that is as open and

inclusive as possible, with no preconceptions about how the Charter may be adopted or used in different contexts.

It is important to emphasise that the Charter cannot of itself deliver some kind of dramatic impact or significant new idea. Both the Charter itself and the website exist to be used according to need by a wide range of individuals and agencies in many different contexts. It is this usage that will determine in the longer term what the impact of the Charter may be. Broadly, there are two kinds of possible use. Those trying to make the case for media literacy and its importance in 21st century culture can invoke the Charter text and the fact of its growing number of signatories, as an endorsement of their arguments. This could happen at any level, from a single institution like a school, to advocacy for national policy. Secondly, the existence of the Charter may be able to provide a bridge or a basis for communication between media educators in different countries. For this to happen, it will be important that Charter signatories publish their forward plans on the website, and participate in the news and discussion forums that the site provides. The Charter is thus of little importance in itself. What is important is what it may enable: and this depends – as it always has – on the willingness of individuals and institutions to reach out across national boundaries.

The Charter's organisational support is currently very simple. So far, it has been achieved through a small, ad hoc Steering Group, comprised of people who were interested in the Charter concept and could persuade their organisations to commit a little of their time and travel budgets for group meetings. It so happens that these people come from eight European nations, as follows:

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Individual Members</b>
Grupo Comunicar, Spain	Dr Ignacio Aguaded
Faculty of Education and Humanities, University of Kassel, Germany	Prof Dr Ben Bachmair
British Film Institute (BFI), UK	Cary Bazalgette (to be replaced in 2007)
Centre de liaison de l'enseignement et les médias d'information (CLEMI), France	Evelyne Bevort
Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, Austria	Ministerialrätin Dr Susanne Krucsay
CICCOM, University of Algarve – ESE, Portugal	Dr Vítor Reia-Baptista
Conseil de l'éducation aux médias (CEM), Brussels, Belgium	Patrick Verniers
Swedish Film Institute	Klås Viklund
Center for Learning, Communication and Media, University of Karlstad, Sweden	Dr. Pär Lundgren

However, the group makes no claim to be representative of these nations, or to be open to demands that other nations „ought to be represented“. Weighing deference to national sensitivities against practical realities, the group decided in favour of practicality: the capacity of parliamentary style representative bodies to take action and reach consensus is limited. At the same time, all members of the Steering Group have formally agreed to „engage themselves for a first period of 3 years beginning on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2005 and finishing on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2008, and to the following actions:”.

- *to support the dissemination and spread awareness of the Charter across Europe;*
- *to administrate the charter and its further developments;*

- *to participate in a collective process aiming to develop a permanent and voluntary network of media educators in Europe;*
- *to ensure the proper management and sustainability of the Charter website at [www.euromedialiteracy.eu](http://www.euromedialiteracy.eu).*
- *each member of the Steering Group to ensure the promotion of the Charter within their own nation or region.*

The Steering Group has also agreed a simple constitution, clarifying its decision-making processes and management, as follows:

- *The internal decision-making processes of the steering group are based on the principle of consensus. If necessary, the steering group will take decisions on the basis of a simple majority of the members present or represented. Any modification of the charter principles or steering group membership agreement will need two-thirds of the members present or represented.*
- *The steering group will choose and decide internally any rules needed for the purpose stated in this agreement. The group will appoint internally a general secretary on a rotating basis starting with an initial 18-month period from September 2005 to February 2007, and any functions needed to pursue the aims stated in this agreement. The rules of representation of the steering group will also be decided internally. The first general secretary will be Cary Bazalgette of the British Film Institute, UK<sup>vii</sup>.*

## **5. Progress so far**

The Charter is a new and untried initiative in a field that has seen many failures and much confusion. It has also been set up at a time when the European Commission is poised to initiate new policy in respect of media literacy, as described in Section 1 (above). How this as yet unformed policy will relate to the Charter has yet to be seen. What can be seen, however, is the steady growth of registrations and signatories on the Charter website. Arriving at a steady rate of five or six a week there are already 174 signatories from a wide variety of institutions and nations, and nearly 700 registrations on the site.<sup>viii</sup> Arguably, this demonstrates an interest and need for Europe-wide information-sharing and dialogue.

But this need cannot be met by any central authority. The Steering Group can attempt to stimulate participation by signatories: in particular, getting them to post their action plans for media literacy on the site. It is noticeable that few have so far signed the Charter as providers, even though many signatories clearly are providers of resources and services for media literacy and are likely to have their own planned programmes for such provision. There seems to be a general reluctance to make these plans public; but if this reluctance is not overcome, then there is little basis for real debate about how media literacy can most effectively be fostered. The next year (2007-08) is therefore likely to be the crucial testing-period for the Charter concept. Can it become a genuine focus for consensus and constructive debate, or will it be just another short term project in a landscape littered with failed attempts? Only time will tell.

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<sup>i</sup> See [http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/media/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/media/index_en.htm)

<sup>ii</sup> See [http://ec.europa.eu/comm/avpolicy/media\\_literacy/act\\_prog/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/comm/avpolicy/media_literacy/act_prog/index_en.htm)

<sup>iii</sup> See [http://ec.europa.eu/comm/avpolicy/media\\_literacy/act\\_prog/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/comm/avpolicy/media_literacy/act_prog/index_en.htm).

<sup>iv</sup> See [http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/strategymedialit/ml\\_statement/annexb/?a=87101](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/strategymedialit/ml_statement/annexb/?a=87101).

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v See [http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/strategymedialit/ml\\_statement/](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/strategymedialit/ml_statement/).

vi See [www.euromedialiteracy.eu](http://www.euromedialiteracy.eu)

vii Following Cary Bazalgette's retirement from the BFI, Patrick Verniers is now General Secretary of the Steering Group.

viii Web stats as of February 2007

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Ofcom's duty to promote media literacy as expressed in the Communicaitons Act 2003. [http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/strategymedialit/ml\\_statement/annexb/?a=87101](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/strategymedialit/ml_statement/annexb/?a=87101)

Ofcom's policy and priorities relating to media literacy. [http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/strategymedialit/ml\\_statement/](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/strategymedialit/ml_statement/).