

Media Culture and Communicative Competence in Europe

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Such a thing as *Europe* hardly exists if we think of the existence of pan-European media. There are many contradictory trends in the process of European integration such as increasing regionalism and diversity of ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities. Europe, if it is to exist, is composed of many cultures and diversities.

According to *The New York Times* (20.1.1997) Finland has more Internet servers per 1 000 inhabitants than any other country. Currently there are approximately 64 servers per 1 000 inhabitants in Finland, while Iceland has 44, Norway 41 and the United States "only" 35. The Finns also have more cellular telephones per capita than any other people in the world. Currently, there are 1,7 million mobile phones in the country which means that every third person in Finland carries one. Most of the users are young people of the age 18-25 (*Helsingin Sanomat* 4 July, 1997).

No wonder that the *ABCNEWS* morning broadcast from Finland on May 15, 1997, stated that per capita, Finland is the most wired nation in the world. Most of its 5 million inhabitants have Internet access, and cellular phones are as ubiquitous as snow in this country:

While the rest of the world is still trying to figure out how to install a modem to get Internet access, Finland is plugged in. The country is twice as wired as the U.S. and virtually every school in Finland's capital, Helsinki, is on the Net. Schools in the rest of the country should be wired by 2000.

Currently, approximately 76% of the schools of the whole country are wired. Communication competence and media literacy, or media education in general, are now high in the Finnish and European policies of promoting the idea of an information so-

ciety. The educational priorities were also emphasized by President Clinton in his State of the Nation address in 1997.

Historically the European approach towards media and communication studies has emphasized more sociology of knowledge than the American tradition of mass communication research. Originally the European approach emphasized the concept of knowledge as a historical process (Merton, Mannheim) while the Americans often tended to stress information as a fragmentary and isolated concept. Today these differences are no more as obvious although postmodern media studies, for example, have a different role in Europe than in America.

The concepts of "mass communication" and "mass culture" reflect the American school of thought while a more genuine European approach would use the concept of "social communication" (la comunicacion social) which implies more the idea of communication as something of "sharing" (see Breton & Proulx 1989) or the exchange of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols (Ong 1996). Currently the Europeans use the concept of "information society" to refer to what the Americans call "national information infrastructure" (NII), and "national learning information initiative" (NLII), and their counterpart "global information infrastructure" (GII). Contrary to "communication", the concept of "information" does not of itself involve meaning. While the American approach has emphasized private initiative, the Europeans have stressed public service. Today, the private initiative is aggressively being promoted everywhere by, for example, "liberalization" or deregulation of communications while the public service approach is on the defence.

But even in Europe the traditions of communication have been very different in different parts of

the continent. The attitudes towards technology have also been diverse.

The early communication technology was based on rhetorics and related techniques. For the ancient Greeks technology (*techne*) meant more labor and skills that belonged to the slaves while the free men concentrated on the spiritual ideas. The Romans, on the contrary, were more pragmatic and technology was combined with esthetics and harmony. The rhetoric skills were maintained in the Catholic Church and we can claim that the Roman empire and latin culture thereafter is truly a culture of communication.

Today, the term “skills” is seen too narrow and is being replaced by the term “competence”. Philosophically the roots of “communicative competence” are developed by Jürgen Habermas who refers with this concept to the several means of using language to create consensus and agreement between two or more speaking and acting subjects. The attention is directed beyond the syntactical and grammatical rules of this or that language to the universal means in which speech is used to create and sustain social relationships. In a sense we are talking about universal skills of communication. We are born with the potential to use them to create a better society. Habermas presents an idea of the universal pragmatic features of speech-actions and hence also of communicative competence (Pusey 1987, p.73, 78).

A more pragmatic report to UNESCO by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century *Learning: The Treasure within* (1996) speaks of moving from “skill to competence”:

In industry, especially for machine operators and technicians, the ascendancy of knowledge and information as factors in production systems is making the idea of occupational skills obsolete and is bringing personal competence to the fore...

...if we add to those new demands the requirement for personal commitment on the part of the worker, regarded as an agent of change, it becomes clear that the highly subjective qualities, innate or acquired, that company heads often call ‘life skills’, combine with knowledge and know-how to make up competence required – which provides a good illustration of the link that education must maintain with the various aspects of learning...

...Among those qualities, the ability to communicate, work with others, and manage and re-

solve conflicts is becoming increasingly important. This trend is being accentuated by the development of service activities. (UNESCO 1996, p.89-90)

The concept of “communicative competence” or “media competence” is also used by the major European media conglomerates like Bertelsmann in their strategy as one of the key objectives in media culture. This German media giant which is almost equal to Time-Warner in size, emphasizes the role of the media and communication in the national economy in its basic document *Kommunikationsordnung 2000* (Communication order 2000, April 1997). This concept of “order” is another characteristic of a European approach to analyse world affairs, particularly in the German tradition.

There are several parallel trends that can characterize the media environment and public communication in Europe. One is the increasing effort to try to define what “Europeanness” really means, and the search for cultural and ethnic identities in a world of the global media. This is particularly characteristic for the smaller nations and language groups and observable in the Mediterranean countries as well as in the extreme North. Some major countries like France are anxious to maintain their linguistic and cultural dominance in the world.

It is very difficult to characterize our time or give any name to the era that we are either living in or approaching to enter in. We name different eras such as the Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Modern Time as if there were a linear progress in some direction in world development. We have called the epochs with such names as “Reformation”, “Enlightenment”. “Modernity” or “Post-modernity.” May be there is no return to any more “world order” but to analyse world disorder and chaos. However, a political economy approach could point out that there exists a certain world corporate order of transnational conglomerates.

Now, after the Cold War we do not know any more how our new age should be called or what name should this post-everything era be given. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* wrote (No. 39, 1996) that we are witnessing a new industrial revolution: capitalism without frontiers. The worldwide struggle for jobs and salaries will change our lives radically. The national governments stand helpless while their businesses and enterprizes look the world as a single one, global market. Is politics losing its power, asks the journal.

Two experts in *Der Spiegel* note that this strengthening of what they call “turbo-capitalism”

is undermining the conditions of its own existence: the functional state system and the democratic stability. We could add that it is the communication and information technology that is contributing essentially to these changes.

The rich countries of the world, the G7 group, has promoted for long two things. First, they have taken action to accelerate the so called full liberalisation of telecommunications infrastructure and services before the year 1998. And second, they have promoted global trade by opening up basic telecommunications services and infrastructures.

One of the consequences is the disappearance of national monopolies in telecommunications. They may continue in alliances with transnational giants. But less known is the possibility of replacing national monopolies with transnational oligopolies. The trade of world telecommunications is approximately 20% of the world trade.

An illustrative example is the 1996 deregulation of the United States communication industries which is launching a \$ 1 trillion digital competition free-for-all. After 10 years of trying, the U.S. Congress finally passed a bill deregulating all segments of the communications industry. This means that from now on telephone companies, broadcasters, and cable operators are all free to enter each others' markets (*Business Week*, April 8, 1996). In Europe, the deregulation will become effective in 1998. These developments will change everything in the traditional media and communication businesses in the era of world-wide information infrastructures.

In the early 1990's the European Union (then European Community) had approximately 20% of the world market of telecommunications as compared with 35% for the United States and 11% for Japan. But no single EU Member State represented more than 6% of the world market share due to the monopolies of the national services.

The Americans speak of entertainment's new landscape. This is characterized by five trends. The first is globalization. As media companies search for growth, they are looking for overseas. All the three giant networks have extensive foreign assets and experience which can be used to build an audience for programming that can then be resold in growing markets overseas.

Deregulation, in turn, is making television networks more valuable by allowing them to own more local stations. The networks also may be able to operate several digital channels at each station they own.

The third dimension is technology. Direct broadcast and digital technology will create innumerable outlets for programming. But the giant networks, with their blanket coverage and core viewership, remain the most efficient way to distribute and promote the media.

The fourth trend deals with finances. The advertising market is booming. Stock prices are up, and the cost of debt is down.

Finally, there are new people in the business which brings the needed personal contributions to the business. (*Business Week*, August 14, 1995)

The European Audiovisual Observatory has studied the European audiovisual market in detail. According to them, the European audiovisual market in 1994, measured by taking the turnover of the 50 leading companies, enjoyed growth figures of 10,2%. (European Audiovisual Observatory 1994)

Currently, there is a strong increase in the number of television channels in Europe. As many as 98 new national or pan-European television channels were launched in Europe in 1995. This increase can be attributed to the development of the European satellite capacity, which gave rise to the first services offering digital technology in 1995.

The first digital programmes were offered to television viewers by the U.S. company DirectTV in 1994. In Europe, the beginning of the digital television was delayed by bottlenecks arising from a need to sort out cooperation patterns and make technical applications compatible with each other.

The French Canal Plus started digital transmissions in 1996, followed by the German Kirch, and Italian Telepiu. There are more than 40 different television transmission standards in use now.

Another factor affecting the European increase of television channels is the ongoing de-regulation which is also causing some confusion. The cable infrastructure is improving and is leading to the increase in consumer cable subscription.

Another important factor in the European television landscape is the recovery of television advertising which showed an increase of 14,7% between 1993 and 1994. Also the Pay-TV channels are developing fast.

The statistical data confirms, however, the market domination by the American programmes in Europe. American films are the main beneficiaries of the admission recovery in cinema, but are also to a large extent responsible for it. Admissions for national films fell from 177 millions in 1985 to 89 millions in 1994, while the market share of the American films rose from 56% to 76% over the same period.

An analysis of 47 television channels shows that in 1994, as much as 53% of all films shown were American, as against 30% of national films and 23% of non-national European films. Over 68,8% of the fiction programmes (series, films made for television, cinema films) were of U.S. origin. (European Audiovisual Observatory 1994)

The percentage of European works in the television channels vary considerably. It should be remembered that the provisions of the European Directive *Television Without Frontiers* and the European Convention on cross-border television have included the aim of broadcasting a majority of European-made programmes. This has been regarded as the evidence of the future importance of the geographical origin of the programmes and of programmes purchased from independent producers.

European broadcasters are requested to reserve at least 10% of the transmission time, excluding the time appointed to news, sports, events games, advertising and teletext services, for European works created by producers who are independent of broadcasters.

For some time now we have been witnessing the growth of "infotainment", combination of information and entertainment, as well as "edutainment", a combination of education and entertainment. The genre of "entertainment" seems to have an almost universal appeal in television programming. Opinion, information and commercial seem to be increasingly mixed.

The second trend has been targeting of the programming, segmentalization of the audience. The third trend has been the expansion of pay-tv, video-on-demand, etc (Varis 1996, p.14-18). The same observations have been made in Japan where a multi-media, multi-channel era in television broadcasting is creating more specialized television channels and audiences (Nishino 1994, p.126-127).

The globalization of television markets is a process that need not destroy diversity and difference but challenges the production and distribution of regional and local audiovisual productions and linguistic as well as cultural identities.

The rapid development of information and communication technology, especially in computer and telecommunication applications and systems, is creating profound political and cultural changes. At least two issues seem to dominate the immediate future of world communications: First, the exponential increase in the quantity of information and communication as a consequence of digitalization and photonic infrastructures in the emerging information society, and second, the rapid growth of

telecommunications and integration of all media. The network media, like Internet, is opening a new channel of television programme distribution.

This process of globalization is promoted by technology which in turn favours simplified answers to most complicated social, cultural and religious problems. Technology, money and markets are global but culture, values, and life-styles are not.

Consequently, one of the major challenges of the near future will be the maintenance of cultural diversity in television programming. Television culture is, of course, a changing, interactive process that deals with human values. Those values, in turn, are difficult to predict nor can they be created from above only without respect to local cultures.

It is known that Europe is one of the major areas of commercial interest in the world's audio-visual markets. The American film industry invests massively in distribution and promotion throughout Europe. According to *Le Monde Diplomatique* the gigantic American companies Time-Warner-Turner, Disney-ABC, and Westinghouse-CBS are more and more present in Europe, particularly through local cable-tv companies. The exchange ratio of visual images between Europe and America is increasingly in favor of the Americans. In 1988 the figure was 2,1 billion dollars in favor of the U.S. products, and in 1995 as much as 6,3 billion dollars (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, 2.2.1997). No figures are available yet of the success of Microsoft-NBC in Europe.

What is sure is that uncertainty in modern world has increased. The new communication and information systems are often more complex than the old ones. If the process of communication is better understood by generalist rather than fragmentary type of knowledge we have to be careful in accepting research practices from such fields of research where extreme specialization is favoured.

The nature of knowledge is no more as certain and absolute as in the world view of Galileo and Newton but increasingly transdisciplinary and contextual. Different disciplines are more in favour of the use of the theory of chaos than before. Complexity and unpredictability characterize their scholarly efforts to know and understand things. Chaos theory, in essence, implies that very simple dynamical rules can give rise to extraordinarily intricate, surprising and essentially unpredictable behaviour like fractals, turbulence, or the weather.

Planning an engine or even a computer and designing a building are intellectually demanding but they are quite different processes than creating so-

cial reality, communicating with humans and defining identities. People have their individual and collective memories, their history and the past, which defines where they belong and how they are approaching the existing or the future. It is this concept of “cultural identity” (or collective identity) which is gaining ground in the present European media debate of the relationship between global media and different cultural, ethnic and national identities (Schlesinger 1993).

The European Union is concerned of the weak level of “Euro-consciousness”, “Euro-identity”, or “Europeanness”. It is too much defined from the above without creating possibilities for people to construct the meaning for “Europeanness” by themselves, if it is to have a meaning to them. The failures for efforts to create collective consciousness from above or force “official internationalism” are known to fail. Examples include the American attempts to create a free-world with the introduction of international television in the 1960’s, or the Russian efforts to create an all-Russian empire by imposing Russian language and culture to other people within the empire in the middle of the 19th century.

The increasing Euro-centric attention on the problems of “Euro-identity” have already provoked the Asians to start defining “Asian-ness” and the Russians to search for “Russian-ness” in relation to the “European-ness”.

The “White Paper” of the European Union defines the development of an “information society” in Europe as a global phenomenon where Europe should aim at achieving three objectives:

1. from the outset, placing its approach in a world perspective, and therefore encouraging the international alliance strategies of its companies and operators;
2. ensuring, at the same time, that the systems developed take due account of European characteristics: multilingualism, cultural diversity, economic divergence, and more generally the preservation of its social model; and
3. creating the conditions whereby, in an open and competitive international system, Europe still has an adequate take-up of basic technologies and an efficient and competitive industry. (White Paper 1994, p.110)

Although the documents speak nicely of “diversity” etc it may often turn out to be mere lipservice in relation to the existing reality. The European audio-visual space and the trends of regional television

has been studied thoroughly by Catalynuyan and Basque researchers in Spain (de Moragas Spa & Garitaonandia 1995) and the role of European public broadcasting by German and other researchers (Kopper 1997).

According to de Moragas Spa and Garitaonandia the regions of Europe are not the result of mere geographical or administrative divisions, but in many cases are the result of long historical processes, the legacy of the feudal structure, of Romanization, or of even earlier times, which have created a profound and important diversity of culture and language in the continent.

Today, the states are losing influence as a consequence of privatization, transfer of authority to supra-national European levels and decentralization, with the gradual shift of authority in matters of communication to the regional, autonomous and local levels. Such names as Springer, Bertelsmann, CLT, Fininvest, Hachette, Hersant and Canal Plus are as important in the European communication sector as in the past has been the case with the BBC, RAI, ORTF, etc.

The idea has been the need to create a common cultural market capable of guaranteeing both the survival of European cultural identity and its industrial competitiveness. European communication policies are therefore defined as a form of resistance against the great powers (United States and Japan) whose industry, apart from casting a shadow over the cultural identity and supremacy of Europe, impoverishes its economy and curbs the creation of jobs.

However, as noted by de Moragas Spa and Garitaonandia, this debate on the European ‘common’ space has opened up a new front on which the member States are losing their powers in the field of communication: regionalization. Strangely enough, to the question “what is European” comes the answer “diversity”, and together with the creation of a common audio-visual space, all the various audio-visual landscapes making up that whole have been mapped out: city, region, State and Europe. A European audio-visual policy will only be complete if it covers each and every one of these four spheres.

The television programming in the regions could offer exclusive coverage in the following:

- a. presenting local reality as different from national and transnational reality;
- b. presenting and interpreting news and current affairs concerning politics, culture and the national and international economy, selected and

discussed on the basis of the region's specific character and interests;

- c. highlighting and giving prominence to the region's relations with other regions within the same State and with other nations, as well as the projects stemming from those relations (de Moragas Spa & Garitaonandia 1995).

A study of the print media and the European Union by Fundesco in Spain showed, among other things, that there are predominantly nationalist attitudes and even occasional touches of xenophobia in the European media (*The European Union in the Media* 1995, and 1996). The study defined Europe as an empty gap between the local and the global. Europe's image is statistics and economic information but not human nor social aspects. Since there are no common values or ideological substance there is a compensatory tendency to seek refuge in nationalist introspection. Sometimes this is manifested merely in a domestic viewpoint with well defined local interests but they coexist with a modern sense of globalization. A year later the same research project noted that appeals are made to the media's status as a public service or to a sense of social responsibility, but these ideologically shaped values are becoming blurred in a period that is dominated by mercantile interests.

There is no pan-European media nor audience. Giuseppe Richeri has pointed out (1993) that:

- a pan-European market does not exist
- there are many barriers for a all-European media (some are withering away)
- the media markets follow linguistic frontiers
- all-European commercial marker does not yet exist

Richeri also notes that although some media like television satellites and cable can be received across national borders the audience prefer to follow the linguistic-cultural closeness, their own lifestyle and habits in the media. There is also a trend of "minimal efforts" which determine the way people choose their entertainment. Furthermore, resources given to pan-European media are still scant when compared with national media.

The largest language group in the all-European audience is German with approximately 90 million audience in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Luxemburg, Belgium and Liechtenstein. In the future, there will be millions more from the Central

and Eastern European nations. The second group is composed of the French-speakers (60 million) which is about equal with the English-speakers. The Italian speakers make up some 57 million inhabitants.

The 1996 Fundesco study of the *The European Union in the Media* stressed that the absence of media with a pan-European audience and scope makes the creation of a common reality still more difficult. The language barrier is turning out to be more persistent than customs controls. Furthermore, when the media discourse is favourably disposed towards supranational amalgamation, the frame of reference is not sections the constructed reality of Europe but the image of globality, with the time scale and a set of dimensions which clearly surpass the borders of the European Community. Global ideology lies behind strategies to induce a planetary market, and therefore operates on a waveband that is broad but standardised.

The researchers conclude that as a symbol and an image, today's Europe can be nothing but the Europe of the media, bound up with information, social debate and consensus. The idea of Europe requires inductive strategies that go beyond the interests and agenda values of the local and national media, whose geographical and cultural territories are still excessively littered with border elements. Politicians and top civil servants in Brussels often define the failures of the project Europe as stemming from a problem of communication.

In summary, the following trends are examples that could be observed from the European dailies in 1996:

- thematic polarisation: Even though the coverage given by the press seems ample from a purely quantitative point of view, the thematic values of EU-related contents generally reveal biases and polarisations. Society and culture sections contain scarcely any reference to the initiatives, policies and constructive values of the EU. To illustrate the contrast, it is worth pointing out that the number of texts included in economic sections is nine times greater than those published in culture and society sections. There is an increasing cultural homogeneity among the younger generations, apparent in a growing similarity among agenda signals referring to leisure, consumption, education and training, urban habits etc.
- local pre-agenda values: values of identity with local audiences

- reduction in critical tension: improvement of the economy in most EU countries; Balkan conflict has also done away one of the news stories that did most to deteriorate the image of Europe
- predominance of supranational discourse. Quantitative studies from several years show that for the first time in 1996 the information and comment of the European press dealing directly with the European Union (41% of the total) outnumbers items in which the European Union is related to the interests of the newspaper's own country. There is, in other words, more of Europe 'per se' in the media. References to non-EU countries, with the exception of the United States, have diminished considerably in the written press.

Communicative Competence

The efforts to create a pan-European awareness are combined by efforts to improve the basic information society skills for all. The basic strategy, like the one followed in Finland, implies three dimensions: basic skills while at school, life-long learning, and new vocational skills. The philosophy is based on the assumption that it is characteristic of the information society that information is available through many different media. A new media culture is about to emerge in which people need, in addition to the traditional reading and writing abilities, a new type of ability, "cultural literacy" – the ability to communicate, handle, understand and interpret information. It is the task of general education to provide every pupil with the versatile basic skills in acquiring, managing and communicating information which are necessary in the information society and essential for successful further study.

In the early 1996 the Finnish Ministry for Education published a Report by a small committee on cultural and media literacy. It emphasized the importance of the new civil and professional skills and competence in the use of the media and nets. The report, among other things, pointed out that the field of the media is integrating and becoming interactive while audiovisuality becomes a central issue. This cultural change requires the reform of the traditional literacy into media literacy, or in broader terms into cultural literacy where it is of central importance to understand how the images and significance is being created (OPM 1996).

This short national Report is very much in line with the global approach of the UNESCO Interna-

tional Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century report *Learning: The Treasure Within*. (1996) This report emphasizes the four pillars of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, learning to live with others, and learning to be.

Learning to know includes both the combination of sufficiently broad general knowledge and learning to learn. Learning to do means that in order to acquire not only an occupational skill but also, more broadly, the competence to deal with many situations and work in teams. Learning to live together means the developing of an understanding of other people and an appreciation of interdependence in a spirit of respect for the values of pluralism, mutual understanding and peace. Learning to be refers to the development of one's own personality: memory, reasoning, aesthetic sense, physical capacities and communication skills.

Formal education systems tend to emphasize the acquisition of knowledge to the detriment of other types of learning; but it is vital now to conceive education in a more encompassing fashion. There is an increasing understanding of the fact that intelligence is not one thing but many. We can speak of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993 & 1996). The new media environment and communication landscape offers life-long system of learning.

One of the central issues is what do we really understand by the new forms of literacy like "media literacy" and what importance the media competence and communication skills have in the information society?

In America media literacy is increasingly being defined as the

ability to communicate competently in all media, print and electronic, as well as to access, analyze and evaluate the powerful images, words and sounds that make up our contemporary mass media culture. These skills of media literacy are essential for our future as individuals and as members of a democratic society. (Center for Media Literacy, Los Angeles)

Research has focused on defined of what constitutes the "critical viewing skills", David Schaefer, however, criticizes the term "skills" as stressing too much the reception side of the communication process only. He, too, follows the Habermas approach of communicative competency defining it to include three dimensions: the cognitive one dealing with the potentialities of communication, the performative dimension, temporal dimension, and spatial dimension (Schaefer 1996 & 1997). Commun-

icative competency, then, would be the integration of all these levels (Sitaram 1997).

The rapid development of information and communication technology, especially in computer and telecommunication applications and systems, is creating profound political and cultural changes and also new learning environments. Traditional institutions of education are facing critical intellectual, pedagogic and institutional challenges.

At least two issues seem to dominate the future of communications. First, the exponential increase in the quantity of information and communication in the emerging global information society; and second, knowledge is becoming the most important resource in the global information economy. (Melody 1996). The key concepts are interconnectivity and network economy.

There are at least two technological trends in the late 1990's that affect world business, institutions and everyday life. One is the rapid exploitation of Internet by corporations and institutions, and the other is the deregulation of telecommunications and the introduction of new telematic services. It remains to be seen whether this "liberalization" of the huge telecommunications industry will create a true competition instead of monopoly systems or create only huge oligopolies.

The almost unavoidable globalization is promoted by technology which in turn favors simplified answers to most complicated social, cultural and religious problems that are bound to emerge and which are not global in essence. Already in the beginning of the 1960's the French sociologist Jacques Ellul spoke of the new media as a "technological bluff". He thought that each new medium does bring something new in the organizing, processing and utilization of information but also makes something disappear. The new inventions, though, always have consequences that could not have been foreseen (Varis 1995). Culture is a changing, interactive process that deals with human values.

But the belief in the revolutionary impact of the new technologies is very strong. New virtual technologies like the Learning Machine are propagated as "the most powerful learning tool since the invention of the book". Learning foreign languages, for example, is said to take place "at rocket speed!"

The problem of media skills and communication competence was created when the technological change last century had the consequence that the following generations could no more be sure of in what kind of a world would they live. The era of

modernism did not only change the environment but also the way in which people perceive and construct the reality. The emergence of photography and later film were radical innovations in the media world. In order to understand them it was not enough to have the traditional views of what painting is or what is the role of a picture in culture in general.

Henri Matisse wrote:

Our senses have a developmental age which is not that of the immediate environment, but that of the period into which we were born. We are born with the sensibility of that period, that phase of civilization, and it counts for more than anything learning can give us. (Lovejoy 1989, p.3)

Current media research also maintains the view that the dominant media emphasize some of our senses more than others and also have an impact on the structure of thinking processes. Walter Ong wrote of the "secondary orality" as the consequence of the emergence of radio. He said that to use the term "media" is useful to refer to the technological means like writing, printing or electronic means of communication, but it could also be misleading if it leads us to think that the use of these media would be only transmission of information. In fact, all of the media do much more; they enable thought processes inconceivable before. In communication between conscious persons the medium is more than what the medium is in information processing (Ong 1996).

The dominant media culture now is audio-visual in nature. The media environment is increasingly oral and visual, composed of audiovisual images. Furthermore, there is an accelerating speed of information abundance, noise and stimuli that are difficult to give significance. Parallel to the quantitative growth there is a qualitative process as well. Ignacio Ramonet from *Le Monde Diplomatique* has criticized the influence of television, televisable information, to the whole concept of information and journalism. The mere image of events is now sufficient to give significance to them and events without audiovisual content simply disappear from the agenda (Ramonet 1997).

Régis Debray speaks of *mediology*; of different eras of logosphere, graphosphere, and videosphere. During the first sphere of oral media the truth was theological with a center in the ancient Greece. Then, during the renaissance and the birth of printing, the truth became aesthetic and the center

moved to Rome. Now with the audiovisual media culture the truth is economic and the center is New York (Debray 1995).

Frank Biocca has repeatedly stressed the deep and qualitative consequences of the new media environment to design and cognition. According to him the change from a passive two-dimensional to an interactive three-dimensional media may be as dramatic as the change from still to motion pictures. (Biocca & Levy 1995)

It is also widely believed that the new technology solves the problems of employment, teaching and learning, free-time, democracy etc. However, the available evidence is rather contradictory and at least leaves many questions open. (Rifkin 1994)

Perhaps the artists are least prejudiced people because nobody determines them in advance conditions to use the new technology. Their imagination and utilization is only limited by economic realities and their own prejudices, customs and ignorance.

Now the skills and competencies of the era of modernism have since long changed into the art of postmodern media. In fact we are living something which could be called a telematic era of photonic communication and information technologies. The integration of telecommunications, computers and multimedia change in a qualitative way our traditional conceptions of almost all spheres of life. Less attention has been given to the ethical and moral problems which are also affected.

As has been stressed by contemporary French sociologists and philosophers we face three complex problem areas. The first one is the globality of technology, money and markets. The second one is the universality of values, and the third one the uniqueness of forms. Languages, cultures, individuals, random chances etc. are unique. If the values are lost, the global techno-structure conquers the uniqueness and homogenizes it.

Most essential in this new learning environment is the fact that whoever learner is constantly facing epistemic conflicts when the learner is presented with a problem that needs to be solved but which is outside the learners current repertoire. Most of the problems of the information society will be of that kind. The learner needs to proceed with self-regulation with an active engagement and self-regulation which is the learner's response to the conflict. The idea is to adjust and reconstruct thinking to deal with the learning problem at hand (Klemm 1996). This information ocean of the emerging information society could be navigated by computer and information literacy and with a broader competence of media literacy.

However, it is still necessary to maintain and develop what has been called traditional literacy. A recent study in Germany concluded that if a significant proportion of young generations remain literally limited in their literary capabilities, do not get proper introduction to computer literacy, and consequently develop poorly their skills of abstract thinking and imagination, there will never be any information society. A citizen in an information society uses similar frame of reference as a traditional reader when he or she uses information data services, computers or media in a productive way. (von der Lahr 1996)

In the new media-environment the concept of the "text" extends into visual, audiovisual and computerized dimensions. We can speak of the media space where cognitive, affective and intuitive elements co-exist. The new, telematic multimedia are telepresent everywhere.

In my understanding we face three kinds of problems. First we have to try to understand what is the learning process of becoming literate and what does communication competence and media skills mean in the information society. Second, we have to analyze the increasing neo-illiteracy. Third, we should discuss of what kind of skills should we give to the citizens now as compared to the earlier skills of writing and reading.

According to research, literacy skills are of central importance to the psychological and intellectual developments of human beings. Traditional reading of texts and stories to small children seem to be fundamental for their later developments. Consequently, traditional literacy can be seen as a condition to becoming media literate.

What is less known is how the cultural frames filter the processes of reading visual, auditive and other signals and messages. Seeing, for example, is very selective and the power of the dominant media culture is widely based on the audio-visual power of the images.

Along with the diffusion of the new media there is an increasing trend of neo-illiteracy in the industrialized countries. In general, the amount of neo-illiterates is estimated to be 10-15% of the adult population. In the United States *The Commission on Reading* estimates that 10% of the adult Americans are illiterate and another 44% only passively capable of reading.

Jeremy Rifkin gives the figure that approximately 90 million Americans are so poorly educated that they cannot write to explain a minor error of their credit card or read bus time-table properly, etc. He claims that today one out of three adult

Americans are partially or completely illiterate. (Rifkin 1996, p.60)

Although some European countries may still be proud of having high figures in general, the average total for the whole of Europe could be much worse than believed.

If we understand by literacy the process of abstract thinking that starts with the first years of birth with hearing stories and matures sometimes at the age of 14, probably no mediated information environment can compensate the neglecting of this process. In fact, unprepared immersion to the new virtual technology might turn out to be harmful to some processes. At least there should be serious, critical and independent research on the use of different information technologies for processes like learning.

The multimedia genres of “edutainment” and “infotainment” may also be too much culture-based. In some cultures like in Japanese the state of

mind in learning is to force yourself to strive for acquiring knowledge. (“ben kyou”). It is different attitude than exposing yourself to “entertainment” (Utsumi 1996).

In any case, the new media environments, telematic applications in learning, teaching and working, and in citizen services require new skills and competence. It is necessary to know to use the networked, telematic media both to receive, produce, and disseminate messages increasingly in an interactive and collaborative way.

In an intercultural world communication necessarily mediates different values and cultural behaviors. Great civilizations and cultures have very different patterns of communication and use different senses in a different way. In consequence, if a truly global information society is to be created, more attention should be given to the diversity of cultures and the co-existence of different civilizations and cultures.

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