Media Literacy in the Digital Age
How to benefit from media use while protecting against harm
– An overview of competencies needed by learners, teachers and teacher educators using ‘Media Didactica’

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Abstract: Both traditional and digital media are an integral part of young people’s lives. The abundance of opportunities to consume, create and communicate content could have an unprecedented impact on the worldview and values of today’s youth. Moreover, they might be exposed to several risks through their media use. Opportunities and risks connected to media use by young people are the reason for the current increase in attention for media literacy in education. Media literacy education provides youth with the knowledge, insights, skills and attitudes needed to reap the benefits of their media use as well as to protect them from potential harm. The research project ‘Media Didactica’ created a unique conceptual framework for (lifelong) learners, teachers and teacher educators to analyze, develop and assess their personal media literacy competencies. This paper will provide a rough overview of the different opportunities and risks that today’s young media consumers face. Using ‘Media Didactica’, this paper will then explore which competencies from the framework are needed by youth to critically engage with media as well as to fully participate in 21st century society. The present study will also home in on the pedagogical-didactic competencies needed by teachers and teacher educators to reinforce these media literacy competencies among their pupils.

Key words media literacy, media literacy education, curriculum development, competencies
Media have become an integral part of young people’s lives (Apestaartjaren 2014). Children and adolescents watch television, play video games, send text messages and surf the internet for several hours a day. Moreover, they often use several types of media the same time (Apestaartjaren 2014). The media environment in which today’s youth grow up, differs greatly from that of previous generations. Both traditional and digital media offer youth more opportunities to create, share and consume content as well as to engage in communication than ever before. The first part of this paper gives some examples of new opportunities and risks connected with media use. In the second part we will home in on the new challenges this poses for media literacy education.

Media-industry and media technology in transition

As new technologies make it easier to create large volumes of new and diverse media products, the nature and scope of the media supply has increased substantially (McQuail 2011). The economic conditions under which media operate and compete with each other, however, have impacted the quality of the media supply as well. Both in Europe and the United States commercial media enterprises are under pressure to offer mainstream media products for a young mass audience. They increasingly focus on entertainment and sports and less on news (Saura and Enli 2011). News organizations are, for instance, being systematically dismantled. In order to reach larger audiences they are put under pressure to offer ‘infotainment’ stories, blurring the line between news and entertainment (Kellner 2009). Commercial television stations offer mostly specific genres such as ‘reality shows, talk and game shows, soap operas, situation comedies, action/adventure series’ (Kellner 2009), which are produced using similar production techniques and conventions.
Mergers and acquisitions in the media industry have resulted in concentration of media ownership. In the United States, for example, about five media corporations dominate the entire market as opposed to 50 corporations in 1983 (Croteau, Hoynes, and Milan 2012; Ott and Mack 2010). Critics fear that concentration of media ownership and profit maximization could lead to a decrease in the diversity of the media offerings and promote cultural imperialism and hegemony (e.g., by US-American media products) (Ott and Mack 2010). Concentration of media ownership could also adversely affect democracy, as mass media have an impact on public opinion (Lippmann 1997) and are closely linked to political, institutional and economic interests (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Klaehn 2002; Cook 1998).

New opportunities for information and learning

Contrary to prior generations, today’s youth does not need to rely on information provided by national media. The internet offers youth new opportunities to search for information and to access news from diverse international sources. Online information, however, does not always adhere to same standards as information provided by traditional media. While surfing the internet children and teenagers can be confronted with information from questionable sources such as weblogs containing conspiracy theories (Kata, 2010), websites containing political hate speech (Gerstenfeld, Grant, and Chiang 2003) or those which promote unhealthy behavior like anorexia (Livingstone et al., 2011).

Furthermore, while using the internet children and adolescents may be willingly or unwillingly confronted with age inappropriate content such as pornography (Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2007), violence (e.g., ‘happy slapping’) (Palasinski 2013) or gambling (Lupu and Todirita 2013).
While exploring their identities, children and adolescents can use online communication platforms, such as social networking sites, for self-presentation, networking, feedback and support. In doing so, they can refine their social skills, meet new people and learn from the feedback they receive (Wilson, Gosling, and Graham 2012). Social networking sites can help their users to benefit from their social capital (Jung et al. 2013). However, engaging in the World Wide Web involves sharing personal information with others (Ellison and boyd 2013). The online disclosure of personal information comes with certain risks, as not all users and the companies that provide those online services have the wellbeing of children as their first interest (Livingstone and Brake 2010; Walrave 2006). Children and adolescents can fall victim to cyberbullying (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, and Vandebosch 2014). While pursuing new relationships or deepening existing ones, they could become a victim of online grooming (Whittle et al. 2013) or engage in the exchange of self-made sexually explicit texts, pictures and videos (i.e., sexting) (Walrave, Heirman, and Hallam 2014). Furthermore, children and adolescents are targeted online by new, and often more engaging and personalized, forms of advertising (e.g., advergames or social advertising) (Terlutter and Capella 2013; Thomson 2011; Li, Lee, and Lien 2012; Pariser 2011). Their personal contact information is collected on different websites for commercial purposes (Walrave 2006; Walrave and Heirman 2012). The content they create and share publicly online is accessible by future romantic partners, college admission officers and (future) employers and could have an impact on their personal and professional relationships (Deane 2011; Fox, Warber, and Makstaller 2013; Brown and Vaughn 2011). In sum, the many benefits of online self-presentation and communication also come with several risks.
Video games and serious games seem to be promising tools for knowledge acquisition and learning (Lunenberg, Korthagen, and Dengerink 2013), as they are better able to engage and motivate users than traditional teaching methods (Girard, Ecalle, and Magnan 2012; Bekebrede, Warmelink, and Mayer 2011). However, researchers have also highlighted possible negative outcomes associated with the use of violent video games such as addiction, aggression, hostility (Anderson, Gentile, and Dill 2012) or antisociality (DeLisi et al. 2013).

Youth mostly engage with media in an intuitive way. However, they often lack the insight, judgment and experience to critically and safely engage with media (Lieten and Smet 2012). Opportunities and risks, connected to media use by young people are the reason for the current increase in attention for media literacy in education (Tulodziecki and Grafe 2012; Unesco 2008). Just as with other types of prevention education, such as road safety education, health education or sex education, schools can help their students acquire the skills to become media literate (Meeus, Walrave, et al. 2014).

Media literacy is one of the new literacies in development, such as ‘information literacy’, ‘digital literacy’, ‘critical literacy’ ‘multiliteracy’ and ‘visual literacy’. These different notions of literacy are highly intertwined. As ‘literacy’ is often strongly associated with classical reading proficiency, we decided to define media literacy in accordance with the Dutch concept ‘mediawijsheid’ (‘media wisdom’), of which participation in society is one of the ultimate goals (Lieten and Smet 2012).

The research project ‘Media Didactica’ (Meeus, T’Sas, et al. 2014) created a unique conceptual framework for lifelong learners, teachers and
teacher educators to analyze, develop and assess their personal media literacy competencies. Based on this analysis, users will be able to define their own educational needs and to develop a personal learning plan. The original aim of the research project was to develop a reference framework for media literacy for teacher educators. But in order to be able to define which competencies teacher educators need, the project had to be developed alongside a media literacy framework for teachers and learners. Consequently, ‘Media Didactica’ addresses three target groups: (lifelong) learners, teachers and teacher educators.

‘Media Didactica’ defines media literacy for (life-long) learners as a set of competencies, which is a combination of knowledge, insight, skills and attitude¹ that the public can utilise to consciously use and understand media² critically.³ Moreover, they can use these competencies to contribute to contemporary society through media.

‘Media Didactica’ defines media literacy for teachers as a set of competencies which is the combination of knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes, that teachers can use to integrate media in the learning process as a didactic tool⁴ and through media education⁵. Moreover, they can use these competencies in their professional development and in the education community.

‘Media Didactica’ defines media literacy for teacher educators as a set of competencies, which is the combination of knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes, that teacher educators can use to integrate media in teacher education both from an exemplary function⁶ and on a meta level⁷ in the teaching and education community.

Using the reference framework ‘Media Didactica’, we will define which competencies and learning goals young people need in order to be able to benefit from the opportunities of their media use while being protected from potential harm (RQ1). We will also focus on which competencies and learning
goals are needed by teachers and teacher educators in order to teach those competencies to their respective pupils and students (RQ2).

I. Method

A separate, accurately shaped framework was developed for each target group of ‘Media Didactica’ (i.e., pupils, teachers and teacher educators) using a four-step approach. The conceptual similarities and disparities between the groups in the framework are also discussed.

Stage 1: Inventory of competencies from the literature

During the first stage, existing references of general frameworks and conceptualizations regarding media literacy competencies in English, Dutch and German were searched. Eight sources were identified: Ala-Mutka (2011), Buckingham (2005), EAVI (2010), Ferrari (2012), Hobbs (2010), Länderkonferenz Medienbildung (2008), Tulodziecki (2007) and Zwanenberg and Pardoen (2010). The curricula of both primary and secondary education in Flanders (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap s.d.) were also analyzed for competencies of pupils that were in line with our definition of media literacy.

For the target group of teachers, existing German media literacy models for teachers were identified: Blömeke (2001), Bremer (2011) and Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (2001). The Flemish competencies for teachers (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap 2008), a report of the international UNESCO expert group on media literacy (Unesco 2008) and competencies for language teachers from the Nederlandse Taalunie (Paus, Rymenans, and Gorp 2006) were screened for
additional competencies relating to our definition of media literacy and the use of media in the teaching profession.

For the target group of teacher educators, ‘the developmental profile of teacher educators in Flanders’ (Velov 2012) and Lunenberg, Korthagen, and Dengerink (2013) were used to assess the context in which teacher educators operate and to assess the extent to which the target group teachers differed from the target group of teacher educators.

Stage 2: Conceptualization of the framework through peer debriefing

Based on this review of existing conceptualizations, an inventory was made of competencies and contents that pupils, teachers and teacher educators need in order to develop their respective media literacy. Competencies were defined as ‘the capacity to make integrated use of knowledge, skills and attitudes for societal activities’ (cf. Decreet betreffende de kwalificatiestructuur B.S.16/07/2009). The competencies found in the first stage were compared and clustered based on their thematic similarities. By this inductive method, three classes of competencies were identified for the framework of the target group pupils: using media (1), understanding media (2), contributing medically (3). Different classes of competencies were used for the structure of the framework for teachers and teacher educators, taking into account their specific tasks in their respective institutions. Therefore the three classes of competencies for teachers are media in the learning process (1), media in the professionalization of the teachers (2), media in the education community (3). For the target group teacher educators the following classes were discerned: media in teacher education (1), media in the professionalization of the teacher educator (2), media in the training and education community (3). Throughout the three classes both the use of media
for professional tasks and the didactic transfer of competencies of the subordinate target groups were included as part of the different competencies.

Using peer debriefing, the competencies derived from literature and conceptually organized were then critically assessed by four researchers. Each competency found in the literature was appraised using the criteria of clearness, tangibility, specificity and the extent to which it adhered to our broad definition of media literacy. The different conceptualizations of media literacy found in the literature were complementary. Based on the qualitative analysis, competencies were dropped, reformulated and reassigned to the classes of competencies or subsequent levels. The adjusted competencies were clustered based on their thematic similarities. They were arranged according to their level of abstraction: from general to specific. The reference framework was developed through an iterative process of conceptualizing, classifying and reformulating. Following this bottom-up approach, the subordinate levels of classes of learning goals, learning goals and examples were formulated, each level more specific and detailed than the previous one.

The final media literacy framework for each target group consists of five levels: classes of competencies, competencies, classes of learning goals, learning goals and examples. The classes of learning goals for pupils were defined as knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes because of the didactical goals of the conceptual framework for this target group (Meeus 2012). Different classes of learning goals were constructed for the target groups teachers and teacher educators, based on the different phases of educational processes (i.e., preparation, execution and evaluation) and the thematic coherence of the underlying learning goals.

In the framework for the target group teachers, learning goals for the didactical transfer of the media literacy competencies of the framework for pupils were added. This ensured that attention was paid to both media education as well as the didactic use of media in the classroom.
Similarly, learning goals needed for the didactic transfer of the competencies of the framework for teachers were added in the framework for the target group of teacher educators. As we were unable to identify existing media literacy frameworks for teacher educators, both structure and learning goals of the framework for teachers were adapted to the level of teacher educators, bearing in mind the specific context of teacher education (Cf. Velov 2012; Lunenberg, Korthagen, and Dengerink 2013). Special attention was paid to ‘meta-thinking’ about the didactic value of media use in the learning and developmental processes of children.

Stage 3: Expert inquiry

‘Media Didactica’ was presented to fifteen experts from the fields of media, education, media literacy education and academia. The experts were asked to evaluate whether the competencies of the framework included all aspects of media literacy. They also assessed whether the competencies were formulated in a consistent way and whether they appeared in a logical order. Based on their feedback the framework was adjusted. The learning goals of the competency ‘participation through media’ were combined and various additional examples about e-safety, gaming, advertising literacy and the usage of internet cookies were included. An overview of the modifications was sent to the experts electronically after which they had the opportunity to respond once again to the readjustments.

Stage 4: Usability test among teacher educators

After the final feedback of the expert group was integrated, the instrument accompanying ‘Media Didactica’ was developed. The instrument was pretested by five different teacher education institutions which focus on a different level of education. Some members of the teacher education
institutions were asked to test the instrument individually whilst others tested the instrument as a team.

II. Results

The framework ‘Media Didactica’ consists of 24 competencies. The three primary levels of ‘Media Didactica’ are presented in appendix 1 in their entirety. The entire framework comprises of 138 learning goals. In order to determine which competencies and learning goals are needed to help young people to enjoy the opportunities of their media use while protecting them against harm, we selected learning goals that could help pupils to critically engage with media. Moreover, we selected learning goals that could help pupils to actively participate and contribute to society and thus enable them to enjoy the benefits of their media use. All learning goals relating to the research questions outlined in this study are included in appendix 2.

The selected learning goals for pupils were all found in the classes of competencies ‘understanding media’ and ‘contributing medially’. The first class of competencies ‘using media’ focuses predominantly on the technical skills needed to use media devices and software. The competencies and learning goals of this first class of competencies are therefore less relevant to the research questions of the present study.

Using the framework for the target groups ‘teachers’ and ‘teacher educators’, we selected predominantly learning goals from the first two classes of competencies of each framework (i.e., ‘media in the learning process’ and ‘media in the professionalization of the teacher’ for the former target group and ‘media in the teacher education’ and ‘media in the professionalization of the teacher educator’ for the latter target group).
III. Discussion

The reference framework ‘Media Didactica’ was created based on several underlying assumptions. Firstly, ‘Media Didactica’ is cumulative. This means that teachers should have mastered the media literacy competencies of their pupils to a certain degree. Consequently, teacher educators should have mastered the media literacy competencies of the target groups teachers and pupils. The overall framework is circular in the sense that the mastering of one particular competency will improve the acquisition of other competencies (e.g., creating a movie will also enhance technical skills needed to operate a video camera). Although it would be laudable if media literacy were the topic of a separate course, it should not be limited to one course alone. It is expected that media literacy will eventually become a cross-curricular topic in education and should be discussed in different courses and not in one separate ‘media literacy course’.

In the remainder of this article, we will discuss which learning goals of ‘Media Didactica’ are needed by pupils to critically engage with media, to use the internet safely and to participate and contribute to society, using media. The impact of media on the individual and society are discussed as well as how the individual can use media as a means to contribute to societal change. We will also present the learning goals and competencies needed by teachers and teacher educators to reinforce the presented learning goals in their pupils and students. It is assumed that teachers and teacher educators are willing to follow-up on new developments in the field of media and media education and that they are able to infer their personal need for further training (T.2.2.1 – T.E.2.2.2.).
Pupils should be able to critically engage with media and media messages in an autonomous and independent way (2.1.). This entails that they understand that different types of media products use various types of media conventions and that media use a specific ‘language’ (e.g., montage techniques or sound effects) (2.1.2). Pupils should comprehend that media representations are not necessarily faithful representations of reality, but that they are merely constructs of a reality (e.g., influenced by party affiliation or commercial interests) (2.1.4) and pupils should be able to critically analyze and interpret the media language of media messages (2.1.7).

In order to fully understand the transitioning media environment they live in, young people should know the economic relevance of the media-industry and how its transition impacts society (2.2.2.). Pupils should understand the role media play in democracy (e.g., the so-called ‘fourth estate’) (2.2.6.). They should also be able to explain how media companies filter the information they present to the public and which actors facilitate this process (2.2.4). When using traditional as well as digital media, students should be aware that the media content is tailored to specific target groups (2.3.4.) (e.g., tabloid versus broadsheet newspapers or personalized advertising on search engines and social networking sites).

When confronted with media messages, news and information in traditional mass media and, especially, digital media students should be able to assess whether the content is correct and trustworthy (2.4.1). Pupils should be capable of evaluating, comparing and contrasting the information they find in different media sources (2.4.3.). They should also adopt the attitude to critically assess the information and media content they find online (2.4.6.).

Pupils should also reflect upon the way in which media products influence the behavior and opinions of media users (2.5.5.). Attention should be paid to media effects of persuasive media messages (e.g., advertising and
political marketing) as well as the behavioral and emotional effects of general media products (e.g., the effects of violent video games or relaxing music on the mood of a media user).

Teachers should assess the extent to which a critical understanding of media is present in their pupils (T.1.1.4). Based on this assessment they could teach their pupils how to evaluate and analyze media content based on the media language and production conventions used, the potential media-effects on the individual and society, the way in which it was influenced by economic and political conditions and the way in which the message was directed to a specific target audience (T.1.2.5.). Furthermore, teachers should evaluate the critical media understanding of their students (T.1.3.2.). Teacher educators should show their students how to promote critical media understanding among their pupils (T.E.1.2.6) and evaluate the way in which they promote a critical understanding of media among their pupils (T.E.1.3.4). Teacher educators could raise awareness among their students that their future pupils differ in their understanding of media content and messages (T.E. 1.2.5).

E-safety

Pupils should learn how they can safely use digital media. This includes that they are aware of the different risks and opportunities connected to online communication and self-presentation (e.g., cyberbullying or online grooming) (2.6.2. - 3.2.3.) and that they know how to deal with those risks (e.g., protecting their online privacy and learning proper netiquette) (2.6.5.). Students should also learn how to respect intellectual property (e.g., creative commons) (2.6.4). Teachers should know how to advice their students on how to properly behave online and how to deal with online risks (T.1.2.7) and they should provide their students with examples of this behavior by being careful about how they present themselves online (T.3.1.3.).
Participation and societal engagement

In contrast to the previous set of learning goals that focused on how individuals can react upon the influence of media, the last part of our selection focuses on how media use can empower pupils to participate in society, work together with others on societal change, and show their solidarity. These learning goals will empower them to actively participate in the media culture as opposed to being passive consumers.

In order to fully benefit from the opportunities that digital media and traditional media offer to participate in society, pupils should learn how they can conceptualize their ideas, emotions, fantasies and experiences in media content (3.1.4.), with a self-confident attitude and perseverance (3.1.6.). The pupils should also be able to use different media genres and formats to present their ideas (3.2.6.) in an attractive fashion (3.2.7.). Moreover, they should be capable of starting new (strategic) relationships and strengthening existing ones using media (3.3.3). Finally, pupils should be able to use media to show their societal involvement (3.3.5.) and be willing to become engaged in society through their media use (3.3.7). Teachers can facilitate this process by stimulating their pupils to create and produce media content (T.1.2.9.) and by stimulating their pupils to become socially engaged through their media use (T.1.2.10). Teacher educators can inspire their students to stimulate their pupils to participate and contribute to society (T.E.1.2.9.).

IV. Conclusion

Media technology as well as the media industry have changed tremendously over the last decade. Youth are confronted with opportunities and risks through traditional and digital media, which were unknown to previous generations. Media literacy has become an essential skill to be able to participate in the society of the 21st century. Based on the unique media
literacy framework ‘Media Didactica’, we discussed the competencies and learning goals needed by young people to be able to critically engage with media as well as fully contribute to and participate in a society saturated with media. We also discussed the competencies needed by teachers and teacher educators to be able to reinforce these competencies and learning goals in their pupils and students.

References


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1 The classification of knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes is meant to define the didactic goal of the conceptual framework.

2 The classification of knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes is meant to define the didactic goal of the conceptual framework.

3 Consciously and critically refer to a process of analysis, reflection and judgment.

4 Media as a didactic tool refers to the didactic component of a teacher’s media literacy.

5 Media education is part of the pedagogic component of a teacher’s media literacy.

6 The exemplary function refers to the teacher educator’s role as a teacher which also entails that teacher educators have to act accordingly in conjunction to the pedagogic-didactic principles they teach.

7 The meta level implies that teacher educators are aware of the choices they and other teacher educators make and that they can explain on which ideas, beliefs, convictions and studies their choices are based.