

## **"An European approach to media literacy"**

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*A democratic civilisation will save itself only if it makes the language of image into a stimulus for critical reflection, not an invitation to hypnosis*  
- Umberto Eco

*Movies invented the American dream. They can do the same for Europe*  
- Wim Wenders

Media literacy is the ability to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contents and to create communications in a variety of contexts. Media literacy relates to all media, including television and film, radio and recorded music, print media, the Internet and other digital communication technologies. In particular, the audiovisual production sector is an essential instrument of expression of our cultural values. It is a vector for European citizenship and culture and plays a primary role in building a European identity. The aim of media literacy is to increase people's awareness of the many forms of media messages encountered in their everyday lives. Media messages are the programmes, films, images, texts, sounds and websites that are carried by different forms of communication. Media literacy is a matter of inclusion and citizenship in today's information society. It is a fundamental skill not only for young people but also for adults and elderly people, parents, teachers and media professionals. Media literacy is today regarded as one of the key pre-requisites for an active and full citizenship in order to prevent and diminish risks of exclusion from community life.

As from 2006, responding to calls from the European Parliament and the media and ICT industries and building on the results of media literacy projects supported through the eLearning Initiative, the Commission started a reflection on media literacy in the frameworks of the European Audiovisual policy and the Lisbon strategy. Work started with the creation of a "Media Literacy Expert Group" with an advisory role for the European Commission. A public consultation was held at the end of 2006. The response was satisfactory both in quantitative terms and in terms of the quality and variety of the respondents. Respondents included media organisations and industry, formal and non-formal education institutions, content providers and producers, research and cultural institutions, regulators and citizens' and consumers' associations. The analysis showed differences in practices and levels of media literacy in Europe. It also emerged that criteria or standards for assessing media literacy are lacking and that good practices are not available for all aspects of media literacy

At the end of 2007, the Commission adopted a Communication on media literacy adding a further building block to European audiovisual policy and linking to the provisions of the Audiovisual Media Services directive (AVMS) - article 26 introduced a reporting obligation for the Commission on levels of media literacy in all Member States - and the MEDIA 2007 programme.

In 2009, the Commission came forward with a Recommendation on media literacy stressing the role of Member States (in cooperation with the authorities in charge of audiovisual and electronic communication regulation) and the Media Industry in improving the level of media literacy in society. It was also recommended that Member States open a debate on the inclusion of media literacy in the compulsory education curriculum.

In 2010, the main responsibility for the Commission's work on media literacy passed from DG INFSO to DG EAC. This change creates the opportunity for a reflection on a more comprehensive policy strategy on media literacy and culture and education for the next five years. In addition to that, within the global political context of the EUROPE 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and of the European Digital Agenda, the Commission stressed that the digital era should be about empowerment and emancipation of citizens. Lack of background knowledge, literacy or skills should not be a barrier to accessing the new opportunities offered by the media and the information society. In this context it is important to stress the distinction between media education – which is the process leading to media literacy – and the educational use of media in schools. The latter has of course elements that are relevant to media literacy education but can not be identified with it. In fact, media education and literacy is a precondition for successful use of media in education.

As the EU is currently falling behind in markets of media services, both in terms of what consumers can access, and in terms of business models that can create jobs in Europe, it is important to address digital and media literacy and competences as a priority. The Commission will have to table new policy options and offer more support to projects and good practices by building on previous work and better exploiting opportunities offered in the context of existing initiatives and programmes. Synergies with education programmes and policy have to be explored while keeping at same time the right cultural and audiovisual dimension in the global media literacy strategy.

In consideration of the reporting obligation introduced by the AVMS Directive, two different studies to develop, test and refine criteria for assessing media literacy levels have been launched. In 2011, the Commission will have to report on "media literacy levels" in all Member States.

In the next two year the European Commission will stimulate a debate on the role of media (and film) literacy in school. A new Expert Group composed by representatives of Ministries of Education of all Member States will meet and discuss – in respect of subsidiarity – the possible inclusion of media literacy in the compulsory education curriculum. In addition to that, a study aiming at mapping the current practices in film literacy in European school education will be launched in the current year.

Finally, the Commission will seek the best way to integrate a media and film literacy dimension into the next MEDIA Programme as from 2014. For 20 years the MEDIA Programme has worked on the "offer" end of the European cinema industry supporting the development of European audiovisual works, their distribution, their promotion. Now, it is time to focus more on the "demand" perspectives, addressing in particular younger viewer, in order to invest in building a long term audience for European films. Media and film literacy play a fundamental role in audience building initiatives. As Wim Wenders correctly pointed out before the EP last October, *an audience with even a vague knowledge of the history and the richness of European cinema would and will be able to choose differently, would and will make other decisions what it wants to feed on. Taste can be taught!* Media literate citizens and viewers would hold a higher degree of freedom and curiosity as they will have the instruments to choose what they want to see and will be able to better evaluate the implications of their choices. At the same time, children should have more opportunities to watch European films at a

very early age. Good film literacy initiatives do exist in Europe. However they have very limited scale and scope with high costs in relation to the number of children benefiting from them. The creation of a European network for film and media literacy could tackle some of these problems and develop synergies and improve cost-effectiveness.

*We need to equip our children with the skills to decode images so they'll still have the taste for their own ones.  
Only in this way we can continue in Europe to produce and project our own image and identity in the future.*

*- Wim Wenders (Public Hearing, EP, Brussels, 27 October 2010)*

