Media Literacy in Times of Crisis: First Results of the YO-MEDIA Project Handling the Voice of Educators, Teachers, and Journalists

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Abstract

The contemporary younger generation is facing a multitude of changes and adversities stemming from prevalent political, military, and pandemic crises that have garnered substantial attention in the media. In light of these circumstances, Media Literacy and critical thinking are paramount in navigating the influx of information and discerning veracity from misinformation. The rationale behind selecting this demographic as the focal point lies in the discernible trend wherein young individuals often peruse news content on their mobile devices with minimal contemplation, relying exclusively on social media platforms devoid of journalistic filtration. As delineated by various investigations, this juncture in their lives is pivotal to cultivating critical thinking skills. Such skills empower the youth to engage in autonomous thought processes, make informed decisions, and assess the repercussions of their actions. The contribution presents the outcomes of the

interviews conducted in Italy, Spain, and Portugal within the project YO-MEDIA on Media Literacy in times of crisis, addressing the attention of educators, teachers, stakeholders, and journalists.

Keywords: Media literacy, Information literacy, crisis, adolescents, interviews

Introduction

Since February 2020, in the starting phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has identified the contemporary issue of "infodemic", an excess of information, is not always accurate, making it challenging to navigate due to the difficulty in identifying reliable sources (Cavalcante et al., 2022). Since that year, an increasing number of researchers have focused on the ability to identify false news (Yankoski et al., 2020), emphasizing the role of misinformation in creating a hostile climate (Greene & Murphy, 2021), fueling conspiracy theories (Santerini, 2023), within a framework of "new scenarios for old grievances" (Pasta, 2021a).

The impact of various forms of misinformation is exacerbated by post-truth, a discursive regime characterized by the persuasive power of emotions and initial personal beliefs rather than facts, and its consequences on democratic discourse (McIntyre, 2019; Nicita, 2021). Authors such as Han discuss "infocracy" and "informational capitalism," which relegates the youth to "zombies of consumption and communication" (Han, 2022).

Media Literacy and critical thinking are crucial to handling information and false content, especially considering young people. Youngsters often scroll through news content on their mobile devices without giving too much thought, consuming it exclusively through social media without a journalistic filter (Herdzina & Lauricella, 2020; Jolley et al., 2021). A crucial period for critical thinking, which allows youngsters to develop the ability to think for themselves, make decisions, and evaluate consequences.

In the current media landscape, video games play a relevant role in youngsters' media choices: according to the media consumption patterns of the younger generation, video games emerge as a potential resource in response to the challenges posed by Information and Media Literacy during times of crisis, particularly the pandemic, which has directly impacted the organization of time, relationships, and education. Additionally, the military crisis, such as the conflict in Ukraine and the new crisis in the Middle East that commenced in October 2023, has become a subject of discourse marked by simplification, polarization, and information overload (Raviolo & Pasta, 2022; Quattrociocchi & Vicini, 2023).

After the pandemic, video games have been considered more relevant in young people's media repertoires (the combination of different media practices and habits, both analogic and digital), not simply for the average time spent online or in front of the screen, but also in terms of socialization.

On one hand, video games have been linked to addictive behaviors. During social and physical isolation, individuals have shifted their routines to confined environments, utilizing television, the Internet, social media, and video games as primary outlets for time investment and day-to-day living. This shift has resulted in an increase in the duration of time spent engaging in video games. On the other hand, the literature emphasizes the positive impact of video games during times of constraint, particularly in the context of global "stay at home" campaigns. In these situations, video games emerged as a crucial means of managing stressful circumstances and maintaining personal connections, fostering a sense of togetherness despite physical separation. Various studies have investigated the favorable effects of video games and virtual social environments on mental well-being during the pandemic, suggesting their capacity to address fundamental psychological needs (Paul et al., 2022; Johannes et al., 2021; Yee et al., 2022).

As highlighted in Willy C. Kriz's editorial, the World Health Organization (WHO) has undergone a shift in its stance towards online gaming. Initially cautioning against its perceived dangers and addictive nature, the WHO's perspective evolved in 2020 to acknowledge the positive impact of gaming on socialization and stress coping. In a collaborative effort, the global games industry endorsed key messages from the WHO, launching the #PlayApartTogether initiative. This initiative, supported by more than 50 leaders in the game and interactive entertainment industry, encourages users to adhere to WHO health guidelines, thus contributing to awareness and efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (Kriz, 2020).

Alternative perspectives regard video games as a form of psychological solace in high-stress situations, fulfilling essential psychological needs (Canales, 2020). To elaborate further, video games are associated with the potential for individuals to detach «from reality in a condition where the sense of time and space perceived by people has been altered by the COVID-19 pandemic, reshaping both their intimate and wider social interactions and eliciting a wide spectrum of disturbing emotions. Players escaped from this unsatisfying reality into video game worlds, searching for new normality that could compensate for the unpredictability and dangerousness of the pandemic life, as well as seeking uncertainty in the game environments to balance the flatness of the lockdown everydayness» (Boldi et al., 2022, p.1).

Moreover, video games serve as a conducive platform for imparting behaviors aimed at preventing the spread of the virus and safeguarding individuals. For instance, mobile gaming apps have been implied as tools «to learn and create awareness among children about COVID-19. Using this app, they obtain scores/points by grabbing the right objects from their superhero-shaped player, which are fun, attractive, and psychologically helpful during this pandemic» (Satu et al., 2021, p. 321).

Considering these premises, YO-MEDIA (Youngsters' Media Literacy in Times of Crisis) is working on this topic with the design and development of a hybrid game on misinformation, disinformation, and Information Literacy.

YO-MEDIA (https://yomedia.a-mcc.eu/) is a three-year forward-looking initiative funded by the European Media and Information Fund established by the European University Institute and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (project n. 269094), with a strong emphasis on enhancing media literacy among young individuals, particularly during times of crisis (health emergencies, war crises, and natural catastrophes). Three phases have been planned: map the use of media design and information literacy in times of crisis (Carenzio, Ferrari & Pasta, in press); develop and validate a hybrid game and the MOOC for media awareness (Contreras-Espinosa & Eguia-Gomez, 2023); assess the feasibility of the strategies adopted. The consortium is composed of the Associação Portuguesa de Imprensa, the Media Competence Center di Aveiro, the Universidade de Aveiro, of the Catholic University of Milan, and the Universitat de Vic - Central de Catalunya.

Method

In this framework, the contribution presents the results of the semi-structured interviews with 29 educators, teachers/professors, and journalists with backgrounds in media studies, and games, across the three countries involved in YO-MEDIA. The following research questions guided the interviews:

Q1- What is the role of Media Literacy in times of crisis, compared to the past?

Q2 - What competencies are needed to face information?

Q3 - What video games can add, focusing on their structure, to foster Media Literacy in young people?

The selection of interviewees encompassed a wide array of experiences in teaching, with a predominant focus on young individuals ranging from 12 to 20 years old, including the perspective of educators and professionals with diverse backgrounds, cultivating expertise in producing various forms of audiovisual media, games, blogs, videos, animations, graphics, podcasts. The diversity of the interviewees sought to gather multifaceted perspectives on Media Literacy among youth, with extensive experience with young people or participating in ML projects: secondary and higher education teachers, educators, vice presidents of regional associations, parents' associations, school directors, librarians, town hall officials, journalists, and a director of a newspaper. Some interviewees have been pioneers in introducing digital media as a pertinent topic for young people within their communities and educational environments.

The Spanish team conducted 10 interviews, including six teachers involved in media literacy in secondary schools, three journalists involved in research projects related to media literacy and digital issues, and an educator with expertise in diverse educational contexts.

In Portugal, nine in-depth interviews were conducted, featuring four teachers actively engaged in Media Literacy initiatives, three informal educators and stakeholders focusing on youth education, and two media professionals.

The Italian team conducted 10 interviews, involving four educators from various youth associations and organizations, three teachers experienced in implementing Media Literacy projects, and three journalists from different news organizations specialized in video games, digital, and e-sports content.

Table 1: Sample by role and Country with codes

Country		Teachers (T)	Educators/ Stakeholders (E)	Journalists (J)	Total
Spain (S)		6	1	3	10
Portugal (P)		4	3	2	9
Italy (I)		4	3	3	10
Total		14	7	8	29

All interviewees provided informed consent, acknowledging the research objectives, process, risks, and benefits Each interview lasted approximately 100 minutes and was video recorded and transcribed verbatim. During May, June, and July 2023 interviews were conducted using the Zoom video-conferencing application. For the analysis of the interviews, we used a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Starting from the transcriptions, we defined the emerging patterns in data.

Findings

The Relevance of Media Literacy: Promoting Critical Thinking

Analysing the main topics emerging from the interviews Media Literacy appears crucial in today's communication environment, signed by fast processes and low rates of attention:

> «We live in a time of over-information that has nothing to do with traditional media because information reaches us through social media and many other channels that cannot be considered informative media. That is, a hyper-informed, hyper-communicated society, but poorly managed» (J1S).

> «Everybody has access to content and everybody can generate it. But you cannot know where that content comes from and whether it is reliable. Some people know it and they take advantage of it. Content creation is designed to capture your attention from the first line, the first image. It is supposed to catch your eye because it is attractive, but they don't look at the content in-depth" (referring to the students in general)» (T5S).

The main feature of communication today affects the nature of critical thinking, demonstrating a strong awareness of theoretical issues and content perspectives among all the interviewees (not simply from the journalists' side):

> «The access to content production has been democratized to such an extent that we also have to be very responsible when producing this content. Therefore, if there is no literacy, if there is no guidance, if there is no critical perspective [...] it can have negative consequences» (E1S).

> «We start feeding discourses that are more populist, more intolerant, or discourses that don't respect others, and sometimes, we are also directed more towards the "bubble", and we don't have the notion that we are in it» (T3P).

Within the scope of Media Literacy, critical thinking (Jenkins, 2006; Hobbs,2021) is a key element for all the interviewees, apart from the specific profession, country, and profile, and it seems even more relevant to deal with information during a crisis when political, military, and pandemic emergencies have gained prominence in the media:

> «Certainly, in a crisis, the ability to read the world through information becomes a central issue. Knowing where to find information is crucial, especially when there is an abundance of it. The theme of selection comes into play, and selecting becomes problematic. Which sources can I trust? Have I verified them? Are they from professionals? This is often a concern for young people and adults» (E3I).

In particular, teachers approach Media Literacy from a different perspective, including both the role of users (as readers) and the role of producers (as creators):

> «Media Literacy is the ability to access the media, to critically analyze, to reflexively produce, to disseminate, to participate, to know how to use the media to work, to have fun, to

communicate and to learn» (T1P).

«Media Literacy is the ability to create and share media content in various formats, including text, images, audio, video, or games» (T5S).

Several interviewees also mentioned that moments of crisis promote situations that can affect mental health, underlining the role of information and the need to prevent information overload:

«It is important that they also create mechanisms and manage to defend themselves from fake news, which is very stressful, and even true news can be very stressful. They must create those mechanisms, manage and understand when it's time to switch off so it doesn't affect their mental health» (J2P).

Facing Information: The Impact of Social Media

One of the focal points that several teachers emphasize, referring to social media, is the tendency to ground decisions on the fast and intuitive system, namely the "system 1" in Kahneman's work (2011), contrasting with the slow and rational "system 2". This organization of the heuristics of decision-making allows us to perform complex operations easily and "sift through" a large amount of data, but it can also be a source of systematic errors (biases) when intuition is influenced by stereotypes, leading users toward content that confirms their initial beliefs. Reflection is often too lazy to correct these biases: everyone is much more impulsive (and much less reflective) than one might think, offline and online. However, in the online environment, our mind is even more inclined to resort to system 1:

«Nowadays, media and digital technology allow young people to react and share information instantly and impulsively, almost without thinking, without really understanding what is happening» (T3P).

«Social media platforms are now replacing search engines for information. So, it's not just about checking informative websites; it's also about considering which accounts on my social media provide information, and which ones I choose to follow more meaningfully. Another thing that comes to mind is trying not to follow only those that confirm my views. In other words, there's a risk of finding 3-4 accounts that provide information, but they do so in a biased direction» (E3I).

Teachers, educators, and journalists recognize the impact of social media in the digital repertoires of young people, as theoretical background affirms (Herdzina & Lauricella, 2020; Jolley et al., 2021), revealing a comprehensive understanding of the realm of adolescents and the practices driven by increasingly accessible and miniaturized mobile devices.

Interviews also show an increased awareness of how the interactivity facilitated by the social web necessitates acquiring novel competencies among communication and education professionals to engage with the generation of "prosumers":

«The new generations have their mobile phones as their main reference point, always available, allowing them to continuously verify all information in real-time» (J3I).

Video games in the Framework of Media Literacy

Interviewees converge on defining video games in education and Media Literacy as a tool for critical thinking in a collaborative learning environment, where identity, simulation, and peers interact, thanks to mistakes as a lever for improving competencies (Gee, 2003). From this perspective, video games can support understanding and critical thinking:

> «Using games as a starting point, it is possible to explore the challenges related to media literacy more tangibly and engagingly, encouraging critical reflection and enabling individuals to acquire skills in navigating the digital world consciously» (E2I).

The most recurrent comments refer to a collaborative learning scenario, rather than a competitive one:

> «Collaborative games are perfect for this (education) scenario, while competitive games may be less useful. In my experience, using games with a sandbox characteristic is ideal – a metaphorical sandbox where players can shape the game as they wish» (E2I).

> «The question of playing presupposes interacting, stimulating, challenging with another player, against the machine» (T4P).

> «They do not learn because, in the end, someone has to measure what they have done or not done, but they are surrounded by a consistent environment where they exercise their agency, acquiring competencies» (T2I).

> «A mechanism of equality among the players. In this way, there isn't the most skilled student who listens more and can repeat or assimilate information from the teacher more effectively» (E1I).

Besides, especially in the interviews conducted in Italy, mistakes turn into a great opportunity:

> «In a protected environment, if a mistake is made, one can start again from the beginning, thus promoting reflection on the cause and effect of actions» (T2I).

From a Media Literacy standpoint, this perspective is intriguing as it reinterprets a problematic aspect as an opportunity, especially from the school's point of view, that is to slow down and encourage participation:

> «A challenge that teachers have today is to be able to capture students' attention and attune them to the content and the learning process. I say that is a big challenge» (T4P).

> «In a board game, maybe you can explore that dimension of thinking that is not so fast-paced. [...] A research game that implied reading and interpretation to help decision-making. In a logic of a reaction that is not a need for a quick decision, that implies "pondering, implies a collection of information or thoughtful interpretation and then decision making» (T4P).

Final Remarks: Literacies and Participation to Face a Crisis

The combined insights from the interviews offer a multi-dimensional perspective on the critical aspects of Media Literacy development, particularly within the context of crises, and provide valuable contributions to the ongoing efforts of the YO-MEDIA project.

Considering the first section of the interview, devoted to Media Literacy, we focused on three crucial nodes highlighting the importance and skills of Media Literacy in times of crisis (Q1 and Q2):

- Critical thinking to question everyday life;

- The role of information/disinformation and the democratization of content and knowledge;

- The role of social media and how they affect critical thinking, raising the need for new competencies.

Moving to the second section on video games (Q3), five core elements emerged as patterns, defining video games as an intriguing tool for:

- Working actively and critically;

- Building strategies to think and reflect;

- Collaborating;

- Experimenting;

- Engaging young people.

These core elements are framed in a dynamic perspective, overcoming any approach based on certification to media competencies.

Starting from the research questions, the impact of Media Literacy in times of crisis, specifically compared to the past (Q1), gains even more importance: fake news, algorithms, and Artificial Intelligence - when affecting health and crisis communication - are not simply disturbing, they can profoundly change decision-making.

The proliferation of digital data and information entails important aspects to be considered: information overload abundance (Weinberger, 2012; Ferrari & Pasta, 2023); fragmentariness and decontextualization, leading to "cognitive chaos" (Zuboff, 2019); mutability, provisionality of sources, and unpredictability; qualitative heterogeneity (Ranieri, 2022). From this perspective, a task for Media Literacy today is to handle information overload in times of crisis.

Regarding competencies required in the new scenario (Q2), as minors are required to have advanced Media Literacy skills, experts observe how periods of crisis expose them to the risk of information distortion (Pasta, 2022; Ranieri, 2016). Above all, the increasing number of information and the apathy left by the pandemic risk making students less interested in what is

going on in the world, paying less attention to data sources and reliability, especially with Artificial Intelligence (AI). This aspect was notably highlighted in interviews conducted in Italy, where the discourse surrounding AI occupies a central position within educational discourse and societal engagement. This discussion prompts inquiries and uncertainties primarily confined to the instrumental aspect of AI within a paradigm that could be characterized as functionalist (Carenzio, 2024). Some scholars are pointing out the need to expand Media Literacy, using the concept of Artificial Intelligence Literacy (Cuomo, Ranieri & Biagini, 2024). Reading and decoding information is no longer sufficient. It now requires a range of skills that enable individuals to produce and share information on social media and within the emerging Algorithmic Society (Schuilenburg & Peeters, 2021), where decision-making processes are carried out by both humans and artificial agents. Education professionals face significant challenges due to the prevalence of post-truth and misinformation (Pasta, 2018; 2021b; Ferrari & Pasta, 2023; Panciroli & Rivoltella, 2022).

Moving to the last research question, video games are an engaging tool to promote active audience participation (Q3). This aspect is crucial when considering the development of digital skills and Media Literacy in social environments: it is within the space of affinity (Gee, 2003) that information is found, created, shared, and given meaning. Digital citizenship should be formulated in a social and participative framework where players mobilize skills related to Media Literacy as suggested in the theoretical framework on video games (Beutelspacher & Henkel, 2022).

Moreover, video games offer a world in which it is possible to simulate solutions to real-life problems, reducing the impact of consequences and risk (considering biases in responses) and developing the agency of individuals (McGonigal, 2023) in environments protected by a "playful frame". With video games, players can anticipate potential consequences, for instance in understanding the implications of disseminating false information (or intentionally altered data), or in analyzing a social media post reflecting on the value of information use.

The subject of simulation and practice is thoroughly examined in the literature, representing a functional mechanism for skill consolidation in an environment where errors are permissible and contribute to real-world learning. The role of mistakes, specifically, has been posed in the interviews, particularly with teachers for a well-known reason connected to assessment: addressing Media Literacy interventions, it is crucial to provoke questions and encourage young people to draw their conclusions, as Masterman (1985) suggested at the very beginning of the adventure of Media Literacy.

A clear methodological focus is evident among teachers and educators, who are involved in the framework of peer education: adults should not provide answers but create an environment for young people to play, experiment, make mistakes, and think about processes, even after (or thanks to) several attempts. Further research would be relevant to nourish good practices - based on Peer and Media Education (Carenzio, Ferrari, De Cani, Lo Jacono, Rivoltella, 2021) among journalists and stakeholders. Journalists especially focused on the conceptual framework of information, and teachers and educators mainly moved to the discussion of goal-oriented proposals connected to methodological scenarios, practical needs (especially for their training), and problems (students' attention, young people's participation). Interviewees, on the contrary, provided examples of video games that can foster the main aims connected to Media Literacy.

The interviews also suggest the value of intergenerational contamination between adults and young people and the relevance of mixing different areas of competence (and professional input): video games engage various competencies that are inherently transdisciplinary and

interdisciplinary. At the moment, a further analysis of the interviews is in progress, to underline other eventual peculiarities based on geographical location, considering the differences already marked within the professional backgrounds of the interviewees.

There is an emerging imperative to establish forums where Media Literacy can interface with the market, specifically engaging game developers, to create products that harmonize the perspectives of education and industry stakeholders. Teachers, educators, media professionals, game developers, and institutions should be on the same page to support Media Literacy in times of crisis and complexity.

Acknowledgments

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