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Recursos para la alfabetización mediática: mediando la investigación sobre niños y medios de comunicación

Resources for media literacy: mediating the research on children and media

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Resumen
Mucho se ha dicho y escrito sobre la educación en medios, su importancia y objetivos. Más allá de las directivas, resoluciones o recomendaciones, la investigación en esta área ha permitido profundizar e solidificar sus fundamentos, pero también ha facilitado el reconocimiento de sus puntos más débiles o omisiones. Uno de los puntos críticos destacados por la formación y por el trabajo de investigación que se ha desarrollado en la Universidad de Minho, Portugal, durante los últimos 20 años, es la inexistencia de recursos y materiales que puedan utilizarse para la promoción de la educación en los medios de comunicación en diferentes contextos. Y esto no es sólo acerca de la existencia o inexistencia de los materiales, es sobre la importancia de la transferencia de conocimientos a la práctica, se trata de la importancia de la mediación del conocimiento producido a su público. Esta preocupación fue la base principal de lo proyecto intitulado 'Recursos para la Alfabetización Mediática' llevado a cabo en el Centro de Estudios de Comunicación y Sociedad y financiado por la Evens Foundation, Bélgica. Este trabajo se propone presentar lo proceso de creación y lo resultado de esos recursos centrados en tres medios: televisión, videojuegos, e internet y redes sociales.

Abstract
Much has been said and written about media education, its relevance and goals. Beyond directives, resolutions or recommendations, research in this area has allowed deepening of its foundation, but it has also facilitated the acknowledgement of its weakest points or faults. One of the critical points noted by the training and research work that has been developed at the University of Minho, Portugal, during the last 20 years is the inexistence of resources and materials that might be used for promoting media education in different contexts. And this is not only about the existence or inexistence of materials, it is about the importance of transferring knowledge into practice; it is about the importance of mediating the produced knowledge to its audience. This concern was the main basis of the project 'Media Education in Booklets' carried out at the Society and Communication Research Centre and funded by the Evens Foundation, Belgium.
This paper intends to present the resources produced within this project, concerning three booklets: one about mediation of TV at school and at home; another one, about videogames, ways of playing, benefits, dangers, creativity and interculturality; and the third, about the Internet and social networks and the new forms of relationships and communication that these means allow.

1. Introduction: the importance and the meaning of media literacy resources

In recent years, media education went to a top place on the agendas of the major international organizations. "Media literacy is a paramount goal of the EU's public policy," translated into a series of action programs, emphasized, not long ago, according to Viviane Reding (2009), by that time, the European Commissioner for the information society and media. UNESCO, in particular, has been developing initiatives to define consistent indicators of "media and information literacy" (Grizzle, 2011). These trends represent, to the local level, a significant stimulus, while opening to private initiatives a horizon of meaning and a framing map. However, by themselves, those initiatives are not enough to produce success of actions and projects. They require, among other things, plans of incentive and inspiring resources for their development.

At least since the 1970s, the definitions of media education clearly distinguish this concept from others related to "educational media" or "educational use of media." For example, in 1973, the International Council of Cinema and Television, associated with UNESCO, defined media education as "the study, teaching and learning of modern means of communication and expression, defined as a specific and autonomous domain of knowledge, both in the theory and in the pedagogical practice." In the same citation, the Council pointed out that this area cannot be confused with the "use [of the media] as an auxiliary for teaching and learning in other fields of knowledge such as mathematics, science or geography" (UNESCO, 1984:7).

The same could be said about the place of ICT, in a communication and educational landscape that has changed greatly in recent decades. But this does not mean that media education does not require tools and resources to be developed with accuracy and interest. In the case of the media, the diversity of means, language and gender, joined with its role of expression and enunciation of the contemporary life, provides an inexhaustible source of resources, a necessary and unavoidable subject of study and a favorable ground for expression and communication between individuals and groups.

However, it is important to consider that the production and use of resources is only one of the dimensions of the development of initiatives and programs in this area. The training of teachers, the intervention in the field, the scientific research and the definition and implementation of policies are other dimensions which have to be considered, whether each one independently or in relationship with each other.

Once the dimension of resources has been contextualized, it is necessary to clarify the understanding we have of them and with which we work here. Contrary to current ideas, it seems reductive to confine the concept of resources to materials of support, guides to action and to economic aspects. Certainly these dimensions are necessary, but in our view, they are not enough. The human dimension represents, in this context, a touchstone and a symptom of the direction of the media education plan.

In what sense can we, and should we, consider the human factor as a resource? In three dimensions:

a) The networks of knowledge, in the relationships, in projects, welcoming within them the contributions, competences, knowledge and skills of each member of the network, being it a person or an institution;

b) The organizations as resources, their objectives, their organization, their action plans, their moments and important events. Thus, for example, a school can be understood as a space of relationships that promotes (or inhibits) the action;

c) The enunciation and circulation of testimonies, reflections, statements and goals formulated by different actors that are sources of inspiration, and that could enhance collaboration.

Adopting such a perspective thus opens surprising horizons with regard to resources. It also relativizes, somehow, a recurrent discourse about the "lack of conditions" that, in some cases, is merely an excuse for inaction. Actually, all actors directly or indirectly involved in media education are potentially—and literally—producers of resources, while nodes of a vast network of people and institutions[1].

Although the media are not prodigal on reporting what they do and on scrutinizing their role in society (as opposed to what they do for other entities), what they publish and broadcast provides material of primary importance for media education. The same is true for the self-regulatory bodies, such as ombudsmen, and for the hetero-regulatory bodies, such as the media regulatory authorities. In both cases, they are regular sources of rich material for reflection and analysis. In addition, several companies and media groups, some for altruistic reasons, others for more commercial motivations, have also, in some cases, launched projects and initiatives related to media literacy. The official programs—from governments, international organizations, NGOs, etc.—are often a source of useful and effective materials (which does not mean that they should not be submitted to critical analysis). In this sense, academic works resulting from studies and researches are increasingly accessible through national and transnational repositories, and could be a very important resource because of the reading clues that they sometimes provide. Last, but not least, reports of experiments carried out in classrooms, in different curriculum subjects, in extra-school activities and in training activities in other contexts than those of the schools, represent an inexhaustible source of inspiration and attention, if only to realize the paths or solutions that should not be repeated. In this context, the Internet and, particularly, tools and interactive and digital platforms, as well social networks, go beyond opening doors to a wide range of resources as they are themselves are essential resources.

The outline of a non-reductive view of the resources needed for media literacy would be, however, incomplete if a final element related to the vision of the role of media in society and culture was not underlined. In fact, this element sets up a larger issue of media education development. As pointed out

already in the late eighties of the last century by the well-known Canadian work "Media Literacy Resource Guide" (1989), the resources make little sense if they do not take into account the subjacent *rationale*. This includes the recognition that the media construct social reality, but at the same time, they are themselves a reality socially constructed. The output of the media contains ideologies and worldviews that, more often, are not seen with the naked eye and what they explicitly or implicitly convey influences social and political life. This does not mean that those who receive the messages they send necessarily do so in a passive way. This already occurred in the time of mainstream media, but it happens now, on a larger scale, in the time of interactive and digital media.

2. From research to the field: creating resources for media literacy

2.1. Starting points: the evidence of the research

On 16 December 2008, a resolution on 'Media Literacy in a Digital World' from the European Parliament pointed out that "acquiring media literacy begins in the home with learning how to select from the media services available," stressing "the importance of media education for parents, who play a decisive role in the development of children's media-use habits." Along with this kind of recommendation, the research has also been highlighting the importance of the family context for media reception. Several researchers have stressed the importance of the family in mediating children's relationship with the media (Strasburger et al., 2009; Lemish, 2008; Pinto, 2005; Pereira, 1999). In fact, one of the main discoveries about researches on audiences is the increasing recognition of the importance of reception analysis and consumer context: the family environment. The amount of time that young people devote to media frequently gives rise to concern among parents who don't always hold the necessary tools to analyse and understand this reality and act upon it. Several studies developed in different countries show the importance of the direct interaction between children and adults. If parents discuss, comment on and help children interpret media content, they can help their children understand its messages.

Media plays a significant role in children's socialization process; the media represents a privileged source of learning and contact with the world. Several authors (Strasburger et al., 2009; Pereira, 1999; St. Peters et al., 1991) defend the idea that parents can influence the way children use the media and the learning process that is developed from these experiences.

This means that parents should be sensitized for this important task and have available resources that inform them how to deal with children's media experiences. In Portugal, the lack of materials and guidelines is one of the main aspects that have conditioned the implementation of media education in contexts such as school or family. Therefore, having the results from research as a starting point, taking into account the experience coming from training, and considering the gap between theory and practice identified by research and training (Figure 1), we designed a project whose main aim was to produce materials in order to support media literacy in the family. This project, entitled "Media Education in Booklets," was presented to the 2009 Evens Foundation Prize in Media Education and was awarded the prize by this Belgian Foundation. This prize was an excellent opportunity to bridge a gap identified by the research—the need for resources in media education.
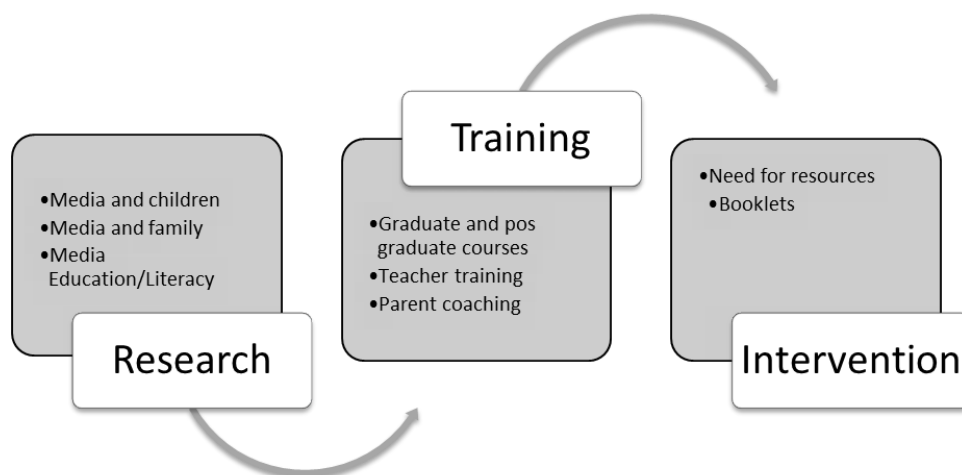

Figure 1 – From research to the field: the need for resources

2.2. The project "Media Education in Booklets": main objectives

Based on the assumptions presented above, the main aims of the project were:
- to provide materials to help parents and teachers to mediate young people's experiences with media;
- to empower educational agents (parents, teachers, socio-cultural facilitators) and children to become critical and demanding media consumers;
- to contribute to improve consumers'/ citizens' level of information (considering that the quality of the media depends also on the critical awareness of its public).

2.3. Themes and target audience

To put these ideas into action, the team conceived three booklets based on a simple verbal language and on an attractive visual language, which could be easily read and also easily transported. The entire project was conducted within the media education objectives and with the sense given by Pier Cesare Rivoltella: "media education, or rather, citizenship education, should provide especially meta-reflective activities, promoting citizens' capacity of self-analysis that contributes to develop the awareness of what they are doing" (Rivoltella, 2007: 23).
Each of the three publications focused on a specific medium. Thus, TV was the first theme, videogames was the second, and the third was the Internet and social networks. The choice of these media was due to their important role in the lives of young people.
The TV booklet is organized in three parts (Figure 2): the first intends to reflect TV habits and clarify some common sense ideas about the role of TV in children's lives. The second is mostly dedicated to the mediation process, trying to sensitize the parents to this important task. The third proposes some activities to enrich the experience of watching television. The figure below describes the main parts of this booklet.

Kids and TV: Watching Wisely

1st part	**Reflecting and clarifying**
	• TV viewing by families and children
	• The importance of TV and other media in children's lives
	• How TV influences children's socialization process
	• The role and meaning of TV in each family
2nd part	**(Re)acting**
	• TV mediation process: how parents and other adults can mediate TV with children
	• The importance of mediation in children's TV viewing habits
	• The contribution of parental mediation for quality TV experience
3rd part	**Proposing activities**
	• Writing a diary—what happens during a week (with or without TV)
	• Topics for programs' analysis with children: fictional and informative programmes
	• How to complain or to praise: information about TV networks and TV programmes—postal and web addresses

Figure 2: TV booklet

The second booklet, entitled 'Videogames: Stepping up to the Next Level' was also divided into three parts, as shown in Figure 3. The first part begins with a brief history of videogames, types of games, and identification of the videogame research areas: design, programming, psychology, education. The second part reflects children's and young people's practices and perspectives about videogames. It also focuses on the dangers and potential of videogames identified by the research and by the society. The third part presents strategies for parental mediation. It also focuses on the place of videogames in school and the role of media education.

Videogames: Stepping up to the Next Level

1st part:	**Videogame history and its contribution to technological development**
	• Brief history of videogames
	• Contributions to their development
	• Types of games

	• Videogame research areas: design, programming, psychology, education
2nd part:	**Videogames as a cultural element: between violence and learning**
	• Connection between children and young people with videogames • Children's practices and perspectives about videogames • Dangers and potential identified by the research and by the society
3rd part:	**Mediation: videogames in school and in family**
	• Strategies for parental mediation • The place of video games in school • The role of media education

Figure 3: Videogames booklet

The Internet and Social Networks booklet is centered on topics like the social networks most used by young people; new forms of communication and their importance in the process of young peoples' socialization; the importance of the contexts (cultural, social) in the access and sharing of information; the concept of the dangers and the need for digital literacy; and the importance of family and peer mediation. Figure 4 presents the main parts of this booklet.

Internet and Social Networks: Caught up in the Web

1st part:	**Social networks' concept, users and impact:**
	• What are social networks • Social networks' profile users • The impact of digital media in society • Technological evolution • Just a trend or new ways to communicate
2nd part:	**Learning to use social networks:**
	• Privacy and identity: data sharing and safety • Research and use of information and media content • Fighting excess, addiction, and alienation • Participation, and citizenship
3rd part:	**Suggestions for families, schools, and teachers:**
	• Strategies for mediation at home and at school

Figure 4: Internet and Social Networks booklet

With respect to age groups, the booklets are directed to a wide age range. Thus, the television booklet is directed primarily for children attending the early years of schooling; the videogame booklet is more focused on an age from 8-10 years, and the last, on the Internet and Social Networks, is aimed at children up 12 years.
In terms of reading and use, the booklets were designed for parents, teachers and children themselves, for the reasons explained below.

2.4. Conception and graphic design

The procedure for setting up each of the publications was identical. The texts were written based on data and information coming from research, mainly national, but also from the international scope.
The texts were written with the concern of avoiding a moralistic perspective or making them a recipe or a set of strategies ready-to-wear. The main aim was to provide information based on the evidence of the research and make suggestions for action in order to encourage readers by appealing to their experience as consumers within the particularities of their contexts, whether family, school, or other.
As the contents of the booklets are predominantly based on the relationship of young people with media, it was intended that their voices were also heard in these publications. The best way to do this was through drawings and texts produced by children between 6 and 15 years old. This material was collected in schools and subsequently the team selected some drawings and texts for publication, according to the topics of the booklets.
The project involved about 200 students from ten schools in the North of Portugal. As mentioned before, students participated through drawings and written texts which enriched the publications with the perceptions of young people. The involvement of those schools in the project gave the children an opportunity for

learning and for sharing experiences about their media consumption habits and patterns of usage. Furthermore, in doing so, children and young people were not considered solely as consumers, but also as producers and participants.

In parallel, the team worked with a designer who has created three characters to inhabit the publications, thereby creating some continuity among the three booklets and also framing the material produced by children[2].

Before publication, the texts were sent to parents, teachers and/or experts in the field, to ascertain the clarity of the language and to collect suggestions for correction or amendment. These comments were a valuable contribution for the final revision and they also allowed having a perception of the public acceptance of the booklets.

The main methodological steps of this process are reported in Figure 5.
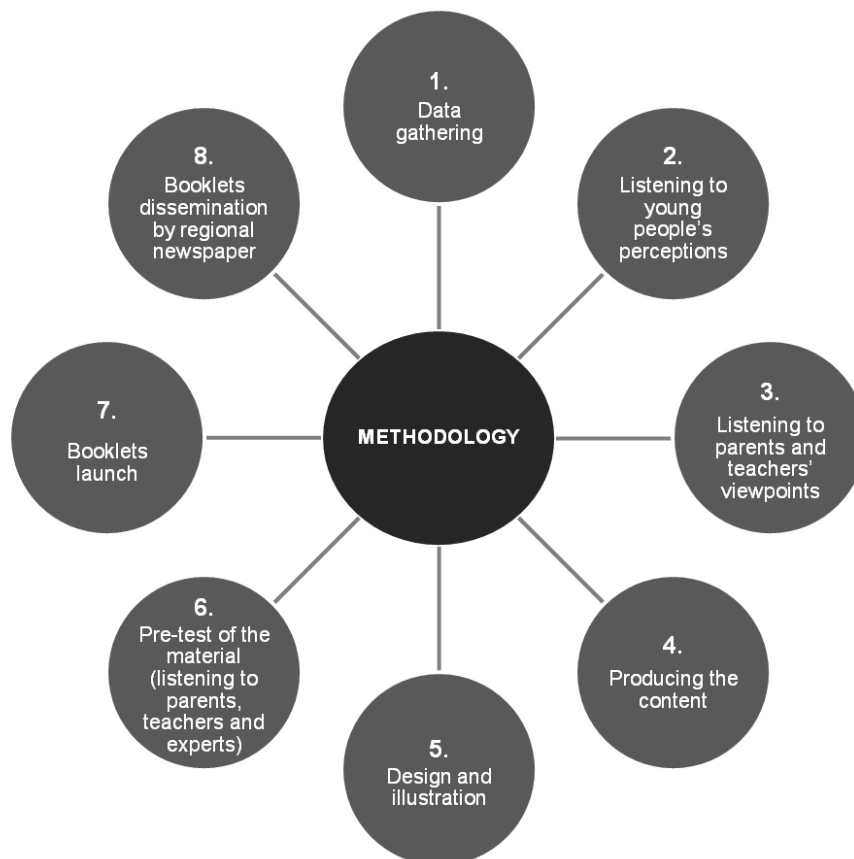

Figure 5 – Project's methodology

2.5. Dissemination of the project

The dissemination of the project and the distribution of booklets throughout Portugal was an aspect to which special attention was given.

The intention of the team, and the initial commitment to the Foundation, was to distribute the booklets free of charge via a national newspaper of mass circulation. However, difficulties arising from the economic crisis the country is experiencing failed to achieve this goal. This problem was partly overcome through the partnership with a regional newspaper. Thus, the booklets were distributed by a newspaper that covers the entire area of Braga[3] and the surrounding area, with a circulation of around 9000 copies. The team's concern was that the booklets reach a large number of people from various social classes and geographic areas.

Alongside this distribution strategy were developed other ways to disseminate the publications. The team held public meetings to launch the booklets. All three were released on dates with a special meaning: the booklet about television was launched in a bookshop and celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Convention

on Child's Rights (November, 20 2009); the videogame booklet was launched in the same bookshop and signaled the World Day of the Child (June, 1 2010); the third, on Internet and Social Networking, was presented in a seminar about "Digital Literacy and Social Networks," which was attended by about two hundred people. These sessions have given significant visibility to the project and have aroused much interest among the population, particularly in the media.

The project and the booklets have also been presented in national and international conferences, in schools and public libraries. In fact, libraries have been important partners for the distribution of the booklets. Some partnerships with civic associations and schools were also established.

The project foresaw a spread that goes beyond the Portuguese border. Therefore, the booklets were translated into English. The printing of books in this language allowed a distribution in international conferences that bring together people from the area of communication sciences and others from education sciences. The main idea was to make the project known as widely as possible, seeking to raise awareness among researchers in different areas of the importance of media literacy and also the importance of providing resources to make this scientific knowledge available to society.

3. Final remarks

In this project, media literacy was understood "in a context of empowerment and human rights" (Livingstone, 2011: 417), namely children's rights to participate, express their opinions and be informed, as is advocated by the Convention on Child's Rights. The core idea was to provide resources that empower citizens, young and adults, to deal critically with media, either traditional or new media. As Livingstone stated, "it is certain that most cultures hope children will be critical media consumers, though not all provide, or can provide, the educational resources to enable this" (Livingstone, 2011: 417).

The choice of the book as the format for the creation of these resources in an age of digital media was purposeful. The aim was to create a resource accessible to all, easy to transport and handle, at home, at school, anywhere. The visual language was intended to capture the attention of children, arousing their curiosity and imagination and creating interest for reading it, by themselves or with their parents or teachers. We wanted these resources also to involve digital info-excluded people, giving them the opportunity to reflect on children's experiences with the media.

A less positive or a less achieved dimension of the project was the difficulty in doing the follow-up on the reception and use of the booklets within families, schools and libraries. We received feedback from many parents and teachers who witnessed the importance and need for such resources, as shown by the quotations below transcribed.

> *- I liked the text, I found it accessible and clear. It is not a moralist text (mother).*
>
> *- Everything in this booklet is relevant (mother).*
>
> *- The document in general seems very well done, is methodical in the presentation and in the recommendations, ending with concrete information on legislation and contacts (father).*
>
> *- This work is very important and useful for parents. More than this, it is urgent! (parents).*
>
> *- The contents seem to me to have relevant and useful information, with practical recommendations that are even possible to achieve (father).*
>
> *- It is clear and accessible, and can be helpful to parents who worry about these matters, or even a warning to those who do not care (father).*
>
> *- This document is very important for educators, works well as an orientation guide! I hope this text could be widely publicised (mother).*
>
> *- I considered it extremely important, especially because in the daily life we don't think much about these issues and a booklet will be a way to check our responsibilities as educators, not just in relation to television but also for a greater interaction with our children (mother).*

The team also had positive feedback from experts and researchers, but it would be important to listen to a greater number of people to do a deeper evaluation of the project's impact. It would be really important to monitor the use of the booklets by parents, teachers and children and in some contexts such as families and schools. Nevertheless, conclusions from other studies that evaluate the practices in schools after the distribution of kits of materials show favorable results. For instance, Susanne Krucsay, Director of the

Department of Media Pedagogy and of the Production Services from the Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture in Austria, stated that studies conducted after the distribution of support materials in media education for teachers show that "there is a significant positive correlation between the frequency of media use in education, held in school practices with relevant material" (Krucsay, 2007: 118).

The added value of this project is not only the products, but also the process to achieve them. The involvement of several teachers from ten schools, a collaboration of more than 200 children, and the work and the discussion enhanced by the activities proposed by the team were by themselves an opportunity for media education.

Despite the constraints related to the economic crisis and the consequent difficulty to involve more social actors, namely the media, in a wider distribution and dissemination of the booklets, the presentations to students, parents, teachers and librarians in several sessions enabled us to sensitize these social agents to the importance of media literacy. The concern with the contents and the need for the information to be based on research findings, written in a plain language and avoid a moralist tone was, in the team's perspective, a positive aspect valued by the recipients.

The design and implementation of resources for media education if is based on a humanist perspective, as advocated in the introduction to this paper, values not only the product but also the process and takes into account the potential of the individuals, their voices, opinions and sensitivity. This was the perspective taken in this project. In the team's perspective, resources do not come from outside or from a source supposedly enlightened, with the appropriate prescription for action that should be taken. They are, rather, moments of an intrinsic process to the action, even when they come from experiences geographically distant. Hence, the advantages of the production of resources come not only from action, but also from research.

As Marc Scheuer states, "Currently, citizens (individuals of all ages and gender) need to develop analytical skills that enable them to better understand the emotional and intellectual world of symbols produced by the new media" (Sheuer, 2009: 15). Therefore, it is important to provide resources that give citizens the opportunity to think about their relationship with the media. That allows them to think about the importance and the meaning of the media in their everyday life, particularly in their children's lives. As the Portuguese Nobel José Saramago said in his book "O Conto da Ilha Desconhecida" (The Tale of the Unknown Island) (2010), "it is necessary to leave the island to see the island, we do not see unless we go out of."

At the end, a final note to underline how important the support and the funding from the Belgian Evens Foundation was for the implementation of this project.

Notes

[1.] On this particular point, we have incorporated ideas from the study Pinto et al., 2011.

[2.] Some of the material collected was analysed more deeply for other studies with other purposes. For instance, the texts about videogames were submitted to a systematic content analysis, which allows the researchers to further understand the perspectives and the perceptions of young people about the phenomena of the electronic games. For the booklet on Internet and Social Networks, the team did a survey of teachers' perspectives on this issue by applying a questionnaire. This work was presented in the Congress 'Literacy, Media and Citizenship', held in Braga in March 2011, and was published in the proceedings of the congress (available on: http://www.lasics.uminho.pt/OJS/index.php/lmc/article/viewFile/516/489).

[3.] Braga is located in northern Portugal, has about 180,000 inhabitants and is considered one of the most dynamic cities in the country. The University of Minho has its headquarters in this city.

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