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Media Literacy in Brazil: Experiences and Models in Non-formal Education

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Abstract

This article analyses the status of media literacy in Brazil from the perspective of non-formal education. It quantifies the situation through a sample of projects (N=240) and organizations (N=107) that develop media literacy activities according to the internationally recognized three dimensions of media education (access/use, critical understanding, and media content media production). These projects are aimed at different communities of citizens according to various levels of segmentation (age, location, social status, social groups, and professional fields). The analysis shows the preponderance of activities geared to the production of audiovisual content (65.4%) and to expanding the rights and communicative capabilities of certain communities, generally excluded from the traditional mass media (45.8%). Moreover, the majority of institutions have projects with a medium and high potential of empowerment (77.6%). Based on the literature review and the analysis conducted, the research presents a model that can be used for studying media education projects in the field of non-formal education. Thus, this article offers an initial look at non-formal media literacy in a country that, due to its size and large social differences, should take advantage of the complementarities that non-formal education provides to formal education, and its curriculum, regarding the development of media education and empowerment of citizens.

Keywords

Media literacy, participatory communication, citizenship, media education, non-formal education, social inclusion, civil society.

1. Introduction

Concern regarding the need of establishing public policies related to media education is unanimous around the world. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) carried out several projects over the last decade, like “Media Education. A Kit for Teachers, Students, Parents and Professionals” (Frau-Meigs, 2006) and “Media and Information Literacy. Curriculum for Teachers” (Wilson, Grizzle, Tuazon, Akyempong, & Cheung, 2011). It is also important to emphasize the broad global mapping performed by UNESCO a few years ago, which analysed policies, views, programs, and goals regarding media literacy at a global level (Frau-Meigs & Torrent, 2009). Today, there are several countries, mainly in the Northern hemisphere, which not only include disciplines



linked to media education in their mandatory curriculums, but also implement agencies and public councils to assist with this issue¹.

In Latin America, however, initiatives regarding media literacy have taken another direction, more frequently being connected to non-formal education, popular education, and civil society, as has been pointed out by several specialists (Fantin, 2011; Girardello & Orofino, 2012; Soares, 2014). After they began in the sixties, with critical readings of cinema, they turned to the critical reading of media, during the military dictatorship, in 1970-1980, and were complemented by people movements for alternative communication and Christian or Catholic movements (Aguaded, 1995; Fantin, 2011). When analysing Brazil from a concrete perspective, isolated initiatives carried out in the scope of formal education should be mentioned: 1) since 2004 a law from the city of São Paulo included activities linked to media education in schools; 2) as to the Brazilian Education Department, the programs “Mais Educação” (More Education) and “Mídias na Escola” (Media at School) work with media education². In 2015, this Department has put into public debate the minimum bases of the curriculum for basic education in which, according to an analysis by Soares (2015), there are several curricular components related to media education, although how they would be included in school activities is not explained.

In non-formal education, however, the situation is totally different. Since the nineties, these projects for media education have been growing in Brazil, whether focusing on training critical reading or designing alternative contents to traditional media. It is important to emphasize the use of a concept of education put forward by authors such as Paulo Freire and Mario Kaplún, in which communication and education are not only seen as intimately connected, but also as having a liberating purpose.

Thus, this research has the goal of characterizing non-formal media literacy projects developed in Brazil by the civil society: non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public interest civil society organisations (PICSO), and foundations, among others. The research covers cultural empowerment (Kellner & Share, 2005), media citizenship and autonomy (Gozálvez & Aguaded, 2012), from a perspective in which citizens would be active subjects in processes of communication so as to exercise the rights expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (O’Neill & Barnes, 2008).

The strong and historical connection between media education and empowerment is clear since the “Grunwald Declaration on Media Education” (UNESCO, 1982), also appearing in the “New Directions in Media Education” of Toulouse, which explicitly connects both areas (Thoman, 1990). Indeed, it is difficult to think of media education “unless it has a civic purpose, that is, it must be endowed with an ethical, social and democratic base that empowers citizens in their dealings with the media” (Gozálvez & Contreras-Pulido, 2014: 130).

The analysis also establishes links between the many types of complementarities: i) media education and media literacy (Buckingham, 2003); ii) main dimensions of media literacy proposed by Buckingham (2005) and Ofcom³: access and use, critical comprehension, and production of communicational contents; iii) production of media contents which are socially relevant and filled with critical comprehension about the media; iv) community, democratic, and participatory communication developed by the civil society and the NGOs (Peruzzo, 2008, 2009); and v) new information and communications technologies (ICT) and their importance in poor areas (González, 2007).

This article proposes the following descriptive research question: “Which are the most important dimensions associated to non-formal media education in Brazil?” The following work hypotheses are considered, related to media literacy projects developed by NGOs in Brazil:

- H1: The projects mainly focus on production of contents.
- H2: When the initiatives focus on ICT, they are usually not linked to other communicational aspects.
- H3: The projects are concerned with the empowerment of citizens and the roles of the actors involved in communication processes.
- H4: The initiatives are connected to community communication, with a tendency of offering permanent communication media as a result.



2. Material and methods

Considering the research goals, the first task (January-May, 2015) was to identify media education projects carried out in Brazil by civil non-profit organisations and outside the school environment. After a direct research through the records of several Brazilian congresses about communication, education, and citizenship, parameters were established regarding aspects such as training, education and communication, media, and ICT. Thus, all initiatives that focused exclusively on the use and maintenance of computers were excluded. 129 NGOs and civil institutions that worked with media education were found, and were then catalogued in a database that identified their characteristics by researching their websites and social networks. The location, starting date, goals, and the role played by communication and education were observed, as well as if the entity focused exclusively on media education activities.

Then came the second level of analysis (June-October, 2015), after the classification of 302 media literacy projects according to categories established from a bibliographic review on the subject:

- Dimensions: access/use, critical comprehension, and content production.
- Actors: receivers, professionals, associates, and sponsors.
- Communication media: print (newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and others); audiovisual (cinema, video, TV, radio/audio, photography, and others); ICT (Internet, web design, apps, and others); digital media (websites, blogs, social networks, mobile media, and others); monitoring and follow-up of communication media (monitoring of themes related to the NGOs, production of alternative guidelines and news, training of journalists, and others).
- Digital technologies: level of importance of the ICT and emphasis on digital inclusion.
- Community communication: as a permanent vehicle and actors involved.
- Empowering: explicitly connected to media education, defense of rights, and role of citizens.

The third level of analysis was quantitative, which contrasted the quantitative information that was found and was performed following these procedures: i) codification of goals according to the keywords of the projects; and ii) elimination of 22 organisations that had little to do with the research or were not working with media education anymore.

Finally, questionnaires (and reminders) were sent (October-December, 2015) to the entities requesting that they confirm their descriptive data and asking for their opinion regarding certain aspects of the research such as the importance of digital inclusion or about empowerment of citizens. This information was obtained with multi-answer, open questions. 22 organisations answered within the delimited period. After cross checking the information following to the established parameters, 240 carried out by 107 organisations were identified and validated.

3. Results

3.1. Basic characteristics

The 107 non-governmental organisations studied here are spread throughout the more than 8.5 million square kilometers that compose Brazil, a Latin American country with more than 200 million inhabitants. Materially, 63 (58.9%) are entities from the Southeast region, the most developed one, while 27 (25.2%) are from the Northeast, the poorest region. The others are spread across different states. As to their time of activity, a small number began their activities before 1990 (15.0%); most of them began in the nineties (31.8%) and in the 21st century (53.2%).

Clearly, there are two great blocks of media education activities developed by NGOs in Brazil. On the one hand, 43 organisations (40.2% of the total) have communication as their main goal and their objectives are to give voice to recipients and to democratise the use of communication. They work with a public that is usually excluded not only from traditional media, but also from communicational processes of content production (homeless people, socially excluded people, inhabitants from poor



communities or slums, etc.). On the other hand, 64 organisations (59.8%) are focused on the dissemination of social issues and the claim of rights (human, childhood, women's, or black people's rights), promoting these themes which are invisible in the media not only through propositions for alternative communication, but also with the training of journalists and the production of alternative guidelines for the media.

Thus, 22 projects (9.2%) have journalists and communication professionals as their recipients, focusing on educating them on the themes mentioned above, or observing the media regarding these issues. Half the projects (120) focus on childhood and youth, an aspect that must be emphasized, while only 4 projects focus on the elderly. It is also important to mention that 41 projects (17.1%) are connected to formal education, since they focus on teachers and students, mainly from public schools. As to the other actors, there is the support of certain foundations associated to big companies (for example, to the telecommunication company "Oi"; to the construction company "Camargo Correa"; to the state energy company "Petrobras"; or to the bank "Itaú"). There is also collaboration between NGOs and public institutions, resulting in a network of difficult connections that cannot be described in a simple manner.

3.2. Dimensions of media literacy

The main dimension observed in the 240 projects analysed here is content production: there are 157 workshops and courses (65.4%) inside this dimension, mixed or not with the other ones. We observed 120 initiatives related to critical comprehension, and 91 to the access and use of communication media, also combining more than one dimension. In this sense, it should also be mentioned that 70 projects are connected to critical comprehension and production content, among which 22 also focus on access and use of communication media. The predominance of content production can also be observed if we consider there are 71 projects focusing exclusively on production, while 33 initiatives focus solely on access and use, and 30 on critical comprehension. This confirms Hypothesis 1 proposed by this study.

It is important to emphasize that simple content production does not always result in empowerment for citizens, since it is possible for an activity to simply reproduce something that already exists in the media. Thus, for the development of communicational abilities it is essential that they be connected to critical comprehension.

As to the means or processes of communication emphasized by the 240 activities analysed here, most of them (99) are connected to audiovisual media (TV, video, radio, audio, and photography), while 41 emphasize digital media (web pages, blogs, social networks, etc.) and 37 use printed media. It should also be noted that 22 initiatives do not work with any real communication media, since they are more concerned with communicational processes and encouraging critical thinking.

From all the projects, only 61 talk about ICT explicitly (29 as the main focus and 32 by complementing them with other communication media). It is necessary to clarify, however, that in most initiatives the ICT are seen as auxiliary, since information and communications technologies are obviously used for the production and publishing of contents. As to the connections between this aspect and the dimensions associated to media literacy, the data show that the projects that use the ICT usually work with access and use: 40 focus on this dimension (17 exclusively, and the rest mixing it with other dimensions). This confirms the Hypothesis 2 of this study.

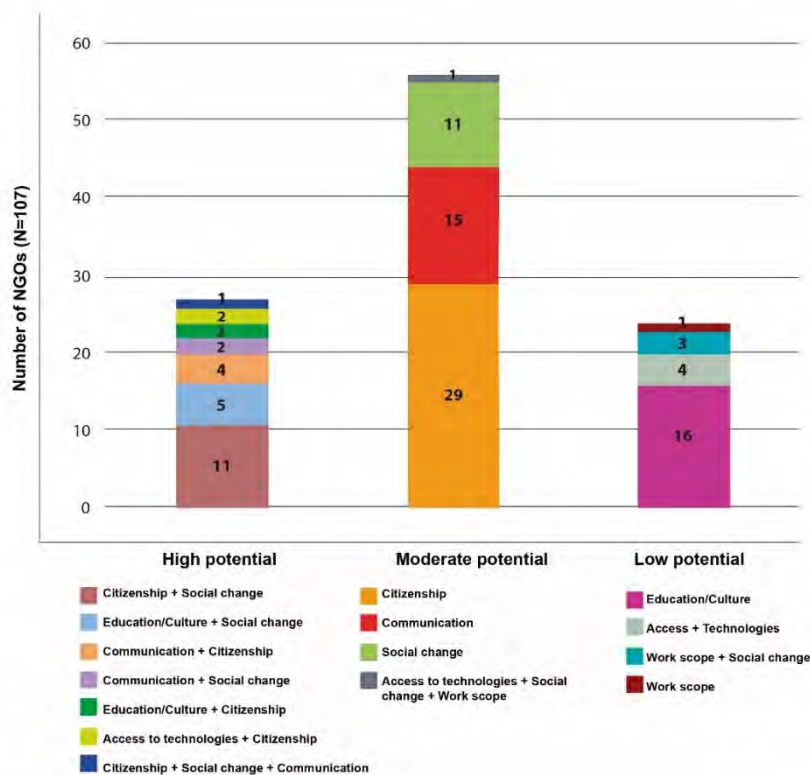
As to the 99 initiatives that focus on audiovisual media, 70 consider activities of production of contents and messages. Besides that, 46 of them target the youth, which shows that most of the initiatives analysed here combine audiovisual media, content production, and youth participation. However, it is interesting to note that cinema is kept alive in many of the initiatives: 33 of the 240 projects emphasize this medium by bringing it to poor communities and neighborhoods through cineclubs and public movie sessions.

In order to analyse the factors related to the empowerment of citizens, the proposals of the 107 NGOs were catalogued and classified into four great groups according to their objectives: i) to



democratise access to any of these aspects: communication, education, culture, and technologies; ii) to work for social change, changes in society, and social inclusion; iii) to help with the recipients' social-economic insertion; and iv) to guarantee and fight for human rights, citizenship, and the rights of peoples in situations of risk of social exclusion.

Even though all the objectives are related to some type of citizen empowerment, it is the proposal (or combination of proposals) performed by the NGO that dictates if its media education activities are more or less effective in the task of empowering citizens as to their active part in communication. Thus, three great tendencies can be traced about the potential of the NGOs according to different, but complementary, goals. Graph 1 shows that 27 (25.2%) of the NGOs combine goals belonging to more than one group and work with objectives that are very meaningful for the empowerment of citizens through media education.



Graph 1. Potential for empowering citizens related to the objectives for media education in Brazilian NGOs.

According to the analysis, 56 organisations (52.4%) focus solely on some goals which, even though they are important for exercising citizenship, do not seem to guarantee empowerment through media literacy, since they focus on goals in an exclusive manner, not a combined one. These institutions would have a moderate level of empowerment potential. Finally, the 24 remaining NGOs (22.4%) could be classified as institutions with a low level of empowerment through media education, because they work with more scattered objectives. It is necessary to emphasize, however, that this scenario of empowerment through media education is an observed tendency, and it would be necessary to study each case in particular to confirm it definitely. Still, it should be emphasized that practically half the projects) –materially, 110 (45.8%)– have some type of connection with social groups at risk of social exclusion. This confirms the Hypothesis 3 of this study.

Figure 1 shows the synthetic and uniform distribution (Bastian, Heymann, & Jacomy, 2009) of the



main interrelations between the non-formal media education projects analyzed in this project: the dimensions of media literacy, the recipients, and the different media used. The proximity between production activities aimed at young people and the connection between critical comprehension and audiovisual are clearly observable, as is the relationship between the dimension of access and use and the media associated with ICT. On the other hand, it was detected that digital media has not reached the impact one would imagine.

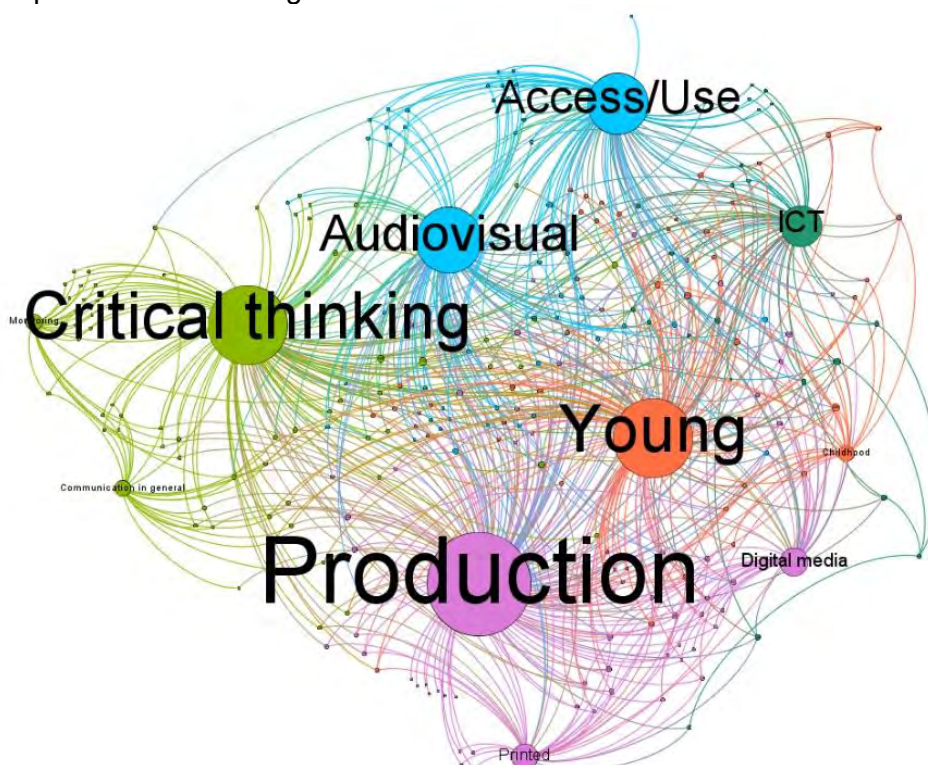


Figure 1. Network of interrelations and proximity between the main dimensions of media literacy, recipients and communication media in non-formal media education activities in Brazil.

If we examine the projects in detail, one important aspect that should be considered is their connection to permanent community communication vehicles. The current scenario shows that this scope is still under developed, indicating a tendency correspondent to Hypothesis 4. From the 240 media education projects present in this study, only 52 (21.7%) are associated to the production of some type of community communication somewhat permanently: 15 are initiatives that produce television programs (aired on university or community channels) or videos; 14 are printed media (newspapers, magazines, and newsletters); 12 are radiophonic media; and 11 are online or digital platforms (blogs, web pages, etc.). The audiovisual media are predominant, but it is surprising that digital platforms and media are still used so little, which means that technologies are much more used as production tools than as channels to air contents.

4. Discussion and conclusions

4.1. Situation

Faced with the high number of media literacy projects that make up the sample, which in future studies has to be extended to other Latin American countries, it can be said that media education carried out by the Brazilian civil society is mainly focused on the content production and that it has gained increasing importance over the last decades. In general terms, this study confirmed that the



projects developed in non-formal educational environments contribute to the development of the rights and freedoms of citizens with regard to access to information, freedom of expression, and the right to education, as established by UNESCO (2013).

Most of the cases studied here give voice to certain communities of people who are usually excluded from traditional mass media. This is particularly important when we consider the sociocultural context of Latin America, where people have almost always been unable to speak, and had to settle for a culture of silence (Freire, 1967, 1979). It is no coincidence, therefore, that the production of contents and messages be the dimensions that was more emphasized by the media literacy projects analysed in this study.

The emphasis on audiovisual indicated by the data is consistent with the context of contemporary society, in which it is possible to notice a fascination with audiovisual language, which creates an almost hypnotic power (Martin-Barbero, 2003: 47). Image ultimately prevails over other types of speech because it is “the main substrate of the rhetoric of the media of mass communication” (Rabadan, 2015: 33). Interestingly, cinema can still be found in several projects studied here. We cannot forget that film literacy is a deep-rooted tradition in many countries, mainly in Europe, and identified as vital by experts of contemporary media education, since “mastery of the language of the moving image becomes more, not less, important in an era of widespread access to digital technologies” (Reia-Baptista, Burn, Reid, & Cannon, 2014: 356).

The instrumental relationship of many NGOs with communication, pointed out by the research, confirms the aspects mentioned by Kaplún, who stated that “for the base movement, communication is not an end in itself, but a necessary tool for the organisation’s service and for popular education” (1983: 41).

The empowerment of citizens proposed by the projects analysed in this study exemplifies the idea that Rivoltella (2005) put forward on the relationship between media education and citizenship and that, for him, becomes a dual exercise of citizenship: belonging and instrumental. In this sense, media education would call the attention of the civil society and political powers to the values associated with citizenship and also contribute to its construction. The media autonomy achieved by the subjects involved should also be mentioned briefly (Gozálvez & Aguaded, 2012: 3).

On the other hand, the projects that work with digital inclusion are geared towards professional training and the acquisition of useful skills for the work environment, with no major concerns regarding media citizenship. Usually, technology is seen outside the scope of culture and seen only through its instrumental dimension (Martín-Barbero, 2003). However, this does not make it impossible to establish and require more connections between media and information literacy and its advantages for enterprises (Martínez-Cerdá & Torrent-Sellens, 2014), or in the scope of targeted actions, including to inmates (Neira-Cruz, 2016).

Finally, it can be said that media education, mainly carried out by non-governmental organizations, can be a key tool for community development, since the creation of their own communication media can enhance and take advantage of the direct participation of citizens in the public sphere (Peruzzo, 1999). In fact, in countries like Argentina and Ecuador, one third of the electric radio spectrum is reserved to community media, which can be “a crucial tool for exerting social pressure on the traditional media powers and for empowering citizens and ensuring their active involvement in the public arena” (Cerbino & Belotti, 2016: 50).

The priority given to children and young people as recipients, and to content production, is observed internationally. In the United States, media literacy activities for young people also include aspects of participation, exercising citizenship, and prioritise the production of audiovisual media (Hobbs, Donnelly, Friesem, & Moen, 2013; Martens & Hobbs, 2015).



4.2. Proposal for a model of description and analysis

The analysis shows that non-formal media education activities take into account interactions (learning), people (recipients), technologies (ICT and media) and places (rooms and community settings). And that is why it is important that they be regarded as integral work marks like the ones provided by social-technical systems (Leavitt, 1965), based on people (personal situations, etc.), structures (organisations, availability, etc.), tasks (use, communication, skills, etc.), and technologies (digital devices, social networks, etc.). Thus, this research also proposes a system model to describe and analyse media education projects in the field of non-formal education.

According to this model (Figure 2), civil society's media education initiatives are more complete and effective when they cover more dimensions (quantitative scope) and focus on content production that empowers citizens (qualitative scope). The model is based on the image of a trapezoid, which can act as a megaphone to a citizen located at its lower base. It is designed from a range of models of indicators and media literacy skills that must be acquired by citizens. Specifically, it is based on three integrator studies which indicate the main levels to be developed (Ferrés, 2006; Celot & Pérez-Tornero, 2009; Pérez-Rodríguez, & Delgado-Ponce, 2012). The proposed model allows one to view the amplifier potential that media education gives to people, and takes into account a description and analysis of the projects from the perspective of non-formal education, from the parameters set by their goals, characteristics and dimensions:

Dimension 1: Access and use:

- Enables access to products, means and forms of communication.
- Helps with the use of basic tools or with the instrumental management of technologies and media.

Dimension 2: Analysis, assessment and critical comprehension:

- Deciphers communicational languages and their construction.
- Analyses and offers tools for studying and comprehending contents, production processes and the functioning of media and their ideological implications.
- Analyses and monitors hegemonic communicational contents, enabling the generation of alternative messages.

Dimension 3: Creation of content:

- Offers the necessary knowledge for understanding communication processes and creation of contents, messages and contributions for mass media communication, through contents generated by users.
- Creates mechanisms that enable the recipients to create channels for permanently generating contents (community media).

Besides showing the characteristics of the activities, the proposed design also shows possible examples in each level. The intention is to offer a tool with which it would be possible to have a holistic understanding of the media education activities, going beyond a proposal based on indicators used to assess a possible ranking of projects. It should be emphasized that usually a project does not perform activities in all and each one of the levels proposed in the model, since NGOs develop complementary projects among themselves. In some cases, inferior levels are omitted because the recipients already have basic knowledge of how to use technologies and media.

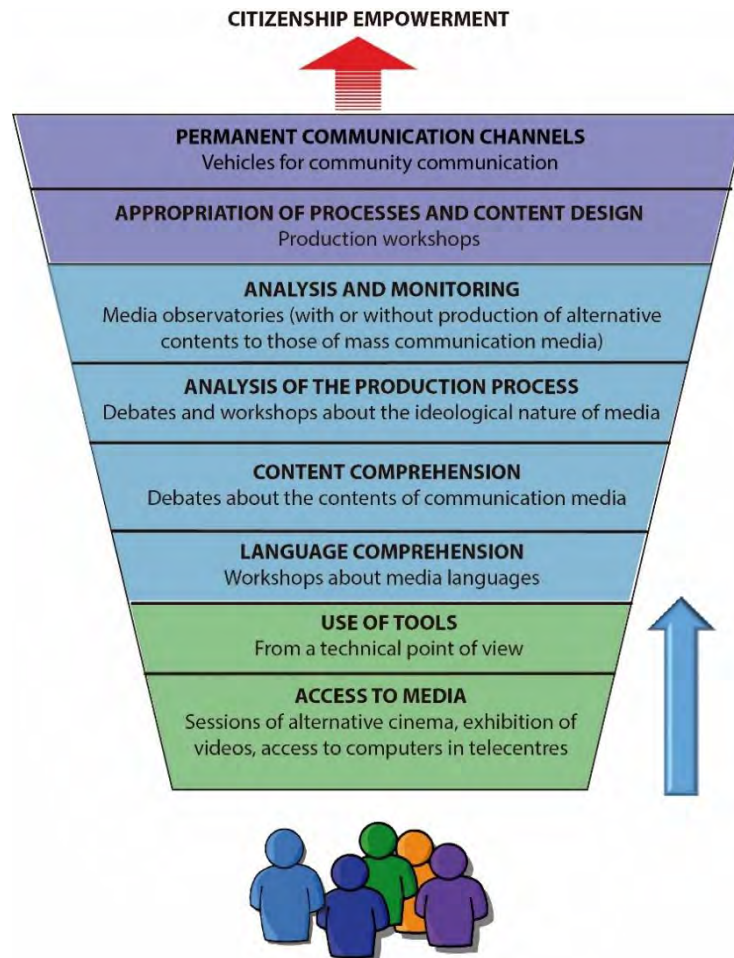


Figure 2. Model for the description and analysis of non-formal media education activities.

From the proposed model, we observe that the final goal of media education activities developed by the civil society could be the creation of permanent channels for community communication, with which the effective participation of citizens in social and communicational processes could be ensured.

4.3. Conclusions

In general, the scenario of media education in Latin America and in Brazil is very different from what is observed in Europe and North America. The initiatives from the North hemisphere are almost always linked to formal education, with activities that target students. While this can be found occasionally in Brazil, the great number of projects developed by NGOs seems to fill the gaps that exist in this type of public policy. From this perspective, the ideal situation for media education is to unify and seeks complementarities between formal public policies and initiatives developed in non-formal education, all of this in a context with great social differences.

Non-formal media education activities enable a higher development of certain social settings which are distant from formal education, like the empowerment of citizens throughout life, community development, and media citizenship and autonomy in a global society that is immersed in a communicative environment in which citizens need to act critically and creatively towards traditional and hegemonic media.



Non-formal media education actions also help to complement projects for professional capacitation with the goal of social-economic integration of recipients, as well as establishing a defense of their rights and capacitation, with the adoption of abilities and useful skills to develop themselves as citizens and rightful workers.

Now that the introduction of media education to the official curriculum of countries like Brazil is put in debate, with investments in corresponding public policies, it is necessary to think about the experiences that have existed for several decades outside formal education settings, with the goal of taking advantage of their benefits.

Indeed, it is not enough to promote public policies for media or digital literacy, which many times result in simply installing technological tools: it is necessary to transfer the philosophy of non-formal media education projects to all scopes, which means to say that the empowerment of subjects in communication processes must be considered to be intrinsic to media education.

Notes

¹ For example: “Le Centre de Liaison de l’Enseignement et des Médias d’Information” (CLEMI), in France; “Conseil Supérieur de l’Educationaux Medias”, in Belgium; “Department for Media Education and Audiovisual Media” (MEKU), in Finland; and “Mediawijzer”, in the Netherlands.

² Details can be seen on: <http://goo.gl/KNDFIh> (2016-05-21).

³ Ofcom is a regulating agency that is independent from the communication industry in the UK. Among other tasks, it promotes and researches media literacy.

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