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GLOBAL HANDBOOKS IN
MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION
RESEARCH

The Handbook of Media Education Research

WILEY Blackwell

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The Handbook of Media Education Research

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Foreword

Ulla Carlsson

There is an urgent need to gain a better understanding of the meaning and consequences of globalization and digitization from the point of view of citizens and media. A changing world puts new demands on education in general, and this challenge is particularly acute for media education, which has an increasingly widening mandate. While the impact of globalization and digitization may appear to cast a net that is wider than the purview of media education, there is no doubt that they are central to our practices as educators and our research objectives.

Broader collaboration across boundaries in coordinated studies that produce comparable results is essential for the development of media education, where research is conducted in many different disciplines. Current research sometimes presents contradictory results, possibly even aggravating an already normatively loaded debate, such as the one on disinformation (or “fake news”) on the effects of the digitization of media.

Even in research, there is a need for holistic perspectives and transparency. But a host of factors in academic research – the incessant struggle to find funding, the pressure to publish quickly with an ever-greater specialization – militate against holistic approaches.

One issue I have wrestled with for many years is the dominance of the Northern hemisphere. Concepts connected to media and media education are often seen with eyes that have been conditioned by analytical categories developed predominantly within the Anglo-American sphere. These categories have then been applied

to other very different social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. Such a hegemonic perception has become prevalent all over the world. So, researchers, educators, experts, and policymakers need to transcend cultural, political, ethnic, and religious boundaries to accommodate regional variations in a manner that is much greater than is done today.

The challenge for researchers is not only to explain the problems but also to communicate with the people in power so that research findings will make a difference. They need to dare to engage in debates on democracy, social change, human rights, freedom of expression – and the role of media education in relation to these fundamental values (cf. Bulger and Davison [2018](#); Carlsson [2019](#); Jolls and Johnsen [2018](#)).

In such a context, *The Handbook on Media Education Research* makes a very important contribution to increasing our knowledge and understanding of media education on a global basis. Nearly 40 well-known, international researchers formulate important themes, approaches, and valuable insights into the dynamic and evolving field of media education research in the digital age. The book provides a fruitful framework for discussing critical issues from different perspectives: theoretical, methodological, and practical; educational, pedagogic, and political; local and global. The goal stated in the introductory chapter to present a “historically informed and future-oriented work” is very well achieved through this broad and in-depth picture of the state of media education research around the world. *The Handbook on Media Education Research* offers researchers, decision-makers, teachers, and practitioners the knowledge and experience needed for media education to be effective from a civic and long-term perspective.

The Media and Communication Culture in the Digital Age

Around the world, citizens are struggling to bring about an internet that is open, free, and safe – that is, to abolish surveillance, control, censorship, misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and threats. In some instances, politicians and civil society organizations are calling for government measures to help them achieve these goals. In other countries, authoritarian regimes use the internet and social media to justify repression, including measures to limit freedom of expression. The powers of state and private interests combine to silence free speech. The internet can have quite different impacts on social order.

In this context, we should bear in mind that nearly half of humanity lacks internet access – in many cases due to poverty, social injustice, gender discrimination, ethnic or religious discrimination, or unemployment (ITU [2018](#); SPI [2018](#); UNESCO [2018](#)). Exclusion from the digital media and communication system, however, can mean exclusion from a primary site of power and connection that binds together societies and regions around the world.

Many states also have active cyber operations for offensive and defensive actions to attack another nation's information infrastructure through, for example, computer viruses, denial-of-service attacks, and propaganda. It is not easy in this context to gain an overview of the cyberworld that confronts citizens today.

We could assume that we are now at a point that may be described as “the end of the digital beginning” (Kueng [2017](#), p. 9). Following a period of optimism, not to say euphoria, about the potentialities the internet offered – not least hopes for increasing citizen engagement and

participation – problems have become apparent. The media ecology has changed, and the public sphere has been transformed.

These changes are taking place within socioeconomic orders that are in flux. In many places, changing political, social, and economic landscapes, characterized by growing inequality and polarization, mean that societal institutions are facing challenges and an inability to respond satisfactorily to citizens' needs. The changes are linked to long-term processes, and these processes, in turn, raise issues about what democracy is and what it should be. Core democratic virtues are called into consideration, and human rights can no longer be taken for granted as the international guide to democratic order.

The complexities of modern society demand educated, skilled, communicative, and reflective citizens in many different areas if democracy and social progress are to be maintained and developed. Critical understanding is more urgent than ever. Some of the knowledge and skills required relate to the media and communication culture.

In this context, we all need to think critically about how different media platforms work, how they represent society and the world, how they earn their money, how they are produced and used, and, not least, how people communicate both as producers and consumers of content (cf. Buckingham [2017](#)).

Therefore, media education takes its place alongside other resources people need in order to be informed, engaged, empowered citizens. Media education is about “democratic education” as a part of general education and everyday life (Mihailidis [2019](#); Stoddard [2014](#)). This resource involves life-long learning both in the classroom and beyond. But it has its value only when it is combined with basic knowledge of core subjects, including civics, history, native

language, religion, foreign languages, mathematics, and so on. The ability to read, write, and do arithmetic is crucial, and this implies good schools for all – girls and boys, women and men – with competent teachers and sufficient funding. However, we are past the point where a traditional education in the 3Rs is enough to prepare students for a future where most communication is multimodal. Schools and universities, for the most part, have been resistant to change: in most educational sectors around the world, words, rather than images and sounds, continue to get the most attention as the end goal of learning processes, even though visual content occupies such a central position in contemporary media culture.

There is no doubt that the institutions that have the greatest potential to heighten media education among children and young people are schools, libraries, and families. Media education in a life-learning perspective continues to be a real challenge for the field. How to reach adult populations, and where fair and just incentives are needed, remain critical issues.

Algorithms and Big Data - Implications for the Public Sphere

The many changes in the media and communication system are largely the work of influential transnational actors like Google, Facebook, and Amazon and, in China, Tencent, Alibaba, and Baidu. These companies have evolved into economic and socio-cultural phenomena with the power to transform the relationships between technology, capital, content, and users (Karppi [2018](#); Zuboff [2018](#)).

The power over users resides in the companies' ability to alter algorithms and terms of service without transparency. It might be described as a monopoly on information, for

which users pay with their personal data. This information, *big data*, is then used to target advertising and shopping patterns, guide political messaging in general elections, and shape human behavior. One of the presumably unintended outcomes of its influence is its incendiary role in resulting violent acts.

A consequence of Google's and Facebook's dominance in the advertising market is that traditional media companies – such as newspapers and, particularly, local papers – have suffered a marked decline in advertising revenue. Less revenue impacts their ability to offer quality journalism, which in turn impoverishes public discourse.

This new media environment has opened the door to views and objectives that otherwise would not become so widely known – for example, hate speech and threats. The risk of being exposed to misinformation and manipulation has never been greater. New ideas about freedom of expression come into play. Clearly, the balance between personal privacy, security, and reliability is of crucial importance in our digital age.

The vast quantity of information from an ever-greater diversity of sources leads to a greater disparity of media uses between different groups of citizens. There is concern about the social cohesion that underpins democratic rule – how it is being challenged by individuals' and groups' need to assert their identities and views. Some researchers argue that misinformation and disinformation are drivers of political polarization (Barberá et al. [2015](#); Lee et al. [2018](#)).

As a consequence, gaps open in terms of knowledge and participation, which in turn may weaken social cohesion and increase inequality between social classes. Digital inequality becomes an important element in the broader and ever-present issues of social equality, gender equality, and social justice.