

Towards an epistemological model of media competence: paideia, maieutics and classical thought

Hacia un modelo epistemológico de competencia mediática: paideia, mayéutica y pensamiento clásico

Em direção a um modelo epistemológico de competência midiática: paideia, maiêutica e pensamento clássico

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MARIO MONTANER BASTÍAS¹

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8878-1475>

MARCELO CAREAGA BUTTER²

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2404-4898>

ANDRÉS SEGUEL ARRIAGADA³

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2549-5890>

Media competence has gained relevance in the 21st century as an essential skill to face the challenges of the media environment. This essay explores its objectives, seeking epistemological support to facilitate its understanding. A relationship between media competence, Greek paideia and maieutics is proposed, questioning the positivist paradigm that has predominated in the study of the media. Finally, elements from classical schools of thought are integrated to enrich its approach, offering an epistemological foundation that reinforces its purpose of social and individual good.

KEYWORDS: Media literacy, media competence, educommunication, epistemology.

La competencia mediática ha cobrado relevancia en el siglo XXI como una habilidad esencial para enfrentar los retos del entorno mediático. Este ensayo explora sus objetivos y busca un sustento epistemológico que facilite su comprensión. Se propone una relación entre la competencia mediática, la paideia griega y la mayéutica, cuestionando el paradigma positivista que ha predominado en el estudio de los medios. Finalmente, se integran elementos de escuelas clásicas del pensamiento para enriquecer su enfoque y ofrecer un fundamento epistemológico que refuerce su propósito de bien social e individual.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Alfabetización mediática, competencia mediática, educomunicación, epistemología.

A competência midiática ganhou relevância no século XXI como uma habilidade essencial para enfrentar os desafios do ambiente midiático. Este ensaio explora seus objetivos, buscando apoio epistemológico para facilitar sua compreensão. Ele propõe uma relação entre a competência midiática, a paideia grega e a maiêutica, questionando o paradigma positivista que predominou no estudo da mídia. Por fim, elementos das escolas clássicas de pensamento são integrados para enriquecer sua abordagem, oferecendo uma base epistemológica que reforça seu propósito de bem social e individual.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Alfabetização midiática, competência midiática, educomunicação, epistemologia.

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¹ Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción, Chile.

mmontaner@ucsc

² Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción, Chile.

mcareaga@ucsc

³ Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción, Chile.

asequel@doctoradoedu.ucsc

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INTRODUCTION

If the objective is to explain an argument and what is implied by media competence, it is convenient to specify the space in which an attempt has been made to install it as a basic exercise to approach its epistemological support. Turg'unboyev (2024) posits that, in the changing panorama of education, the integration of media literacy and technological skills has become indispensable, affirming that it is necessary to explore the pedagogical foundations that support the development of media competence. From an instrumental perspective, Kulibaba and Hidayberdiyeva (2024) conclude that formation in media-communicational competence can be carried out through multimedia technologies based on the pertinence of using them to establish effective communication between specialists. The concept is based on the principle of using multimedia technologies that allow the simulation of practical situations to evaluate the actions taken by specialists with the aim of solving problems.

Another way of analyzing media competence is offered by Chelysheva and Mikhaleva (2023), who affirm that media culture is part of the mass communication media, understanding that media education is growing significantly in the current scenario. The competences related to the ability to comprehend and critically analyze mass communication texts and to distinguish true media information from false, and the capacity to choose and utilize educational media competences and positive developments in formation, have become vital, particularly for the younger generation in our current media society.

From another perspective, in Xu et al. (2023, p. 152), media competence is linked to the communicational competences developed by students through social media. These authors indicate that there would be four dimensions of media competence in social media: 1) technical use, 2) interpretation of content, 3) content generation, and 4) anticipatory reflection, from which students significantly predict the development of their digital citizenship. From this base, the authors propose four paths to improve the digital citizenship of vocational high school students: 1) create adequate surroundings for students to apply their informa-

tion-technology skills; 2) improve the ability of vocational high school students to discriminate information on the Internet; 3) improve their interpersonal communication skills when dealing with technical support, and 4) construct an early warning system for the perception of behavior of vocational high school students.

The contributions of these authors, even with their nuances and different approaches, converge in a common space for the development of media competence that, for the effects of this essay, is none other than education, a discipline that has served as a shelter to justify (or at least try to justify) the pretention of making people competent in “command of knowledge, skills, and attitudes oriented towards the production, management, and analysis of media contents with and from diverse surroundings that encourage critical thinking” (Ríos Hernández et al., 2022, p. 245).

In a social sense, to educate can be understood as a verb, construct, or concept that is consubstantial to human nature, its impact does not appear to be absent in any culture or society, which can be appreciated as such, no matter the time or era. Often, its omnipresence means what it is and what it transcends are taken for granted and, thus, it is not an easy task to define it due to its immaterial character.

The Western world finds a good portion of its epistemological foundations in the pillars of societies of the ancient world. A first approximation to the meaning of *educate* is referred to etymologically in the Latin *educere*, as the action of guiding/driving, and *educare*, as the action of forming/instructing (Acosta, 2012). In turn, and invariably, both terms are related to the act of teaching, which in practice is linked to transferring. In Steiner (2004), this action refers to personified responsibility in the figure of the teacher as the guide that introduces the world to the disciple, having a bearing on his or her life through the act of educating.

In retrospect, Steiner’s (2004) vision, which attributes a sense of responsibility to the action of educating, finds support in Immanuel Kant, the benchmark of transcendental idealism and modern criticism, in whom this sense acquires the imperative of tuition as, in its conception, to educate implies care, discipline, and instruction as part of a transfer process in which the human being is conceived as the only creature

that can be educated. Consequently, Kant (1803/2009) argues that education is the only way a person can become a person, stimulating the cultivation of his or her intelligence.

Thus, if educating in Kant implies transfer, the concurrence of two subjects of action arises unavoidably, as observed by Arendt (1996), who describes a dynamic of intergenerational transmission between the old and the new, correspondingly between the one who educates and the one who is being educated. Furthermore, the German philosopher adds a new dimension that, in some way, protects and ennobles the consubstantial responsibility of the act of educating: love. It is that, in her criteria, the action of educating is explained as an expiatory act that reveals how much we love the world, so that through its intermediation we take on the responsibility of saving it from ruin, promoting the aforementioned intergenerational transmission, whose purpose is to prepare new generations with anticipation so that they become the ones that fulfil the task of renewing the common world.

In concrete terms, educating is an activity that is intrinsic to the human being and, by its essence, latent in the transfer from one to another, and refers to a social origin and character. As indicated by Acosta (2012), it is not possible to think of people in social terms without the concurrence of educational processes. Thus, the preponderance of education is highlighted as the guarantee and motor of the construction of life in society. Regardless of the origin, association, or tenor conferred on the act of educating, all its paths seem to present a common denominator: the virtue that encourages the desire of transfer to make things better for each new generation.

Knowledge transfer with the stamp of educating has allowed human genius –in the Western view– to create and put into practice different methods to fulfil that purpose, but as we approach the 20th century and beyond, this stamp begins to blur as people stop being the center and depository of this virtue in favor of other interests. Because of this, it would be convenient to follow the history of some of the schools of thought and actions that have centered on the action of educating, for and by people.

THE SOCRATIC METHOD: MAIEUTICS

It is worth warning that there will be neither pretention nor need in this intellectual exercise to describe what has been extensively analyzed with maieutics as the center and object of study. The only aim is to explain the virtue of its purpose to disclose how opposed it is to the positivist paradigm that governs contemporary society.

We start, therefore, from a point of questioning, with apparent resolution, if a person (educating) could educate himself or herself, there would be no reason for the teacher (educator) to exist. Maieutics obliges us to rethink this questioning, but not placing the teacher as a mere container of knowledge that is susceptible to transfer to the apprentice (educating).

The Socratic method that argues maieutics suggests a very different approach in which the teacher only stimulates that which the apprentice has to consolidate as knowledge from inside himself or herself. This is revealed in the dialogue the philosopher maintains with Theaetetus (Plato, n.d.), in which he confesses that his art has as a purpose to help give birth, in analogy and inspiration by the midwifery profession her mother practiced. Metaphorically, Socrates (teacher), as midwife, by means of the method that encloses maieutics, helps the apprentice to give birth to the knowledge that is taking shape inside him or her. Through a dialectic process, Socrates stimulates the educating, but not in the conviction of being the one who transfers knowledge, as he rejects that his interlocutor is an empty vessel. From maieutics, it is inferred that educating is an expression of assistance responsibility and thus, by extension in Arendt (1996), an act of love.

Authors from the 20th century that have developed their thinking under the dominant influence of the age of positivism and post-positivism keep finding a pretext in the maieutic method. In this respect, Gadamer (2001) declares without contradiction: “I believe that you can only learn through conversation” (p. 529), while Burbules (1999) lifts dialogue as a way of communication with a pedagogical stamp, and Alexander (2020) indicates that the evidence places dialogic education as a beneficial method both for students and professors.

MAIEUTICS AND MIRROR FOUNDATIONS IN MEDIA COMPETENCE

The first three decades of this millennium show the impact and omnipresence of information technology in global society (González de Eusebio & Tucho, 2021). In this context it has been possible to observe new vices described as *Infoxication* (Cornella, 2003), to describe the information avalanche and the consequent uncontrolled consumption that some people exposed to the media surroundings suffer; or *Digitovisual Infoxication* (Aguaded et al., 2018), which refers to the same, but in allusion to television and cinematographic contents of all types.

However, and despite all these concepts that arise in the 21st century, the first warnings with respect to what was coming have roots in the Grünwald Declaration (UNESCO, 1982), which drew the attention to the need to educate people in the consumption of news media. Media literacy would be the proposed path. From that point, a conceptual diaspora has increasingly been generated with the aim of contributing to this new form of literacy for people in the digital media context: informational media literacy (UNESCO, 2013), media education, edumunication, media competence, among others (Galeano, 2023). Even with their different approaches, all of them seek to put into practice a common end point that aims to cultivate thought and a critical posture in the consumption of contents that finally move towards finding significant and beneficial knowledge for the people.

In terms of the concept of *media competence*, the antecedents have their origin in the 1980's and early 1990's, although restricted to the English-speaking world (García-Ruiz et al., 2020). In relation to the publications dealing with media competence in Spanish, studying the Ibero-American context, these begin in the second decade of the 21st century, from the theoretical construct developed by Ferrés and Pisitelli (2012).

The proposal of these authors is based in prior contributions and conceptualizations, using Jenkins (2009) and the preliminary arguments of Ferrés (2007) in the context of competence in audiovisual communication, which would be the precursory construct for media competence. More than 50 experts from different nationalities analyzed the media

competence proposal based on Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012), which is supported in six dimensions (language; aesthetics; ideology and values; technology; interaction process, and production and broadcasting process). The contributions of these experts were consolidated in the article published by the authors in 2012, which has served as a reference point for multiple later studies developed in Ibero-America, whose objective is to measure the skill level the people (different groups and age ranges) possess of that competence, starting from the six dimensions and indicators it is composed of (Aguaded et al., 2018; Arenas-Fernández et al., 2021; Montaner, 2021).

Beyond the specific results obtained, including the details of each of the six dimensions that compose media competence, the studies underline the importance of cultivating a critical perspective in the consumption and generation of media content as a fundamental element to consolidate a healthy level of competence that allows people to insert themselves correctly in the new media surroundings, thus obtaining benefits from it (Aguaded et al., 2018; Foronda et al., 2018; García-Ruiz et al., 2020).

From this, it is possible to establish a meeting point between maieutics and media competence, the latter circumscribed to the field of educommunication that, in Barbas (2012), is understood as a dialogic process. Maieutics, developed as a method by Socrates (Plato, n.d.), as observed before, stimulates the critical perspective in order to obtain significant and truthful knowledge, a process in which there is someone that stimulates exploration from questioning and analysis to someone in formation. There is no controversy in its foundational spirit, because its ulterior motive is the development of the person.

Media competence, that aims to promote the cultivation of a critical perspective in people to face the omnipresent media surroundings of the 21st century (Foronda et al., 2018), could present contradictions linked to the concept of *competence*, as Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012) refer to the fact that this concept arises as a response to the needs of companies and the working world, which is very distant from that of education. From this vision, it would not be about cultivating the person for the benefit of the person, but rather for the benefit of productive industry. Even though both researchers describe how the term

was gradually incorporated into the academic world, it is not possible to sidestep its initial impression.

It is worth questioning whether, in the academic context, the concept of competence has experienced a change in paradigm in which people become the center of its efforts. Certainly, there is evidence of initiatives that have shown the importance of the need to move towards the formation of people who are media literate, such as the Grünwald Declaration (UNESCO, 1982) and the Paris Agenda (European Parliament, 2008), but it is impossible to forget that the Boulogne Declaration (1999) –supported by 29 European education ministers– proposed rethinking the mission of the university “bringing that institution closer to the interests and needs of companies and the society” (Sierra Sánchez, 2010, pp. 156-157). Here the road seems to fork between the objective of *paideia* and that of media competence, which invites a rethinking of the epistemological foundations of the latter.

PAIDEIA AS A REFERENCE FOR MEDIA COMPETENCE

The positivist paradigm consolidated its epistemological foundation in the principle of an objective and measurable truth (Herrera, 2024). However, in the search for a single truth, it renounces, in some manner, the diversity of perspectives and interpretations of reality, thus reducing media competence to mere technical skills, which are also susceptible to being measured, but neglecting its ethical and value dimension and complexity. This is in intense opposition to education based on the fundamentals of Greek *paideia*.

As has been described in the voices of different authors, media competence can be people’s domain by means of the cultivation of a critical perspective as a tool to filter significant knowledge from the relationship with the media surroundings, but how is it possible to meet the objective of strengthening people in this critical perspective?

It is not our intention to position the fundamentals of *paideia* as the only response to the question, but it could help with the intellectual exercise in discovering or, at least, offering an epistemological foundation for media competence that contributes to the benefit of people and not industry, as the use of the concept of competence did in its origins.

As Careaga (2020) explains, education in ancient Greece was not reduced solely to the learning of knowledge, as it placed special attention on the transfer of values in favor of *knowing how to be* and *knowing how to do*, the latter of which is very closely related to the basis of what it means to be competent. The same thinker refers to the fact that *paideia* tends towards the virtuous development of the individual as a social actor and political and cultural agent. If we pause in this last point, we can make a connection with media competence, as educating in media implies the citizen knowing and assuming his or her political, economic, and social responsibility (Tucho, 2006).

Consequently, the historical moment in which media competence is installed coincides with an era described in Bauman (2003) as *Liquid Modernity*, referring to all that belongs to postmodernity, a space in which everything seems to be volatile and in constant change. Using Bauman's metaphor, Area and Pessoa (2012) indicate that the digital culture is a fluid of information and unstable knowledge in constant change. In this context, in permanent tension, media competence is inserted.

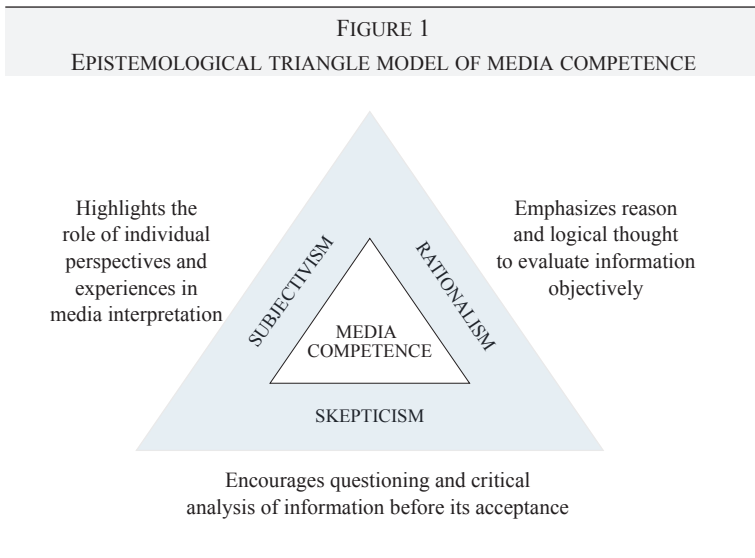
The risks associated with postmodernity have begun to be warned as pernicious for people. Lipovetsky (2000) points out that postmodern society lacks a historical project to serve as a guide because it is governed by the vacuum, which promoted a move towards a *Society of Ignorance* (Brey et al., 2012) with the danger that the excess of information will end up encouraging a renunciation of knowledge and, in consequence, an acceptance of imposed visions. The vision of these thinkers supposes an adverse scenario for the cultivation of a critical perspective that attempts to stimulate and strengthen people.

The cultivation of a critical perspective is a process that is inherent to being and operates as a vehicle to access knowledge and cannot be disassociated from the person as, in its essence, the Socratic method and maieutics recognize, and whose focus attempted to form critical and reflective citizens who could actively participate in the life of society.

Up to this point, we have offered a view that could reveal contradictions between what media competence promotes, which is, on one hand, to educate in the responsible and critical consumption of

media and, on the other, to respond from the initial conceptualization given to the concept of competence that did not contribute to the holistic development of people, but rather to other interests, as has already been pointed out. The declaration of its objectives seems to enter into a more harmonious dialogue with the fundamentals of the spirit of paideia and maieutics than with those of the postmodern society.

Media competence posits objectives clearly in terms of what people are expected to reach and the way to achieve it. However, it is important to draw attention to the need for specialist trainers in this field to help people to conceive their own knowledge, starting from the exercise of questioning and critical perspective being supported in the Socratic method in the educational context.



Source: The authors.

As a proposal to enrich the focus in media competence, it is possible to combine elements of rationalism, skepticism, and subjectivism, with the aim of strengthening its epistemological foundation from argumental orientations and lines of the three classical schools of thought but respecting its own nature and needs.

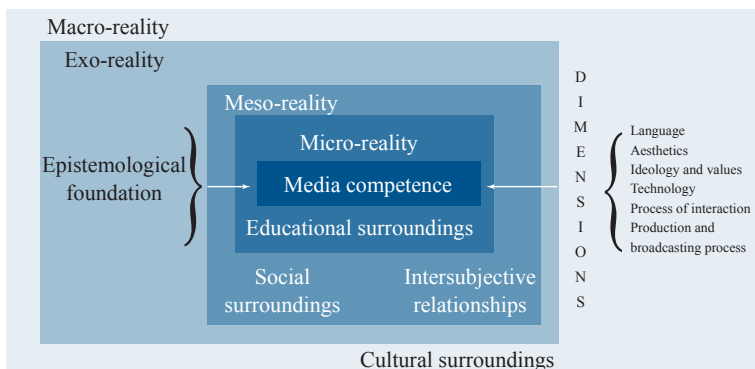
Rationalism is built upon universal philosophers such as Socrates, Aristotle, Saint Thomas, and Descartes. Descartes (1637/2006), considered as its greatest icon and author of the *Discourse on Method*, argues that will must be submitted to reason, following everything that understanding indicates as the best, and assumes that reality has a rational character, revealing distrust in the senses as a means of obtaining knowledge (Linàs, 2017). In the context of media competence, rationalism offers orientation as it encourages the use of reason and logical thought to evaluate the immense whirlpool of information in an objective manner. In a highly polarized and fragmented context, rationalism is a valid tool to promote dialogue and mutual understanding (Habermas, 1987).

For its part, skepticism, in the voice of its main exponent, Pyrrho of Elis (360-270 b.C.), argues that the pretention of knowing the truth is impossible. The critical positioning of this school of thought offers the possibility to question information and not accept it but rather submit it to critical analysis. In media surroundings characterized by the proliferation of fake news, skepticism can be cultivated as an essential skill to discriminate between truth and fiction (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Finally, subjectivism in Nietzsche is based on the impossibility of the existence of one truth, an argument that is picked up by Hume (1998), the modern representative of this school, to establish a criticism of the principle of causality of human knowledge, referring to the fact that this is solely derived from experience. Subjectivism, by affirming that the source of knowledge and any truth depends on each individual, recognizes, for the effects of the consolidation of media competence, the diversity of individual perspectives and experiences in the interpretation of the media. By not imposing one absolute truth, subjectivism affirms that media interpretation is determined by the individual nature of people and their contexts.

The model below is based on the Ecological Focus of Environmental Systems of Bronfenbrenner (1979) that establishes a rationality for the analysis of complex realities linking the relationships between the macro and micro realities and establishing that environments are not distinguished from each other with reference to linear variables

FIGURE 2
SYSTEMIC MODEL OF MEDIA COMPETENCE



Source: The authors, based on the Ecological Theory of Environmental Systems of Bronfenbrenner (1979).

but rather are analyzed in terms of *interrelated systems*. In the most interior level of the diagram, the basic unit of analysis is situated that, for the effects of this model, is media competence. This is understood as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that people possess to face their communicational surroundings, that goes deeper than a mere instrumental use, involving reflection and critical analysis as a necessary condition for complete command. Media competence acquires its contents and evidence of performance in the educational surroundings in which it is possible to observe or measure them.

The next level of analysis corresponds to the meso-reality in which the intersubjective relationships that subjects experience take place in a specific social context characterized by the dynamic of these interactions. From the exo-reality emerge the epistemological foundations that hold the model up, linking with the macro-reality where the dimensions of language are to be found, which implies the intentionality of the model components transfer. This is where the dimension of aesthetics is also found, and is made up of the elements of beauty, harmony, and art and is balanced from the act of communicating itself. Here also is

the dimension of ideology and values that includes ways of thinking and invariable and unchangeable elements that things, forms, and actions possess, incorporating hierarchies and permanent value scales. In the macro-reality is included the dimension of technology that refers to processes of reflection and construction of knowledge about the techniques used to transform communication into media, and finally the processes of production and broadcasting and interaction of the contents that media competence requires to exercise its communicational dynamics.

CONCLUSIONS

Media competence emerges as a fundamental skill in contemporary society that must be situated beyond its technical skills from a place which includes a critical posture and comprehension of media and its impact on society. By questioning the positivist paradigm and arguing for a perspective inspired by Greek *paideia* it is possible to move towards a holistic education that shapes critical and reflective citizens.

The foundations of *paideia* and the Socratic method inscribed in *maieutics* allow us to see how important it is for media competence to strive to place people as the maximum beneficiaries. On the other hand, they invite us to reflect not only on the skills and knowledge that, by their intermediation, people can reach, but also rethink the role of the educator not only as a mere transmitter of knowledge, but as a critical and stimulating agent through questioning and guidance so that the process of assimilation of true knowledge is really significant for those who cultivate it in the context of the current digital society.

Much has been written on what media competence implies, about its purpose and its effects, but there are scarce reflections that attempt to describe and provide a foundation for the basis of its epistemology. In the development of this essay, we have sought to establish that its nature and objectives lead into the act of educating and, with the aim of enriching its basis, a theoretical exercise has been done that combines elements of rationalism, skepticism, and subjectivism. This has been done to enrich not only its focus, but also its most essential foundations in order to provide tools that allow people to cultivate a critical perspective to face the challenges of modern society.

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PROFILES

Mario Andrés Montaner Bastías

Academic assistant at the Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción (UCSC). Journalist with a degree in Social Communication, Master in Creative Communication. He is currently a student of the Doctorate in Education in Consortium of the UCSC. His lines of research are: teacher training and learning, and educommunication.

Marcelo Careaga Butter

Full time academic of the Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción (UCSC). He holds a PhD in Philosophy and Educational Sciences from the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Spain. Postdoctoral studies at the University of Bristol, United Kingdom; and Ramón Llull University, Spain (in development). He holds a Master's degree in Education, mention in Curriculum, Universidad de Concepción. He is a Professor of State, History and Geography at the University of Chile. His research interests are: curriculum integration of technologies in educational and intercultural contexts based on knowledge management and mobilization.

Andrés Ignacio Seguel Arriagada

PhD student in Education in Consortium of the UCSC. He is a psychopedagogue and special educator, with a degree in Education, Master in Educational Sciences and in Curricular Innovation and Educational Evaluation. His lines of research are: curriculum theory, design and evaluation.