

News Literacy in Argentina; Commitment to democracy

By Roxana Morduchowicz, PhD

A democratic culture

Argentina is a “new democracy”. The country was governed by a strong military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983, during which 30.000 people disappeared –whose bodies were never found -and citizens enjoyed no individual and public rights. Without freedom of expression and no access to free media and free information, the Argentine people lived under strong censorship: the military created blacklists for singers, writers and film makers, whose work was completely prohibited. No public demonstrations were allowed and no one could express his or her opinion openly.

In 1982, during the Malvinas War between Argentina and the United Kingdom, the media in Buenos Aires, strictly controlled by a strong military dictatorship, promoted strong feelings of triumphalism and victory. «Argentineans, to win» was the central and repeated expression or slogan in all television campaigns during the conflict.

During the Malvinas War, the media campaign was based on three main themes: confidence in winning, rejection of all symbols of British culture, and

nationalistic sentiments. Television broadcast only British casualties, while calling for leaving Shakespeare out of schools and the Beatles out of record stores. After 60 days of intensive battles, the same media that silenced hundreds of Argentine casualties suddenly announced that Argentina had lost the war.

Thousands of kilometres from the city of Buenos Aires, the British media were also covering the Malvinas War. In a matter of days, they had to persuade the people in Britain that it was worth giving their lives for the future of a few islands that they had only first heard of a few weeks before. Tremendous ideological work was required to persuade the British public opinion of the righteousness of the government's cause. (Masterman, 1993)

The experience of the Malvinas War, in both a democratic country and in a military dictatorship, confirms the need to develop a critical understanding of news and information that, without any doubt, should start in elementary school.

News literacy teaches students to understand the way media and technology construct the public agenda. Only the person who can make use of news and information is ready to participate effectively in the community, because he is able to analyse, interpret, evaluate and make use of this information. News literacy strengthens students' public awareness so that they engage with issues affecting their daily lives.

Information for information itself is not enough, however. Often, information can also contribute to de-politicizing the social and de-socializing the political (Landi, 1994). We value information within a democratic political culture, in which the information has a meaning and its critical reading promotes participation in the public life, without any restrictions or privatizations.

A News Literacy program during the Malvinas War (unthinkable in Argentina's dictatorial context at the time) would have allowed the society –in Argentina as well as in Britain- to understand the way the media operated. It would have also revealed the media manipulation and its strong ideological work to persuade the public opinion -British and Argentinean ones- of the right purpose of the war in one case and of the feeling of triumphalism in the other.

As Stony Brook University points out, most reliable information comes from a source that practices –among other principles- independence, which means freedom from the control and influence of outside parties. This is precisely why a News Literacy program would have been unthinkable during the military dictatorship, when independent media did not exist in Argentina.

News literacy –especially in new democracies such as in Latin America, but also in those with long-standing democratic traditions– is education for citizenship and education for democracy. This is precisely why it would have never survived under an authoritarian regime. And, for that very reason, news literacy cannot be left out of a democratic society, either.

News literacy –as said- involves the way meanings are constructed and legitimized. News literacy pushes us to question the way the world is represented and the way we –as audiences- understand these representations (Ferguson, 1994). Exploring how reality is represented in the news allows young people to critically understand the context they live in, so they are in a better position to participate and to make decisions in public life.

News literacy is designed to help students develop critical thinking skills in order to judge the reliability and credibility of information, whether it comes via print, television or the Internet. (Stony brook University).

To make use of news and information means to know how to analyze, to interpret, to process and to evaluate them. News literacy should reinforce the students' democratic culture and their public awareness. It needs to teach young people how to avoid any limitation to their social participation.

News literacy is based on an expanded definition of literacy, one that includes print, audiovisual media and digital technology. It is concerned with analyzing and understanding how they operate, how they construct meaning, how they can be used, and how to evaluate the information they present. (Wilson, 2015)

News literacy is a permanent question about the way audiences perceive and understand information (Ferguson, 1994). Only by asking ourselves how the meanings are produced can we understand to what extent they influence our perceptions of reality, as they did during the Malvinas war in Argentina and in Britain.

News literacy then –in new democracies such as in Latin America, but also in those with long democratic traditions such as in Europe– should be education for citizenship, for civic awareness and for participation in the public life.

It is in the commitment to democracy that a News Literacy program is justified, whether in wartime, under an authoritarian regime, or in any society's democratic life.

Breaking the gaps

There is another reason why we need news literacy in Argentina: children and adolescents from lower economic families are often excluded from access to information, media and technology.

There exists in Argentina –and in Latin America- a strong economic and cultural gap between young people from different social groups. Teenagers from poorer families have much more restricted access to information, media and technology than their middle and upper class peers.

News literacy in Argentina faces an additional challenge: to narrow these social gaps and to promote more equitable access to information, media and technology for all.

The main problem of young people's limited access to information, media and technology is its direct correlation to use. A reduced access to Internet generates a much less diversified use of technology and *less critical reading skills* towards information. (Morduchowicz, 2013)

Of course, adolescence is not a homogenous category. Personal lives are conditioned by social contexts and can only be understood in reference to the world in which the singularity is built. Young people's perception of reality is influenced by the social and cultural group to which each individual belongs. (Morduchowicz, 2001)

Appropriation of media and technology takes place only if these technologies are naturally integrated to one's everyday life (Winocur, 2006). When life experiences and social contexts are so unequal among the members of the same society, this appropriation becomes strongly uneven.

Social fragmentation is also reflected in the different uses young people make of information, media and technology. (Wolton, 2000).

If one adolescent –who lives in a very poor neighborhood- uses the Internet just to go on Facebook and to watch fun videos in YouTube, and another one –who grows up in a middle class family and in a professional environment- goes on line to read the news, to look for information and to do his homework, it is clear that the gap between these two adolescents is not technological but a social and cultural one. This gap is extremely strong in Argentina and in Latin American countries.

There exists an illusion based on the idea that technology itself generates positive effects without measuring the cultural context in which this technology is being used. This illusion only reflects an uncritical enthusiasm. (Buckingham, 2008)

When a child or a teenager turns on the computer or the tablet, his / her cultural capital affects his/ her use of information and technology. The fragmentation that exists in Argentina and Latin America between young people from different

social backgrounds, does not allow thinking of a common point of departure for all of them. (Morduchowicz, 2003)

A solid cultural capital allows young people to critically read the news and to find different meanings in all discourses that affect their everyday lives and their perception of reality. The challenge in Latin America is to provide every child and teenager with all competencies that will allow them to critically understand information, different texts and discourses and to make a diversified use of media and technology.

Social classes are not exclusively defined by the economic condition, but especially by the symbolic dimensions. Inequalities are not generated only by what someone has, but by what someone is: access to information, culture, education and all the competences they need to get better educational and professional opportunities in the future. (García Canclini, 2005)

The gaps found among students from poor families, show that inequalities are generated by a social and culture context, which can only be solved with strong programs and initiatives in order to reinforce critical skills and reflexive understanding.

Social fragmentation affects the way young people from different social contexts look for information and use media and technology. This gap draws a line between the ones for whom the use of media and technology is rich, diversified

and creative; and the ones for whom Internet is a limited resource, poor and tangential in their lives. (Boyd, 2014)

What really makes a difference is *the competence to use news and information, to understand its social impact, its credibility, to be able to read texts and discourses in a reflexive way, to generate new content and to actively participate in the community.*

So, one of the main goals for news literacy in Argentina and Latin America is that children and young people from the poorest social groups perceive Internet and technology not just as entertainment –as happens today- but as an opportunity to critically read reality, understand it and transform the world in which they live.

Only then, education becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discovers how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 2009)

If inequalities are specially defined in terms of practices, uses and appropriations, the State policy will focus more on competences and new literacies –and not only on equipment and connectivity. This is exactly what is needed for news literacy in Argentina.

A public policy on news and information literacy in Argentina needs to provide a *meaningful* access to news and information. In other words, news literacy should be based on *access with a social meaning*.

The uneven point of departure and the culture fragmentation in Latin-American societies, do not allow unifying under a common name and description (digital natives) young people who share the same age but live under so different –and unequal- realities and social contexts.

The notion of digital natives is just a distraction that hides the uneven distribution of competencies and uses that exist among young people from different social contexts. (Boyd, 2014)

By describing young people in a homogenous way, adults exclude themselves from their essential responsibility in teaching children and adolescents the necessary competences to critically understand the news and information.

The title of “digital generation” positions every adolescent in the same category just for their common age and does not allow identifying the inequalities and difference that exist between them. (Buckingham, 2006)

Only when all children and adolescents will be able to make a reflexive and creative use of news, information, media and technology; only if all of them incorporate critical and reflexive competences that allow them actively participating in their community, are we able to talk of digital natives or digital

generation. In other words, what is really needed is a meaningful access to information and technology that will help young people to make sense of the world. News and information literacy –if considered as a state policy- can promote a meaningful and qualitative access to news and information.

The content

News literacy –as said before- involves the way meanings are constructed.

News literacy is concerned with analyzing and understanding how the news and information is presented. The twenty-first century requires the development of new competencies that will allow students not only to access to information and technology, but to understand the social impact they generate in their everyday lives. Young people need to learn how to look for information, how to process, analyze and evaluate it. News literacy needs to teach students how to contextualize, compare and interpret media and Internet content, analyze its credibility and origin, in order to build their own opinion and to be able to communicate it to others.

These competencies include the set of knowledge, skills and attitudes (including abilities, strategies, values and awareness) that are required when using media and technology to perform tasks, solve problems, communicate, manage information, collaborate, create and share content and build knowledge effectively, efficiently appropriately, critically creatively, autonomously, flexibly, ethically, reflectively for work, leisure, participation, learning, socializing, consuming and empowerment. (European Commission, 2012)

Access, critical analyses and creativity are the three main pillars of a News Literacy program in Argentina. All students need to have *access –meaningful access-* to news and information, they should be able to *analyze, interpret and evaluate* media and Internet content in order to build their own opinion, *express themselves and create new texts.*

The news literacy competences are essentials to reinforce democracy and citizenship education as all these abilities focus on a critical understanding of the way the world is represented, and they promote young people's active participation in the public life.

These are two necessary conditions for a democracy to exist.

The Initiatives: From Sensitization to Action

The different initiatives promoted by the News Literacy Program in Argentina can be grouped by the goals they pursued:

1. Teacher training: courses, workshops and teacher training materials (hardcopy and on-line).
2. Special actions for schools: contests and festivals promoting analysis and creative use of the news. It includes projects addressed to students, promoting their participation, expression and visibility.
3. Projects for the community: initiatives addressed to parents and families to help them understand the media and Internet use among young people and how to orient them when they are on line –including the use of information.

Below, are described some examples of these projects using traditional media and new media as well. All of these projects have been developed by the Argentine Ministry of Education with the participation of the media associations and the Internet industry. All these initiatives integrate *access, critical understanding and creative production*.

The two main goals remain always the same: *to reinforce democratic values, and to break the gaps that separate the poor students from their more economic advantaged peers*:

- **«Journalists for a day» Contest.**

Every year, 16 and 17 year old students write an in-depth report on a topic they care and choose. Editors of the 90 daily newspapers in the whole country select the articles they want to publish. One Sunday in November, every newspaper in Argentina –paper and on line version- publishes the students' story. They are included just as they were written.

While writing their story, students learn how journalism functions and they understand how news constructs meanings. They also learn how to use a certain language to reinforce the credibility to what they want to say and how to address their audiences. Critical understanding and creativity are integrated in the same project.

At the same time, millions of newspaper readers all over the country can read articles written by public-school students. This project gives young people a different visibility and challenge many stereotypes and negative representations. Instead of being adults and journalists who write about young people, it is adolescents, in their own words, who write about teenage pregnancy, music, school violence, addictions, sports, unemployment, and social issues that affect them.

Press Freedom Day

The 3rd of May – World Press Freedom Day- all newspapers in Argentina – paper and on line version- publish a full page with activities that parents and teachers can do with young people to understand the value of free information and the importance of reading the news in a reflexive way. This initiative reinforces critical understanding of information and of the role of a free press in a democratic society.

Radio dreams

A TV program registered the process lived by high school students in a very small rural town (400 inhabitants), to create the first radio station for their village. They were in charge of the programming, the broadcast and the definition of the radio station content.

Students learn to make editorial decisions in the similar way professional journalists make them. Critical understanding and creativity are integrated in the same project.

The Challenges

The News literacy program in Argentina –as mentioned before- achieved promising results in terms of strengthening democratic values among students. News literacy has also allowed us to integrate debates that were absent from schools during the military dictatorship, for almost a decade. Many teachers, who were resistant to these initiatives in 1984 when democracy returned to the country, became more open and ready to incorporate news literacy in their school classes.

The path, though, has just started. There are still several challenges for a News Literacy program in Argentina.

The first challenge concerns still news literacy's main goal: *to reinforce the students' citizenship education*. As explained before, news literacy is education for democracy. It needs to promote and strengthen a democratic political culture so young people critically understand the news and information. Students need to learn and value the right to free express themselves and the right to access to free information. And they also need to learn how to analyze, evaluate and process the news. In a region that includes many "new democracies", this goal is still a big challenge. Teachers lived for many years under a strong military dictatorship and this fact may have left still some traces. A democratic government is a necessary condition but not a guarantee for the development of a democratic culture. News Literacy in Argentina must strengthen its main goal:

to reinforce democracy –critical reading, the right to question and to express themselves- among the new generations.

The second challenge for a News Literacy program in this region is to *narrow the social gap* that still separates young people from different socio economic groups. News Literacy in Argentina and in Latin America needs to contribute to a better access to information, media and technology –meaningful access- especially among the less privileged students.

The social fragmentation in Argentina is not only a digital one. It involves the traditional media as well. One of the main challenges that a News Literacy program needs to face in this region is to break these gaps and promote more equitable and fairer access and understanding of information and technology among young people who come from the poorest families.

Today this exclusion reinforces the social exclusion and reduces the educational and professional opportunities these children and adolescents may get in the future.

How can these challenges be accomplished?

The main step is to consider *news literacy as a public policy*, as part of the State engagement to education and democracy. Fortunately, there have always been teachers who have taught about the news. But, when news literacy

becomes a public policy, it moves beyond the individual initiatives and it transforms the private and isolated efforts into a *State commitment*.

And this is the main key for a solid and systematic News Literacy Program. This is the way to overcome the obstacles and to face the challenges.

In Latin America and in the entire world.

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