

Katarzyna Gajlewicz-Korab

University of Warsaw

ORCID: 0000-0002-4900-2854

The French model of media and information education. A critical analysis of opportunities and threats

Abstract

The French model of media and information education is well developed. Its basis is the educational and cultural policy of the government of the French Republic. These activities have the character of centralised and stratified activity. However, in order to effectively assess the opportunities and risks associated with their effectiveness, it is necessary to embed the analysis in the concept of media cultures and diversity in the media. In addition, the dynamically changing media world must be taken into account. The foundations of media and information education in France (EMI) are analysed, as well as its elements such as; the actors responsible for this policy, the way it is influenced, the recipients of this policy. The research problem thus defined, analysed on a conceptual basis, has shown that the French model exists efficiently, but needs to be redefined in terms of priorities and audiences. This redefinition of activities is mainly due to the socio-political situation in France, which EMI does not seem to take into account.

Keywords: France, media cultures, media education, French media education model, French media.

Introduction

France is a country where the need to monitor the media competence of the population has been taken into account for years. Education, in the broadest sense, is one of the most important elements of French policy, especially social policy, given the stratification and cultural differences evident among the indigenous and immigrant French population. The problem of integration, of adaptation of the immigrant population (and even of those who have lived in France for three generations) is still a 'flashpoint'. Perhaps this influences the fact that the education system (dealing with the strategy and development of media education) is the most centralised in Europe, despite the constitutional reform of 2003, when some competences were transferred to local authorities¹. This may mean that education in its broadest sense is not only

¹ D. Dziewulak, *Legal bases and organisation of the school system in France with reference to the influence of the Minister of Education on the activities of public and public schools*,

important for society in terms of raising competences, increasing awareness, but also has political, economic and cultural dimensions. Problems of migration, assimilation, identity mean that access to education and its dimensions can take different shapes².

Media cultures, defined variously, play an increasingly important role in media studies. One of the bases for understanding what media cultures are is to know the evolution of the media, especially in a technological context, significantly influencing the way media are consumed, the mentality and therefore social activity. Media transcend geographical boundaries, creating enclaves³, it is therefore difficult to define them as media systems based mainly on political and economic theories and foundations. Already in 2014, Peter Gross stated that:

[...] The limitations of existing theories of media systems seem quite clear to me: they lack a human element. They lack, to use Habermas's language, the anchoring of their mechanisms in cultural 'social worlds'-those that keep the system, whether political, economic or media, functioning. All systems and institutions, regardless of their architecture or officially proclaimed goals and functions, involve people and groups of people. Elites, in particular, influence the way systems and institutions function; they influence their nature, their goals and the kind of relationships that develop between systems and institutions. [...]⁴

It therefore seems legitimate to consider the media education model in France in the context of media cultures rather than media systems. In the case of France, the determining element in the nature of the country's media is the social and cultural context⁵. Even Paolo Mancini believed that the media should now be studied taking into account the "human factor", more broadly known as the social context⁶. It is precisely the socio-demographic composition of the French population together with the aspects of values, attitudes, views and reasoning of these groups that should form the basis for considering media education, taking into account the concept of diversity. At the same time, the media education system is highly developed, but the changing media world challenges it.

'BAS Legal Notebooks' 2022, no. 1(73), p. 42.

² This is pointed out, among others, by Renata Matusiak: R. Matusiak, *Media education in France, "Culture, Media, Teology" 2020, no. (40) 1*, p. 29.

³ M. Golka, *Small ontology of enclaves* [in:] *Enclaves of social life*, eds. L. Goldyka, I. Machaj, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, Szczecin 2007, p. 25.

⁴ Glowacki, M., *Culture and media systems: an interview with Peter Gross*, European Journalism Observatory, <https://pl.ejo-online.eu/dziennikarstwo-polityczne/kultura-systemy-medialne-wywiad-peterem-grossem>, (accessed 12.10.2023).

⁵ K. Gajlewicz-Korab, *Media in France in the context of Klaus Schwab's Fourth Industrial Revolution. Selected issues. "Media Business Culture" 2020, no. 2 (9)*, p. 11, <https://www.ejournals.eu/MBK/2020/2-2020/art/18360/>, (accessed 19.10.2023).

⁶ P. Mancini, *Media Systems in Central and Eastern Europe: Between Institutionalism and Culture* [Speech at the conference 'Central European Journal of Communication – 10 Years On', Wrocław, 19.11.2018].

Object and purpose of research

The subject of the study is the French model of media education, which is one of the more developed in Europe. Renata Matusik even emphasises that it is characteristic of highly developed countries (European states), and that France, along with Iceland, Finland, Norway and the United Kingdom, is one of the examples of good practice in this field⁷. In addition, it is France that has for many years been the European leader in taking care of the protection of children and young people, which was evident, among other things, during the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union⁸.

The aim of this article is to analyse this model on the basis of the concept of media cultures understood as “as a set of values, beliefs and attitudes adopted by political, economic and media elites, from which the way the media system functions, its nature and relations are crystallised”⁹. Boćkowski narrows down the understanding of media culture to the statement:

[...] it is undoubtedly a social culture built with the media, created by the media and in many cases specifically evolving under the media. It is multifaceted and escapes description, as the generations defining it are incompatible with the generations that change and transform social culture into a system of data that is sometimes understandable only to themselves¹⁰.

Both attempts to define the concept will serve in analysing the French model of media education. The differences in defining the concept are due to different research perspectives: the first is media studies, the second cultural studies. Both perspectives are relevant to this analysis.

Research questions and hypothesis

The analysis of the subject and reading of the related literature allowed several research questions to be asked:

[P1]: What is media education in France?

[P2]: Who is it aimed at?

[P3]: What are the actors implementing the media education strategy and modus operandi?

[P4]: How does the French media education model function in a diverse French society?

⁷ R. Matusiak, *Media education in France...*, p. 28.

⁸ K. Groszkowska, *Francuska prezydentura w Radzie Unii Europejskiej*, Opinions and Analyses of the Institut de Republica, no. 13(15), <https://iderepublica.pl/nauka/opinie-i-analizy/francuska-prezydentura-w-radzie-unii-europejskiej/>, (accessed 12.10.2023).

⁹ M. Glowacki, *Culture and media systems: an interview with Peter Gross...*.

¹⁰ D. Boćkowski, *Współczesna kultura medialna jako narzędzie projekcji radykalizmów (na przykładzie zjawisko cyber-dżihadu)* [in:] *Kultura w Polsce w XXI wieku: konteksty społeczne, kulturowe i medialne*, ed. E. Dąbrowska-Prokopowska, P. Goryń, M. Zaniewska. University of Białystok Publishing House, Białystok 2020, p. 216.

[P5]: Is this model geared towards global or only national media coverage? Could it be relevant to media culture in France?

Both defining the focus of the research, the purpose and asking several research questions allowed the hypothesis to be set:

[H1]: French media education is an elaborate system that works in practice and in theory (numerous studies).

[H2]: Analysing the media education model in the context of cultural and social diversity, risks are evident that require a revision of the strategy.

The media education model in France

According to Alexander Fedorov, cited by Grzegorz Ptaszek, France is considered a forerunner of media education, when cinema education was intensively taught to young people in the 1920s¹¹. Developments in media, technology, cultural and social changes have led France today to develop its model into media and information education (*Éducation aux médias et à l'information*, EMI). The French state is strongly committed to the development of this discipline, and on the website of the French Ministry of Education we can read that:

Through media and information education (EMI), students learn how to become responsible citizens in a society characterised by a multiplied and accelerated flow of information. They develop their critical faculties and are able to act in an informed manner by seeking, receiving, producing and disseminating information through increasingly diverse media¹².

It is worth noting that although media education is dealt with by French education, some elements of it can also be seen in the activities of the Ministry of Culture, albeit far less developed. This seems to be a deliberate strategy of French policy, with future generations as a priority. The two ministries undertake joint activities, but they are not transparent in terms of action, division of competences and, above all, funding. There is definitely more activity on the education side due to the fact that media education is the fourth of the seven pillars of the core curriculum (it is also part of the sixth in terms of social and civic competences)¹³. However, it should not be forgotten that France was reminded of the need to educate society as a whole at the time of the terrorist threats of the last decade, particularly after the Bataclan attack on 13 November 2015. This was important because the terrorists used instant messaging (for which the French public services were not technologically prepared), and also because of the numerous *fake news stories* circulating online (these led to public controversy resulting, in a way, from

¹¹ G. Ptaszek, *Media Education 3.0 Critical Understanding of Digital Media in the Era of Big Data and Algorithmisation*, Jagiellonian University Publishing House, Kraków 2019, p. 102.

¹² *Éducation aux médias et à l'information*, EDUSCOL, <https://eduscol.education.fr/1531/education-aux-medias-et-l-information>, (accessed 14.10.2023).

¹³ R. Matusiak, *Media education in France...*, p. 32.

the national-ethnic stratification in France). This led the Ministry of Culture to launch a media education effort, stating:

In a society transformed by digital ecosystems and disrupted by crises that contribute to the unprecedented spread of fake news and conspiracy theories, the implementation of media and information education policies targeting all sectors of society is fundamental for the Ministry of Culture¹⁴.

The French model of media education – education

The model of media education in France resulting from the assumptions of the Ministry of Education is aimed at developing knowledge, attitudes, but also skills. As Renata Matusik emphasises, the acquisition of these competences in the educational process does not result from a curricular subject in media education (such a subject is not envisaged by the school system), but – which seems more correct [note K.G.-K.] – is the result of a holistic approach and skills acquired during the implementation of various projects in other classes. Moreover, the process culminates in the issuing of a corresponding 'B2i' certificate at each level of teaching, so it is a verified process¹⁵.

The implementation of policies related to media education on behalf of the French Ministry of Education is handled by Le CLEMI (*Centre pour l'éducation aux médias et à l'information*). Founded back in the 1980s, the institution had the task of protecting children and young people from sensitive content distributed by the media. Nowadays, it has specific tasks to fulfil, still in line with the original objectives: training of teachers (1st and 2nd level, all subjects) and trainers/educators; creation and distribution of materials to support initiatives with students, from pre-school to secondary school; media and information education initiatives aimed at families (guidebook, workshop kit, TV series, etc.); consultancy and expertise in France and internationally; organisation of events, programmes and competitions on media and information literacy and moderation of a network of academic coordinators¹⁶. The most important competence is the creation of a media education programme and strategy. Importantly, CLEMI is also involved in working with 'media people', which shows that the institution is aware of the importance of going beyond the boundaries of traditional thinking about education and looks at educating young people, including in terms of their extracurricular activities.

In addition, elites in the form of politicians are taking action on media education for young people. It is the social factor that is the key element here, determining the direction of media development and the formation of social competences related to it. Nevertheless, France is also a centralised state in terms of policy-making, hence

¹⁴ Education aux médias et à l'information, <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Thematiques/Education-aux-medias-et-a-l-information> (accessed : 14.10.2023)...

¹⁵ R. Matusiak, *Media education in France...*, p. 32–33.

¹⁶ CLEMI, <https://www.clemi.fr/fr/qui-sommes-nous.html> (accessed 14.10.2023).

most initiatives are governmental. Intriguingly, it is politicians who encourage more online activity, but understood as a place for young people to develop and take new initiatives. In addition to the political and media elites, there is little visibility of third sector initiatives that target niche elements of education, such as the impact of advertising etc.¹⁷.

French media education model – culture

Alongside the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture is the other major actor influencing the French media and information education (EMI) model. It is worth noting that EMI in France refers to education in the media sphere, but also information in a broader sense, which significantly broadens the scope of action. Since 2015, the Ministry of Culture has supported the development of media and information education for all audiences, young people and adults, in all regions. It is therefore important to emphasise the much wider reach of the impact than in the case of education, as activities targeting different demographic and social groups are evident here. The Ministry of Culture has further intensified its activities after 2018, mobilising increased financial resources and implementing a media education plan¹⁸. Their website gives a specific amount of €8 million for activities (but does not detail what exactly is funded from this).

The ministry has a wide range of proposals to intensify EMI activity, particularly concerning the changing digital world:

- learning to locate the source of information and understand its impact on society;
- deconstructing conspiracy theories;
- combating hateful content;
- developing critical thinking.

Activities are coordinated at both regional and central levels. This move away from a centralised way of managing media and information education in France can be a huge plus, given the specificity of the problems in each region. However, it is still the case that most of the ministry's activities are aimed at young people, especially as one of the strategies involves education in digital culture, taking into account the role of authorities and the credibility of the content distributed in this culture.

Cultural activities for media and information education are very much represented in the projects coordinated by the ministry. On the one hand, these projects are very content-oriented, consisting of content transfer and skills training, such as the project: *YouVerify!* (a set of educational resources to combat online disinformation conveyed through images and videos, based on the InVID tool developed by AFP). On the other hand, the Ministry of Culture, which has the French media under its umbrella,

¹⁷ For more on this, see R. Matusiak, *Media education in France...*, p. 36.

¹⁸ *Education aux médias et à l'information*, <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Thematiques/Education-aux-medias-et-a-l-information> (accessed :14.10.2023)...

is mobilising the national and regional (public) media in particular to become active in this field. This can be seen in the range of activities offered by Radio France, France Inter, France Télévision, etc. Again, this commitment applies not only to national but also to regional media.

Critical elements of the French model of media and information education

It seems absolutely essential in the discussion of EMI in France to recognise the new media environment resulting from technological advances. According to Pasquier, factors such as gender, social background, education and even religious culture influence our relationship with media, both old and new. These regularities are too often overlooked in work on new technologies, where young people are treated as a group, as if their age category is enough to connect them¹⁹. Moreover, there are other problems, such as seniors' lack of understanding of how media works, for according to a Science Advances study published in 2019, people aged 65 and older “share twice as many fake articles on platforms as those aged 45–65, and up to seven times more” than those aged 18–29²⁰. Again, the results show seniors as a single group, stigmatising them somewhat, whereas if the social factor were included in the analysis, it would provide a better basis for further action.

What is a kind of danger, a gap in research and action related to EMI in France, is the focus on social groups, but divided generationally, and, moreover, the focus practically only on the young generation. In a way, this trend seems right, given the forward-thinking nature of the problem. But research carried out by Julien Boyadjian has shown that a multitude of systemic errors are being made in the sphere of media education for young people, especially if their background, beliefs, place of residence and diverse mentality, even despite one age, are not taken into account. It was found that:

- The social background of the young people surveyed strongly modifies their relationship with cultural universes²¹ ;
- the myth of the sole influence of social networks and their role in acquiring information is debunked; it has been proven that consumption of TV news remains particularly high among young people from working-class backgrounds²² ;

¹⁹ D. Pasquier, *Cultures juvéniles à l'ère numérique*, 'Réseaux'2020, Vol. 222, No. 4, pp. 9–20.

²⁰ *Le CSA préconise de renforcer les actions d'éducation aux médias auprès des adultes*, Le Monde, https://www.lemonde.fr/actualite-medias/article/2021/11/18/le-csa-preconise-de-renforcer-les-actions-d-education-aux-medias-aupres-des-adultes_6102554_3236.html (accessed : 19.20.2023).

²¹ J. Boyadjian, *Désinformation, non-information ou sur-information ? Les logiques d'exposition à l'actualité en milieux étudiants*, «Réseaux » 2020, Vol. 222, No. 4, pp. 21–52.

²² *Ibid.*

- via ‘infomedia’ (mainly Google and Facebook, and to a much lesser extent Twitter) respondents reach news sites (information via digital social networks does not have a monopoly and is highly dependent on the algorithms of intermediaries)²³ ;
- young people from working class or lower middle class backgrounds are more likely to be under-informed than misinformed²⁴. This echoes Schradi’s observation that online participation deficit is clearly correlated with education level²⁵.

Very important for the discussion of the French media education model is its positioning in the concept of diversity in the media. It has always occupied an important place in communication and journalism research. The aforementioned development of new technologies has contributed to intensifying research in this direction, as the possibilities of online communication lead to a transformative, decentralised and diverse exchange of information online²⁶. Cultural diversity is also important for media education in the context of the dangers of filter/media bubbles, and research into this phenomenon was led by Eli Pariser in 2011²⁷. Nowadays, it may already seem like a kind of truism that Denis McQuil’s statement that media diversity plays an important role for democracy²⁸. Unfortunately, one can also see major dangers arising from this in the form of the fragmentation of society²⁹, which can be clearly observed in France following the ZUS (Zones urbaines sensibles³⁰), polarisation³¹ and the spread of fake news³².

Cultural diversity is one of the key actions of UNESCO, which relates it “(...) to the extent to which the media accurately reflect the diversity of cultural, social and political perspectives on issues and opinions of these populations in editorial content”³³. However, in order to realise these assumptions, social stratification has to be taken into account, and the aforementioned SUS pose a major challenge for media and information education in France due to the socio-cultural diversity of its

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ J. Schrady, *The digital production gap: the digital divide and web 2.0 collide*, ‘Poetics’ 2011, No. 39(2), pp. 145–168.

²⁶ L. Bennett, *New Media Power: The Internet and Global Activism* [in:] *Contesting Media Power*, eds Couldry, N, Curran, J., New York Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., New York 2003, pp. 17–37.

²⁷ E. Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, Penguin Books, London 2011.

²⁸ D. McQuail, *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest*, Newbury Park, London 1992.

²⁹ M. Levendusky, *How Partisan Media Polarize America*, Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 2013

³⁰ ZUS, Zone Urbaines Sensibles, <https://sig.ville.gouv.fr/atlas/ZUS> (accessed :17.10.2023).

³¹ N. J. Stroud, *Media Use and Political Predispositions: Revisiting the Concept of Selective Exposure*, *Political Behavior* 2008, no. 30 (3), pp. 341–366.

³² G.L. Ciampaglia, *Fighting Fake News: A Role for Computational Social Science in the Fight against Digital Misinformation*, ‘Journal of Computational Social Science’ 2018, no. 1(1), pp. 147–153.

³³ Media Diversity, <https://www.unesco.org/en/media-pluralism-diversity/media-diversity>, (accessed 19.10.2023).

inhabitants and the lack of differentiated education in media consumption in these neighbourhoods. Vulnerable neighbourhoods are characterised by a number of features that mean that different policies should be applied to them. These include endemic unemployment, poverty, young people dropping out of school, population without qualifications, precarious employment and dependence on social assistance. This makes it necessary for the French EMI model to be revised, especially as a large proportion of the school-age population in these zones does not fulfil this obligation³⁴. Moreover, this is a major social problem, as the EMI population represents around 7% of the population of the French Republic³⁵. In addition, these neighbourhoods are mainly populated by young people, in large families, and unemployment is over 50% among this age group³⁶. In addition, it is pointed out that the population living there is mainly from the working class, whose families were settled there in the 1950s and 1960s, when France massively invited people from other countries (mainly the Maghreb regions) to fill industrial unemployment. Nowadays, the robotisation and digitisation of industry has resulted in the closure of jobs, and people remaining in these places have had a sense of a certain 'social segregation'. Against this background, a culture of Social Security emerged, different, from the media cultures characteristic of the rest of society³⁷.

In addition to ZUS, France is home to many immigrant communities feeling a strong connection to their country of origin. The model of French media education in the age of globalisation and digitisation, the impact of media at a distance, does not seem to take into account the consumption of content from other media cultures, especially those crossing borders. It must be remembered that access to this content is particularly facilitated. Phenomena such as propaganda, manipulation, fake news may be more strongly present in the media offer of countries in conflict with France, and this may lead to social tensions in the Republic. The challenge for EMI therefore appears to be the context of intercultural communication.

Completion

The French model of media and information education is not ideal. This conclusion is all the more important as many post-transition countries have imitated French media solutions, including Poland. Moreover, the French Republic's entry into the new century was difficult for the country because of the changing reality in the world (the

³⁴ P. Carcenac, *Chômage, jeunesse inactive, aides sociales... 800 cités sensibles passées à la loupe dans toute la France*, « Le Figaro », <https://www.lefigaro.fr/conjoncture/quels-sont-les-quartiers-les-plus-touche-par-la-misere-800-cites-sensibles-passees-a-la-loupe-20230505> (accessed 19.10.2023).

³⁵ The last survey was done in 2010, but the data are from 2006: *La population des zones urbaines sensibles*, L'Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1280948#menu> (accessed : 19.10.2023).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ P. Carcenac, *Chômage, jeunesse inactive, aides sociales...*

weak position of France treated as a superpower³⁸), but above all because of the social tensions that intensified after 2005 (long-term mistakes related to immigration policy and the assimilation of the population and their children who came to France after World War II).

However, the EMI model in France is highly developed. It is embedded in state policy and has for years occupied a permanent place in the education process at various stages. What is worth recognising as opportunities for the model's continued success is, above all, the fact that its elements are being addressed by various sectors of the French government, not just education. The Ministry of Culture analysed puts EMI as one of the priorities of its activities. To a lesser extent, other French government activities that make EMI appear to be adapting to changing realities also play a part, one of which is digitisation in the broadest sense. The centralisation of activities and their stratification means that the third sector, which is so very active in Poland in this area, has a marginal impact in France because there is not as much need for it.

The analysis showed that the EMI model operating in this way also entails certain risks. The most important of these is that too little attention is paid to those who are to some extent socially excluded. On the one hand, these are groups of seniors who, as in other countries, have not acquired media competence in the educational process and modern use (especially of digitised media) may be dangerous for them. However, this is a situation that seems to be a concern in France, but its effectiveness is still not great. On the other hand, the analysis showed a huge problem with educating the population in this regard, which represents the second or third generation of immigrants who arrived in France in the 1950s, 1960s and even as late as the 1970s. The lack of a successful assimilation policy has led to a very high degree of social polarisation, mutual resentment between the autochthons and this population, with consequent unemployment, poverty and educational deficiencies (including precisely a less informed media consumption). In such a situation, the French state in terms of EMI is not particularly active and, interestingly, such activity is hardly visible from the community itself, which integrates its internal activities (but without any particular financial support). This aspect, however, calls for special analysis and concern on the part of researchers, as it represents a major problem not only for this population, but also for all French people. Indeed, it should be pointed out that many dangerous situations in major French cities (car arson, terrorist attacks, etc.) originated precisely in ZUS (sensitive neighbourhoods), and the distribution of related content, full of manipulation and fake news, took place online.

For this model to be considered exemplary, it is not only necessary to keep up with changes of a technological nature. The advanced digitalisation of the future will require a completely new mentality, for which education policy must be prepared. However, in addition to these elements, it must be remembered that media cultures from different countries intermingle. The core values of the Republic (freedom, equality,

³⁸ S. Parzymies, *Is France still a great power?*, blog, <https://vistula.edu.pl/wiadomosci/francja-jeszcze-wielkim-mocarstwem> (accessed 20.10.2023).

fraternity) as a result of the encounter with multiculturalism must adapt to the new era within the framework of diversity in the media, taking into account the broad context of intercultural communication. To do so, the country's media cultures need to be well researched, which seems to be one of the key gaps of French researchers today.

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