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MEDIA LITERACY AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION EDUCATION ARE A GOOD MATCH

An Interview with Maria José Brites

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Maria José Brites is an Associate Professor at the Lusófona University, the Vice-President of the Centre for Research in Applied Communication, Culture, and New Technologies (CICANT), the coordinator of the MeLCi Lab — Media Literacy and Civic Cultures Lab, and the coordinator of the Publics and Audiences section of the Portuguese Association for Communication (SOPCOM). She is the principal investigator of the Youth, News and Digital Citizenship — YouNDigital project (PTDC/COM-OUT/0243/2021). She was the Portuguese coordinator of the European Media in Action and the RadioActive Europe projects, as well as the principal investigator of two research projects: the Social Media Resilience Toolkit — SMaRT-EU and DiCi-Educa. She was awarded the Prize for Inclusion and Digital Citizenship for good practices in the implementation of the RadioActive Europe project. Maria José Brites earned her PhD in Communication Sciences (2013) at the NOVA University in Lisbon, with a thesis focused on young people, the news and civic participation. She did a post-doctoral course (2014-2017) at the CECS/Minho University on the news as an educational tool for youth. Her research interests include youth, journalism, and civic participation; audience and reception

studies; news and civic literacy; participatory methodologies; civic cultures; hate speech; and media resistance.

You have just finished an experimental media literacy research project on institutions for educating youth and children who have committed crimes. Could you introduce it to us, please?

The project (DiCi-Educa) was conducted by the Lusófona University/CICANT with the cooperation of the Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services of Portugal and was financed by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. We worked with young people who were institutionalized in education centres (EC), which are used in Portugal to house youths and children who have committed an act that is a crime under the penal law. We introduced the EC students to digital photography (teaching them to take technically and thematically good photos and to create photo essays), podcasts (a radio show), and 360-degree videos about their daily life at the ECs. Then, at the next stage, we worked with them on the critical thinking process, talking about digital citizenship, civic participation, and otherness. These issues were chosen by the members of the research team and the staff who worked with the young people. We adapted them to the ideas and views of the institutionalised youth.

Were you allowed to use the internet in these centres?

No. We had to prepare the project knowing that we wanted to talk about digital literacy and digital citizenship, but that

we would have no permission to get online. This led us to believe that institutionalized youth are among the most excluded of citizens in terms of digital skills. However, we cannot forget that one day, they will leave the educational centres and will be using the internet again, although it has been forbidden to them for one, two, or three years. This can happen for instance to the 13- to 17-year-olds. Their experience is even harder because they face multiple kinds of exclusion — social, economic, and cultural.

What topics did the youth choose to cover in their work?

The topics included mainly the ideas of freedom, friendship, family, and nature — often some small aspect of their daily life, such as playing football, a tree, a plant, or a flower. We tried to encourage them to think in a deeper way through the lens of the camera, in a 360-degree video, or in a podcast, not in the rush of everyday reality. Their reflection on their experience was also part of the process, both during and after their engagement with media.

You started the DiCi-Educa before the pandemic. How was your research in such a setting affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?

We had to interrupt the project for a year beginning in March 2019 because the educational centres were among the first institutions in Portugal to be locked down — and we could not work on-line. So, we waited one year and then started again in January 2021, this time on-line.

As the students were already taking their school classes on-line, the institution was more receptive for this project also being on-line.

What were the findings of your project?

Besides improving the students' critical digital literacy skills, the project enhanced the confidence of these young people. In one of the centres, we were allowed to invite the students' families and friends to listen to their podcasts, and that was appreciated a lot by the youth.

What was the youths' vision of civic participation?

We did not tell them our own views about participation, but we discussed theirs with them. We asked them to reflect on what they understood by their participation. Sometimes, they said at first that they had had no experience with such activities, but as the discussion proceeded, we realised together that they did indeed have some experiences which could be labelled as civic participation, but they just had not realised it. Once, there was a small riot inside the educational centre. When the research team came in again, the students themselves started a debate about the riot. Some of them considered it a form of civic participation. In their way of thinking, they really understood it as a tool for fighting for something.

How did you react to that?

Well, if we label the riot as an act of civic participation, it was a negative one. In

such situations, we can discuss the context, the ideas behind the act, and the consequences for other involved people. To think about what could have been different, to widen the students' perspectives. We often do not consider or discuss negative options for civic participation, and yet even a Nazi or racist protest is a form of participation as well.

The results of the DiCi-Educa project were not published but stayed behind the walls of the centre. Still, did you have to conduct some censorship, for example, of the students' criticism of the conditions prevailing in the centre?

No, they said what they wanted, and we tried to discuss rather than censor.

Was it difficult to convince the institutions to collaborate on this project? What arguments did you use?

To enter the institutions, we first reached an agreement with the Directorate-General for Reintegration and Prison Services. Our research team was very diverse. One member had worked on issues of juvenile delinquency before, so she already knew the institutional staff. That was important for establishing the initial connections.

The children and youth detained in these centres are often traumatised and have a difficult family background. What helped you to gain their trust?

I have been researching youth and the media for the past ten years. I would say that with all kinds of people — not only the disadvantaged ones — the crucial thing is to be honest. Being transparent

and honest is the first step. I would not say that disadvantaged youth are the only group in which challenges should automatically be expected, because working with middle- and upper-class youth also poses challenges. My experience is that young people simply appreciate having a chance to talk freely about unexpected themes like journalism, digital citizenship, and other things. They like to be questioned and have their views considered regarding themes that are often associated with adults only.

There is a big debate within media literacy education (MLE) about whether MLE should promote active citizenship. Julian McDougal (Mc Dougal et al. 2015), Marketa Supa and Annemária Neag (2020), and some others are rather against that. Paul Mihailidis (Mihailidis &Thevenin, 2013) and Rennee Hobbs (2010) represent the academic stream that is more supportive of it. Where do you position yourself?

When we are addressing any issues in the field of media literacy, I think that it is important to contextualize them in everyday life. Why not do so in relation to issues connected with politics, civic life and civic participation? From my experience, it all works very well together.

That is true, however the critics of that approach say — among other things — that it is too ambitious to attempt to teach all parts of media literacy education, and that in reality, there is often too little time for such projects in schools. So, when one is trying to do so, it is not possible to tackle the non-core components of media literacy deeply enough.

That is a relevant point, but I think it is important to mix both media literacy and civic participation, because when we do, we can better explore the everyday context of citizenship with students.

Perhaps it is easier to acquire more time for MLE classes when one mixes the MLE and Civic Participation concepts. That is one more argument for convincing schools to dedicate more time to the MLE. In the end, is preventing people from sharing fake news purely an issue of media literacy or is it civics and citizen participation education?

Yes, exactly.

Your PhD thesis dealt with young people, the news, and civic participation. You have chosen the theme of the news as an educational tool for youth for your postdoctoral research. To what extent is the news a relevant topic for working with youth, when according to numerous studies young people do not follow the news very much?

I have also pursued this theme in another project called “RadioActive Europe.” We presented on-line radio to at-risk youth clubs. First, we provided the youth with some journalistic know-how (being journalist in the past myself helped). Despite the studies you mention indicating the distraction of young people from the news, the students found it appealing to express themselves on a news channel. For example, they appreciated doing interviews. At first it was challenging for them, but they really enjoyed it. Recording devices were the most

interesting piece of equipment for most of them. The same thing happened in the educational centres in our latest project.

Really? I suppose all of them have a recorder in their smartphones anyway....

Maybe, but they probably had never thought about using them this way. The smartphone is a very versatile tool; you can record your voice, a song, you can interview someone. There are so many options. The students did interviews, went out into streets, did reports. We also explored their organizational skills and tried to improve their use of their mother tongue.

For the RadioActive project, you have been awarded the Inclusion and Digital Citizenship Prize. What benefits did you discover when using reporting the news as an MLE tool?

In RadioActive, the participants stated that their school performance improved after participating in the project because they learned how to work in groups. They were better organised and knew better how to express themselves. According to some of them, their presentation skills improved. The great majority of the topics for the radio (90%) were chosen and produced by the youth. We adults — meaning the youth clubs’ staffs and the research team — were often astonished by their selection of topics, which included racism, civic participation, education, and gentrification.

How did their perception of the news change during the project, based on

their experience in the news production process?

They realised that the final product of, for example, a three-minute report requires a lot of work. They discovered that a lot of content they gathered was excluded in the final editing process. They had a somewhat romanticised view of journalistic work but got a more realistic picture of it.

Is media literacy education compulsory in Portugal?

It is not required as a separate subject in schools, but when one finishes his or her compulsory school education, it is now required that he or she have mastered some media literacy competences. In practice, it is a transversal topic.

What project are you planning in the near future?

In 2022, I am starting a project funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology that deals with young people, the news, and digital citizenship. We will take a mixed methods approach, although the project will still rely mostly on qualitative methods like media diaries and semi-structured interviews. We will have a digital newsroom (for the young people) and training for journalists. The YouNDigital project seeks to understand how the digital generation relates to the news. It does so by studying the links between young people, the news, and digital citizenship, seeking to understand the emerging dynamics of a deeply digitized society and to facilitate

training in the area. The challenges of this pressing area have gained relevance in today's democracies because of the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the main challenges of the YouNDigital project is researching the influence of the news and the connection between the news and gender, which is an understudied dimension of the problem.

Lucie Römer is a final year PhD student at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University. Her focus is mainly on media literacy education to promote political participation by disadvantaged youth. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4250-0308>

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