

Resources for Media Literacy: Mediating the Research on Children and Media

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Resources for Media Literacy: Mediating the Research on Children and Media

Recursos para la alfabetización mediática: investigación y propuestas para niños

ABSTRACT

Much has been said and written about media education, its relevance and goals. Beyond directives, resolutions or recommendations, research in this area has deepened the foundations of media education but has also emphasized its weak points or faults. One of these critical points noted in the training and research work developed at the University of Minho, Portugal, in the last 20 years is the non-existence of resources and materials that could be used to promote media education in different contexts. But this is not just about the availability of materials, it concerns the importance of putting knowledge into practice and of mediating the knowledge produced with the appropriate audience. This concern was the basis of the 'Media Education in Booklets' project carried out by the Society and Communication Research Centre and funded by the Evens Foundation, Belgium. This paper presents the resources produced by this project in the form of three booklets: the first deals with the mediation of TV at school and at home; the second describes videogames, ways of playing, benefits, dangers, creativity and interculturality; the third is about the Internet and social networks, and the new forms of relationships and communication that these allow.

RESUMEN

Mucho se ha investigado 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 y solidificar sus fundamentos, al tiempo que ha facilitado el reconocimiento de sus puntos más débiles u omisiones. Uno de los puntos críticos destacados por la formación y por el trabajo de investigación que se ha desarrollado en la Universidad de Miño (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. De esta forma, independientemente de los recursos y materiales, se genera la importancia de la transferencia de conocimientos a la práctica, la trascendencia de la mediación del conocimiento producido a su público. Esta preocupación fue la base principal del proyecto titulado «Recursos para la alfabetización mediática» llevado a cabo en el Centro de Estudios de Comunicación y Sociedad y financiado por Evens Foundation (Bélgica). Este trabajo presenta sucintamente los procesos de creación y los resultados generados por estos recursos, centrados en tres medios: televisión, videojuegos e Internet y redes sociales.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Media literacy, knowledge mediation, children, youth, school, family, television, videogames, social networks. Alfabetización mediática, mediación del conocimiento, jóvenes, escuela, familia, televisión, videojuegos, redes sociales.

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1. The importance and meaning of media literacy resources

In recent years, media education has risen to the top of the agenda of major international organizations. «Media literacy is a paramount goal of the EU's public policy» was a statement of intent that launch a series of action programs, as emphasized at the time (Reding, 2009) by the then 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). On a local level these trends represent a significant stimulus, while encouraging private initiatives to explore a horizon of meaning and map framing; yet these initiatives in themselves are not enough to produce successful actions and projects. They require, among other things, incentive plans and inspiring resources for their development.

Since at least the 1970s, the definitions of media education have clearly distinguished it from other concepts related to «educational media» or «educational use of media». For example, in 1973, the UNESCO-linked International Council of Cinema and Television 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 theory and in pedagogical practice». The Council also 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 also be said for ICT and their place in a communication and educational landscape that has changed greatly in recent decades. But this is not to say that media education does not require tools and resources developed with accuracy and interest. In the case of the media, the diversity of means, language and gender, together with their role in the expression and enunciation of contemporary life, provide an inexhaustible fountain of resources, making the media a necessary and unavoidable study subject and a space propitious 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. Teacher training, intervention in the field, scientific research and the definition and implementation of policies are other dimensions which have to be considered, independently or in relationship to each other.

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

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

a) Networks of knowledge, in relationships and projects that welcome the contributions, competences, knowledge skills of each member of the network, be they a person or an institution.

b) Organizations as resources, their objectives, organization, action plans, their moments and important events. 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 up surprising horizons with regard to resources. It also somehow relativizes a recurrent discourse about the «lack of conditions» which, in some cases, is merely an excuse for inaction. In reality, all actors directly or indirectly involved in media education are potentially –and literally– producers of resources, while also being nodes of a vast network of people and institutions¹.

Although the media are not prodigal when reporting on what they do and on scrutinizing their own 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 self-regulatory bodies such as ombudsmen, and hetero-regulatory bodies like the media regulatory authorities. In both cases, they are 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 launched projects and initiatives related to media literacy. Official programs –from governments, international organizations, NGOs, etc.– are often a source of useful and effective material (which does not mean that they should not be subjected to critical analysis). In this sense, academic works resulting from studies and research are increasingly accessible through national and transnational repositories, and can be a very important resource because of

the clues for further reading they might provide. Last, but not least, reports of experiments carried out in classrooms, in different curriculum subjects, in after-school and training activities in contexts other than schools, represent an inexhaustible supply of inspiration and attention, if only to indicate the paths or solutions that should be avoided. 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 essential resources.

The outline of a non-reductive view of the resources needed for media literacy would, however, be incomplete if we did draw attention to a final element related to the vision of the role of media in society and culture. In fact, this element underlines a larger issue in media education development. As pointed out in 1989 by the influential Canadian work «Media Literacy Resource Guide», the resources have little meaning if they do not take into account the underlying rationale. This includes the recognition that the media construct social reality, but at the same time, they are themselves a reality socially constructed. Media output contains ideologies and worldviews that are more often invisible to the naked eye; 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 era of mainstream media, and it happens now but on a larger scale in the age of interactive and digital media.

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

2.1. Starting points: the evidence from research

On 16 December 2008, a resolution on «Media Literacy in a Digital World» passed by 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». This recommendation, and the research along these lines, has highlighted the importance of the

family context for media reception. Several researchers have stressed the value of the family in mediating children's relationship with the media (Strasburger & al., 2009; Lemish, 2008; Pinto, 2005; Pereira, 1999). In fact, one of the main discoveries of research 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 do not always possess the necessary tools to analyse and understand this reality and act upon it. Several studies developed in different

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countries show the significance of direct interaction between children and adults. If parents discuss, comment on and help children interpret media content, they can help their children understand their messages.

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

As a result, parents should be sensitized to this important task and have access to resources that inform them on how to deal with children's media experiences. In Portugal, the lack of materials and guidelines has conditioned the implementation of media education in contexts such as school or family. This led us to design a project, having taken the results from research as a starting point, the various experiences from training and considering the gap between theory and practice identified by research and training, whose main aim was to produce materials to support media

literacy in the family. This project, entitled «Media Education in Booklets», was awarded the 2009 Evens Foundation Prize in Media Education by this Belgian organization, which encouraged us to take this opportunity to bridge the gap identified by the research – the need for resources in media education (Figure 1).

2.2. The «Media Education in Booklets» project: main objectives

Based on the assumptions presented above, the main aims of the project were: 1) to provide materials to help parents and teachers to mediate young people's experiences with media; 2) to empower educational agents (parents, teachers, socio-cultural facilitators) and children to become critical and demanding media consumers; 3) to contribute to the improvement of the level of consumer/ citizen information (considering that the quality of the media also depends on the critical awareness of their public).

2.3. Themes and target audience

To put these ideas into action, the team conceived three booklets written in a simple verbal and an attractive visual language, which would be easy to read and carry. The entire project was guided by media education objectives in the sense given it by Rivoltella (2007: 23): «media education, or rather, citizenship education, should provide especially meta-reflective activities, promoting citizens' capacity of self-analysis that contributes to the development of the awareness of what they are doing».

Each of the three publications focused on a specific medium: TV, videogames and the Internet and social networks. The choice of these media was due

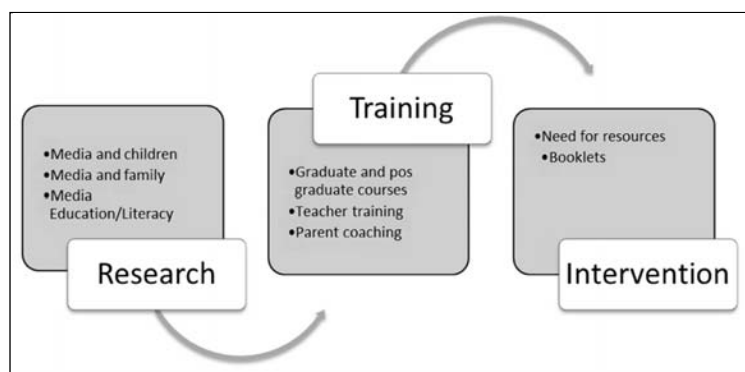


Figure 1. From research to the field: the need for resources.

to their importance in the lives of young people.

The TV booklet is organized in three parts (Figure 2): the first part reflects TV habits and clarifies some common sense ideas about the role of TV in children's lives; part two is mostly dedicated to the mediation process, trying to sensitize the parents to this important task; the third part proposes some activities to enrich the experience of watching television. The figure below describes these three parts of this booklet in greater detail.

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 on videogames. It also focuses on the dangers and potential of videogames identified by the research and 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.

The Internet and Social Networks booklet centers on topics like the social networks most used by young people; new forms of communication and their importance

in the process of young people's socialization; and the significance of contexts (cultural, social) in the access to and sharing of information. Another topic is dedicated to a brief discussion of the possible consequences of excessive habitual use and the risk of social isolation. The booklet ends with a

Kids and TV: Watching Wisely	
1st part	Reflecting and clarifying
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing a diary: what happens during a week (with or without TV) • Topics for program analysis with children: fictional and informative programs • How to complain or to praise: information about TV networks and TV programs: postal and web addresses

Figure 2. Main parts of the TV booklet.

Videogames: Stepping up to the Next Level	
1st part:	Videogame history and its contribution to technological development
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection between children and young people with videogames • Children's practices and perspectives on videogames • Dangers and potential identified by the research and society
3rd part:	Mediation: videogames in school and in the family
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies for parental mediation • The place of videogames in school • The role of media education

Figure 3. Main parts of the Videogames booklet.

reference to the need for digital literacy and the importance of family and peer mediation, considering social networks as potential means of participation and citizenship. Figure 4 presents the main parts of this booklet.

The booklets are aimed at a wide age range. The television booklet is primarily for six-year-old school goers; the videogames booklet focuses on 8-10-year-olds, and the Internet and Social Networks is aimed at children of 12 and older. In terms of reading and use, the booklets were designed for parents, teachers and, of course, children, 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 from national and international research. The first step was to gather in this information. The authors were concerned to avoid a moralistic perspective or to provide a ready-to-use set of strategies. The main aim was to provide information based on the evidence from 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, etc. As the content of the booklets is predominantly based on the relationship of young people with media, the aim was for their voices to be heard throughout these publications, and the best way to do this was through drawings

and texts produced by the children themselves whose ages ranged from 6 to 15. This material was collected at schools and the team subsequently selected drawings and texts for publication, according to the topics of the booklets.

The project involved about 200 students from 10 schools in northern Portugal. As already mentioned, students participated by presenting drawings and texts which enriched the publications with their perceptions. The involvement of these schools in the project gave the children an opportunity to learn and share experiences of media consumption habits and patterns of usage. Furthermore, in doing so, children and young people were not considered to be mere consumers but producers and participants.

With this material and data collected from the literature, the authors were able to produce the content of the booklets, with the collaboration of a designer who created three characters for the publications, thereby lending continuity to the three booklets and framing the material produced by the children².

Before publication, the texts were sent to parents, teachers and/or experts in the field to check the clarity of language and suggestions for corrections or amendments. These comments were a valuable contribution to the final review and also provided an initial sounding-out of public acceptance of the booklets.

Internet and Social Networks: Caught up in the Web	
1st part:	Social network concept, users and impact:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are social networks? • Profile of social network 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:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privacy and identity: data sharing and security • Research and use of information and media content • Fighting excess, addiction, alienation • Participation and citizenship
3rd part:	Suggestions for families, schools and teachers:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies for mediation at home and school

Figure 4. Main parts of the Internet and Social Networks booklet.

Finally, the booklets were published with different launch date, and disseminated throughout the country.

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

2.5. Dissemination of the project

The way in which the project was disseminated and the booklets were distributed throughout Portugal was carefully considered beforehand. The team's intention, and the initial commitment given to the Foundation, was to distribute the booklets free of charge via a mass circulation national newspaper. However, difficulties arising from the economic crisis in the country hampered this goal, but were partly overcome by means of a partnership with a regional newspaper. Thus, the booklets were distributed by a newspaper that covers the city of Braga³ and the surrounding area, with a circulation of around 9,000 copies. The team's concern was that the booklets reached the largest number of people across various social classes and geographical areas.

This distribution strategy was accompanied by public meetings which the team held to launch the booklets. The three booklets were published on dates with a special meaning: the booklet about television was launched at a bookshop that celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of Children (November 20th, 2009); the videogames booklet was presented at the same bookshop coinciding with International Children's Day (June 1st, 2010); the Internet and Social Networking booklet was presented at a seminar on «Digital Literacy and Social Networks», which was attended by about 200 people. These sessions ensured significant exposure for the project and aroused much interest among the population, particularly in the media.

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

The team also foresaw that the project could reach beyond the

Portuguese border, and so the booklets were translated into English, which enabled their distribution at international conferences and encounters with people from the communication and education sciences. The idea was to make the project as widely known as possible, to raise awareness in researchers from different knowledge areas of the importance of media literacy and of providing resources to make this scientific knowledge more readily available to society.

In the first quarter of 2012 the booklets were made available online in Portuguese and English (www.lasics.uminho.pt/edumedia/?lang=en), thus reaching out to an even greater target audience.

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 advocated by the Convention on the Rights of Children. The core idea was to provide resources that empower citizens, young people and adults to deal critically with media, either traditional or new. 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»

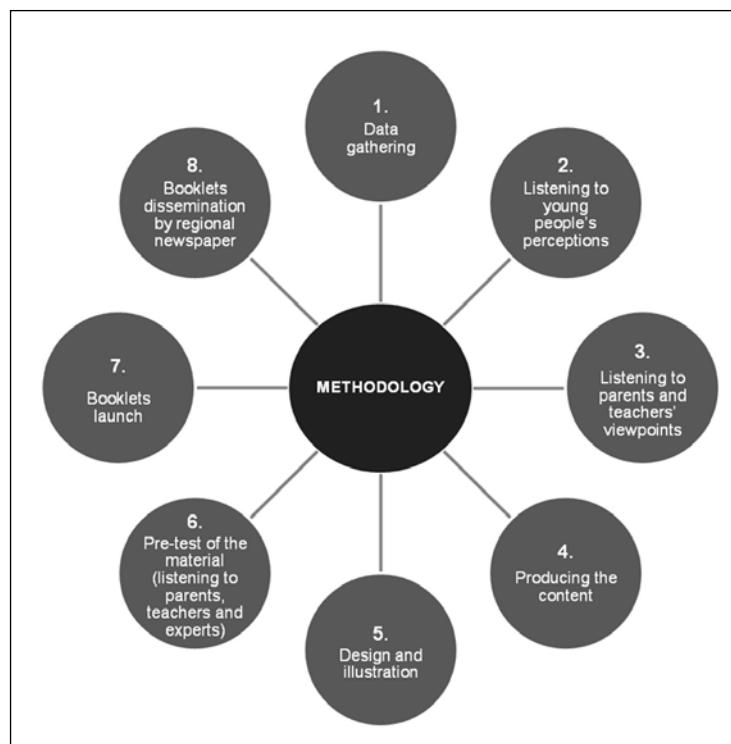


Figure 5. The project methodology.

(Livingstone, 2011: 417). The choice of the booklet as the format for the creation of these resources in an age of digital media was intentional. The aim was to create a resource accessible to all, easy to use and carry, whether at home, at school, or anywhere. The visual language was intended to capture the attention of children, arousing their curiosity, imagination and a desire to read it, by themselves or with their parents or teachers. We also wanted these resources to involve digitally info-excluded people, giving them the opportunity to reflect on children's experiences with the media.

A less positive or underachieved dimension of the project was the difficulty in following-up on the reception and use of the booklets within families, schools and libraries. In some way this was due to the fact that the team was not able to monitor the distribution of the booklets once distributed further than expected. Some testimonies received were sent in voluntarily and spontaneously by readers, which may explain their extremely positive tone. We received feedback from many parents and teachers who acknowledged the importance and need for such resources, as shown by the extracts transcribed below. The scarcity of media literacy resources in Portugal may also explain the booklets' positive reception. In future research on media education contexts, experiences and resources, the team expects to evaluate more rigorously the impact of this kind of material on building media awareness.

- I liked the text, I found it accessible and clear. It is not a moralistic text (mother).
- Everything in this booklet is relevant (mother).
- The document in general seems very well done; it 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 urgently needed! (parents).
- The contents seem to me to have relevant and useful information, with practical recommendations that are 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 is widely publicised (mother).

- I considered it extremely important, especially because in daily life we don't think much about these issues and a booklet is a way to check our responsibilities as educators, not just in relation to television but also for greater interaction with our children (mother).

The team also had positive feedback from experts and researchers, but the project needs to receive a broader range of opinion in order to make a more profound evaluation of the project's impact. It would be

It is important to provide resources that give citizens the opportunity to think about their relationship with the media, which allow them to think about the importance and meaning of the media in their everyday lives, particularly in their children's lives. It is with this perspective that the team hopes to continue producing materials that contribute to the promotion of media education, in particular, enlarging the collection of booklets to take in other media and topics, including advertising, mobile phones and citizen's participation in the media, among others.

invaluable to monitor the use of the booklets by parents, teachers and children, and in contexts such as families and schools. Nevertheless, conclusions from other studies that evaluate practices in schools after the distribution of media material kits present favorable results. For instance, Susanne Krucsay (2007: 118), Director of the Department of Media Pedagogy and of Production Services at 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 in school practices with relevant material».

The added value of this project is not only the products but also the process that took place to produce

them. The involvement of teachers at 10 schools, collaboration with more than 200 children, and the work and discussion enhanced by the activities proposed by the team were in themselves an opportunity for media education.

Despite the constraints of the economic crisis and the consequent difficulty in involving more social actors, namely the media, in a wider distribution and dissemination of the booklets, the presentations to students, parents, teachers and librarians enabled us to sensitize these social agents to the importance of media literacy. The concern with the content and the need for the information to be based on research findings, written in plain language and avoiding a moralistic tone was, from the team's perspective, positively valued by the recipients.

The design and implementation of resources for media education if based on a humanistic perspective (Pérez Tornero & Varis, 2010), as advocated in the introduction to this paper, values not only the product but also the process, and takes into account the potential of individuals, their voices, opinions and sensitivity. This was the perspective applied in this project, in which the resources do not come from outside, or from a supposedly enlightened source with the consequent prescription for action to be taken. They are, rather, moments in a process that is intrinsic to the action, even when they come from experiences spread over a broad geographical area. Hence, the advantages of the production of resources that come from action and research.

As Scheuer (2009: 15) 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». Therefore, it is important to provide resources that give citizens the opportunity to think about their relationship with the media, which allow them to think about the importance and meaning of the media in their everyday lives, particularly in their children's lives. It is with this perspective that the team hopes to continue producing materials that contribute to the promotion of media education, in particular, enlarging the collection of booklets to take in other media and topics, including advertising, mobile phones and citizen's participation in the media, among others.

As the Portuguese Nobel Prize winner 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 it unless we leave it». Applying this notion to the relationship with the media, it is important to

look at the media and media experiences from outside in order to understand them.

In a final note we wish to underline how important the support and funding from the Evens Foundation was for the implementation of this project.

Notes

¹ On this particular point, we have incorporated ideas from the study (Pinto & al., 2011).

² Some of the material collected was analyzed more deeply for other studies with different purposes. For instance, the texts about videogames were submitted to a systematic content analysis, which allows the researchers to further understand the perspectives and perceptions of young people on the phenomena of electronic games. For the booklet on Internet and Social Networks, the team did a survey of teachers' perspectives on this issue by questionnaire. This work was presented at the «Literacy, Media and Citizenship» congress, held in Braga in March 2011, and was published in the proceedings of the congress (www.lasics.uminho.pt/QJS/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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