

Critical Citizenship through Communication and Media Literacy: A UNESCO Chair's contribution

Fernanda Bonacho

(Escola Superior de Comunicação Social, Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa)

Campus de Benfica do IPL, 1549-014 Lisboa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5616-7665>

(fbonacho@escs.ipl.pt)

Margarida Alpuim

(Escola Superior de Comunicação Social, Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa)

Campus de Benfica do IPL, 1549-014 Lisboa

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9924-0007>

(malpuim@escs.ipl.pt)

Fernanda Bonacho (short bio):

(EN) Fernanda Bonacho is a Coordinator Professor at School of Communication and Media Studies/Polytechnic University of Lisbon (ESCS/IPL), where she coordinates the Master's degree in Journalism. She holds a PhD in Communication Sciences and is an integrated researcher at the Applied Research Laboratory in Communication and Media (LIACOM) and collaborator at the NOVA Institute of Communication (ICNOVA). Her research interests focus on media literacy, especially the relationship between media literacy, journalism and communication. She has coordinated several funded research projects and collaborates with the Council of Europe on education for digital citizenship. She represents ESCS/IPL in the Portuguese Informal Group on Media Literacy (GILM) and she is responsible for the UNESCO Chair of Communication, Media and Information Literacy and Citizenship at ESCS/IPL.

(PT) Fernanda Bonacho é Professora Coordenadora na Escola Superior de Comunicação Social/Politécnico de Lisboa (ESCS/IPL), onde coordena o Mestrado em Jornalismo. É doutorada em Ciências da Comunicação e investigadora integrada no Laboratório de Investigação Aplicada em Comunicação e Média (LIACOM) e colaboradora do Instituto de Comunicação da NOVA (ICNOVA). Os seus interesses de investigação centram-se na literacia mediática, especialmente na relação entre literacia mediática, jornalismo e comunicação. Coordenou vários projetos de investigação financiados e colabora com o Conselho da Europa na educação para a cidadania digital. Representa a ESCS/IPL no Grupo Informal sobre Literacia Mediática (GILM) e é responsável pela Cátedra UNESCO de Comunicação, Literacia Mediática e Cidadania, na ESCS/IPL.

Margarida Alpuim (short bio):

(EN) Margarida Alpuim holds a M.S.Ed. in Community and Social Change from the University of Miami. She also holds a bachelor degree in Journalism from the School of Communication and Media Studies (ESCS), of the Polytechnic University of Lisbon (IPL). She is particularly interested in advancing knowledge and practices on collective wellbeing and constructive communication. She has published papers on wellbeing and positive ageing, and is the co-author of the book “Psychology for Journalists”, edited and published by the Bonn Institute for Journalism and Constructive Dialogue. She is currently project assistant at the UNESCO Chair of Communication, Media and Information Literacy and Citizenship, at ESCS-IPL.

(PT) Margarida Alpuim tem um Mestrado em “Community and Social Change” pela Universidade de Miami, e é licenciada em Jornalismo pela Escola Superior de Comunicação Social (ESCS), do Politécnico de Lisboa (IPL). Está particularmente interessada no aprofundamento do conhecimento e das práticas de bem-estar coletivo e comunicação construtiva. Publicou artigos sobre bem-estar e envelhecimento positivo e é coautora do livro “Psicologia para Jornalistas”, editado e publicado pelo Bonn Institute for Journalism and Constructive Dialogue. Atualmente é assistente de projeto na Cátedra UNESCO de Comunicação, Literacia Mediática e Cidadania, na ESCS-IPL.

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Cidadania Crítica através da Comunicação e da Literacia Mediática: Os contributos de uma Cátedra UNESCO

Resumo (PT): Numa era marcada pela hiperconectividade digital e por profundas alterações na forma como os indivíduos interagem com a informação e entre si, a disseminação da desinformação e da polarização desafia os fundamentos das sociedades democráticas e o pleno exercício da cidadania. Este artigo apresenta a Cátedra UNESCO de Comunicação, Literacia Mediática e Cidadania, da Escola Superior de Comunicação Social, do Politécnico de Lisboa (ESCS-IPL). Baseada nos valores da UNESCO, esta Cátedra responde aos desafios contemporâneos dos *media* através da investigação, educação e envolvimento cívico. Este artigo situa a Cátedra no contexto nacional e internacional, e descreve a sua missão, valores, objetivos e principais atividades. É sublinhada a ambição da Cátedra de contribuir para o avanço da literacia mediática como uma ferramenta vital para sociedades inclusivas, informadas e participativas.

Palavras-chave: Cátedra UNESCO, Comunicação, Literacia Mediática, Cidadania, Democracia.

Critical Citizenship through Communication and Media Literacy: A UNESCO Chair's contribution

Abstract (EN): In an era marked by digital hyperconnectivity and profound shifts in the way individuals interact with information and with each other, the spread of disinformation and polarization challenges the foundations of democratic societies and the full exercise of citizenship. This paper presents the UNESCO Chair of Communication, Media and Information Literacy and Citizenship, held by the School of Communication and Media Studies of the Polytechnic University of Lisbon (ESCS-IPL). Grounded in UNESCO's values, this Chair responds to contemporary media challenges through research, education, and civic engagement. This paper situates the Chair within national and international contexts, and outlines its mission, values, objectives, and key activities. The article highlights this Chair's ambition to contribute to media and information literacy (MIL) advancement as a vital tool for inclusive, informed, and participatory societies.

Keywords: UNESCO Chair, Communication, Media and Information Literacy, Citizenship, Democracy.

Introduction

The XXI century is marked by the unprecedented digitalisation of communication. Although the benefits of digital media are undeniable, their indiscriminate and uncritical use brought disinformation, misinformation, hatred and intolerance, threatening the sustainability of inclusive and democratic societies where full citizenship is both a right and a duty.

Media and information literacy and citizenship cultivation are crucial to empower people to be able to recognize, analyse, and resist harmful forms of expression and communication, as well as to engage in constructive and respectful interactions (Carlsson, 2019; Council of Europe, 2020). These are key aspects to a responsible online and offline information experience through which citizens can make informed decisions and become more civically engaged.

With the responsibility to contribute positively for the information ecosystem and media education, the School of Communication and Media Studies (Escola Superior de Comunicação Social, ESCS), part of the Polytechnic University of Lisbon (Politécnico de Lisboa, IPL), created an overarching project dedicated to promoting a critical understanding of the media, empowering citizens to participate actively in society and fostering an ethical and democratic communication environment.

In this paper, we present this project: the UNESCO Chair of Communication, Media and Information Literacy and Citizenship.

We start by establishing the current media landscape, both nationally and internationally. Then, we present the project's mission, goals and activities, framing it within the larger UNESCO Chairs program. At the end, we lay ground for the participation of all. Individuals and entities interested in engaging with or partnering with the UNESCO Chair are welcome to join this endeavour.

1. Global background

Even though disinformation is not a new phenomenon, “it poses one of the greatest challenges for democracy and informed citizenship in the modern media and information environment” (Zenzerović & Nenadić, 2022).

The complexity of the media ecosystem, its digital platformisation and the algorithmic mechanisms, combined with pressing global socio-political issues, are all factors that

favour an environment of polarization and social division (European Commission, 2019). Additionally, communication on digital platforms discourages the allocation of time and attention to in-depth factual information (e.g., Kalogeropoulos et al., 2016; Tully et al., 2020), while leading to a growing tendency to oversimplify complex issues (Centre for Media Transition, 2019; Newman et al., 2024).

To better understand the implications of the media landscape, it becomes essential to start by examining the data and insights that highlight both the severity of the problem and the potential pathways for change, raising awareness to where we should be looking at more carefully.

The Global Risks Report 2025 (World Economic Forum, 2025) shows that “Misinformation and disinformation”, “Societal polarization”, “Inequality”, “Erosion of human rights and/or civic freedoms” and “Adverse outcomes of AI technologies” are identified as five of the ten most likely risks to have a severe impact in society both in the medium and long-term (within two and ten years, respectively). The list also includes geopolitical conflicts and several environmental issues.

Even though these topics are described in the report from a negative point of view, they also signalize that information, communication, social cohesion, sustainability and a global culture of peace are in the top priorities over the next decade and should be addressed by decision and policy makers.

Regarding specifically youngsters, a Eurobarometer survey revealed that “protecting human rights, democracy and peace” emerges as young people's top-ranking value (45% in European Union [EU]; 49% in Portugal), immediately followed by “freedom of speech and thought” (41% in EU; 51% in Portugal) (Starostin et al., 2025). Such results demonstrate that young people (aged 16-30) identify human rights and democracy as essential foundational principles for a peaceful social coexistence.

As far as information consumption is concerned, more than three in four respondents (76% in EU; 81% in Portugal) reported they had been exposed to disinformation and fake information in the seven days prior to the survey (Starostin et al., 2025). The Eurobarometer also shows that for almost half the respondents (42% in EU; 40% in Portugal), social media is the top source of political and social issues, and Instagram is reported as the most used platform to get information (47% in EU; 56% in Portugal).

These data are somewhat in line with and complement the 2024 Digital News Report, by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, a major annual publication in the media field (Newman et al., 2024). (The 2025 edition had not yet been published at the time of this paper was delivered.)

When it comes to news sources, most respondents report using platforms as their primary access point to online news — social media (29%), search engines (25%) or news aggregators (8%). Only around 1 in 5 (22%) says news websites or apps are their main source of online news. According to this report, TikTok is the most popular platform among younger groups, with 23% respondents aged 18–24 using it as news source.

“One of the big challenges of the shift to video networks with a younger age profile is that journalists and news organizations are often eclipsed by news creators and other influencers, even when it comes to news”, we can read in the report (Newman et al., 2024, p. 14). Most respondents pay more attention to news shared by online personalities, celebrities and content creators than by mainstream journalists or newsrooms in platforms such as TikTok (57% vs 34%), Instagram (53% vs 41%) and YouTube (46% vs 41%).

Simultaneously, around six in ten respondents (59%) say they are worried about differentiating what is real and what is fake when it comes to online news. The concern is highest for TikTok and X when compared with other online networks.

One of the most relevant factors contributing to this confusion is the misuse of artificial intelligence (AI), with deep fakes and algorithms playing a significant role, often distorting the perception of reality in a harmful and misleading way (Europol, 2024).

On a parallel, but also very relevant, topic, the Reuters report also found a rise in selective news avoidance. Almost four in ten people (39%) say they sometimes or often avoid the news, with respondents reporting they feel “overloaded” by the amount of news they are exposed to. These data reveal profound shifts in how individuals – particularly younger generations – interact with information, authority, and truth in the digital public sphere.

Particular attention needs to be given to vulnerable groups and communities, historically harassed, marginalized and discriminated based on gender, ethnicity, religion or other characteristics. For example, the UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2024) highlights that girls on social media are significantly more exposed to different forms of

harassment, with cyberbullying being much more frequent among girls than boys, affecting their well-being and academic performance.

Children and youngsters are groups we need to pay special attention to. According to a recent report (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2025), 98% of 15-year-olds in OECD countries have a smartphone. While many of them (51%) report feeling confident in managing privacy settings, a significant portion also engage in risky or concerning behaviors online, such as spreading false information (27,6%) or experiencing discomfort when disconnected from digital devices (17%).

Targeted interventions to address the challenges these groups face on social media platforms are essential to promote a safer online experience for everyone.

All things considered, we can say that these findings underline the critical need for comprehensive measures to enhance citizens' media literacy, but also that a significant number of people prioritize essential human values and demonstrate a deep commitment to fostering a more inclusive and just society.

1.1. The central role of Media and Information Literacy

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) can be defined as “an umbrella expression that includes all the technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a person to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact and engage with it” (European Commission, n.d.).

Several European and international bodies and world scholars and researchers such as Sonia Livingstone, David Buckingham, or Divina Frau-Meigs (e.g., Buckingham, 2019; Frau-Meigs, 2017; Lunt & Livingstone, 2012; McDougall et al., 2014) highlight the importance of MIL and consider it pivotal in helping people to interact safely, rationally and critically, in promoting quality information and trust in the media, as well as in limiting online disinformation and hate speech.

The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) acts as a hub where fact-checkers, researchers, policymakers, media professionals and other stakeholders collaborate to tackle disinformation. EDMO is one of the elements in the European Commission's Action Plan against Disinformation. In October 2024, EDMO published a reference document in the field, *EDMO Guidelines for Effective Media Literacy Initiatives* (2024), endorsed by more than 60 entities dedicated to MIL across Europe.

In January 2025, the Council of Europe launched the European Year of Education for Digital Citizenship that offers a platform for the dissemination of European education initiatives. Digital citizenship refers to the “ability to engage competently and positively with digital technologies (creating, working, participating, socialising, investigating, playing, communicating and learning)”, as described by Frau-Meigs et al. (2017, p. 11). Fostering digital citizenship among citizens implies the defence of human dignity with active, informed and responsible participation in diverse communities, from a geographical, political, economic, social and cultural point of view.

Globally speaking, since the Grünwald Declaration, in 1982, which encouraged the promotion of media education in school systems, UNESCO has revisited and promoted the principles contained therein, seeking to respond in a localised manner with proposals for media education adapted to different socio-economic and cultural contexts and to new media realities, particularly in the digital age. As a reference organisation in the field of education and communication, UNESCO has stressed the need for citizens to be critical and aware of media content, avoiding disinformation, hate speech and other forms of manipulation of public opinion.

In the recently released Pact for the Future (2024, p. 45), the United Nations recognized the importance of MIL by committing to “design and roll out digital media and information literacy curricula” by 2030 “to ensure that all users have the skills and knowledge to safely and critically interact with content” and “to enhance resilience against the harmful impacts of misinformation and disinformation”.

Also in 2024, the G20, an international forum comprised of 19 countries, the European Union and the African Union, included, in the final leaders’ declaration, the recognition “that digital literacy and skills are essential to achieve meaningful digital inclusion” and “necessary to bridge digital divides, including halving the gender digital divide by 2030” (No. 78).

1.2. Media and information literacy in Portugal

The current national landscape is particularly concerning, as the latest results of the Survey of Adult Skills (OECD, 2024) indicate that the adult Portuguese population scores below the European average in literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem solving. In all domains, 40% to 42% of Portuguese adults scored at Level 1 or below.

Moreover, as far as press freedom is concerned, Portugal performed more poorly in the latest annual global report (Reporters Without Borders, 2025) compared to the previous year, dropping from a “good” to a “satisfactory” status. The lowest ranking is associated with the economic indicator, where Portugal now ranks 20th, down from 10th the year before.

In Portugal, governmental work dedicated to media is coordinated by a new mission structure since 2024, #PortugalMediaLab, which was created to execute and monitor public policies designed in the most recent national Action Plan for Media (Assuntos Parlamentares, 2024).

The most recent national media literacy plan was published in early 2025 (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, 2025), consisting of an update of the previous one (Governo de Portugal, 2024). It involves the development of several MIL activities, as well as the stimulation of efforts by national public and private entities to promote media literacy.

Among governmental initiatives, there is a new program offering young citizens (aged 15-18) a free digital subscription to periodical publications for two years, which was made available in May 2025.

Additionally, public and private organizations are investing more and more in MIL initiatives, such as MIL toolkits and websites (e.g., MILObs - Observatory on Media, Information and Literacy); MIL projects with schools, libraries and newsrooms (e.g., “Pinóquio na Escola”, a project for students and schools by Polígrafo, in partnership with Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation; “Expressinho”, a monthly supplement of the *Expresso* newspaper dedicated to children; “Supercharged by AI” an exhibition by Tactical Tech in partnership with the national School Libraries Network); seminars, webinars and other training opportunities; transnational projects (e.g., FACT, a European CERV project developed in Portugal by Instituto Marquês de Valle Flôr).

With the aim of avoiding fragmentation and fostering integrated actions, an Informal Group for Media Literacy (Grupo Informal sobre Literacia Mediática, GILM) was established in 2009. It brings together 14 governmental and non-governmental entities, ranging from educational institutions to media organizations, regulatory bodies, and entities focused on digital security. Every year, GILM organizes a week dedicated to MIL (7 Days With the Media) and a national congress where professionals from different fields come together to share scientific knowledge and reflect on solutions for the future.

Persistent challenges in MIL competencies and press freedom, and a fragmented yet growing media literacy landscape, underscore the need for more unified and strategic responses.

2. The UNESCO Chair of Communication, Media and Information Literacy and Citizenship

Approved in 2023 and established in 2024, the UNESCO Chair of Communication, Media and Information Literacy and Citizenship takes on the research and educational work developed by the ESCS-IPL on media literacy, communication, citizenship and sustainability in the last decades, as well as in its established role in collaborating with civil society and contributing to informing public policies.

The creation of this new UNESCO Chair, the only one in Portugal dedicated to communication and MIL, settles a new phase for expanding this work, particularly with the development of new training courses, research projects, partnerships and internationalization.

2.1. Mission and values

The UNESCO Chair takes communication, MIL and citizenship as essential aspects for active, informed and responsible participation in today's society, which is characterised by the almost ubiquitous presence of the media and the ever-changing flow of information. It proposes to work with citizens for the development of fundamental skills to communicate and critically understand the world, resisting polarization and stereotyping, while shortening the participatory gap that hinders engaged and well-informed citizens.

All actions within this UNESCO Chair align with UNESCO's values and mission, as well as with the overall vision of UNESCO for education, sustainability and MIL actions. As such, initiatives are grounded on the Education 2030 Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16 and 17) and UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy 2022-2029.

This means that processes are set up to empower citizens and engage them in a culture of communication that is open, inclusive, critical and based upon respect for human rights and democracy, contributing to human development and understanding of the world. Activities and projects are designed to ensure freedom of expression and the right to

information at all times, while fighting hate speech, gender harassment and other forms of discrimination.

Particular attention is paid to media literacy in digital media environments as they seem to be a game changer on disinformation, misinformation and false information propagation. To counteract these effects, the UNESCO Chair supports citizens in the development of media use abilities, critical thinking skills and intercultural dialogue competencies. These efforts are implemented from a lifelong learning perspective, addressing MIL education for all age groups as an essential component of an informed, critical, and empowered society.

2.2. Goals

The UNESCO Chair is guided by three core objectives that align with its mission to foster inclusive and sustainable knowledge societies.

First, it aims to **promote communication that supports inclusive, multicultural, equal, and democratic societies** by advancing education and lifelong learning. This is achieved through the development of open and accessible digital resources and the facilitation of mobility exchanges across its partner networks.

Second, the Chair is committed to **strengthening media and information literacy** by upholding freedom of expression, combating hate speech and disinformation, and promoting critical thinking. This includes reinforcing the connection between academia and civil society through digital knowledge transfer and collaborative initiatives within the Chair's thematic areas.

Third, it seeks to **encourage active citizenship and civic engagement** by partnering with communities and civil society organizations to implement projects that contribute to sustainable development and climate action, thereby fostering informed and participatory societies.

2.3. Activities

This UNESCO Chair primarily focuses on developing a set of interrelated actions designed to advance communication, and civic participation in contemporary societies.

Central to its mission is the **promotion of applied research** on communication and citizenship, the societal effects of information and media, and the pursuit of sustainability.

These research activities are conducted within the framework of ESCS-IPL's Applied Research Laboratory in Communication and Media (LIACOM).

In addition, the Chair is dedicated to **strengthening higher education and advanced training** in MIL with the goal of fostering essential competencies for critically understanding and engaging with the world.

It also seeks to bridge the **gap between academia and civil society** by expanding its initiatives into local communities and encouraging active citizen involvement.

Furthermore, the Chair emphasizes both **national and international cooperation**, supporting the exchange of best practices and the development of collaborative projects, particularly with other Portuguese-speaking countries.

Rooted in the spirit of applied education and interdisciplinarity, the vision of this Chair is based on the collaboration between researchers, experts, professionals, students, civil society organizations and communities.

Among these, we count on hundreds of scholars within IPL and on several national and international partnership networks – including UniTwin (UNESCO's network of universities), ORBICOM (global network for communication and media professionals and academics) and MILID (UNESCO's media and information literacy network).

Some examples of initiatives that have already been carried out or that are being developed within the UNESCO Chair include the Reading the World Academy, a project that enabled youngsters with tools to decode the news and the capability to question passive news consumption, and it stimulated a critical and constructive attitude in face of the contemporary media culture (Bonacho et al., 2024); the project Climate Journalism goes to the University, a cross-border project that connected Lisbon to Oslo to support, promote and strengthen climate journalism education; a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on Data Journalism, because the volume of data that currently exists in our society requires technical skills to examine and communicate them rigorously; and the Reading Club EntreLinhas, where journalism and literature come together to add layers to reflecting about the world and acting upon it.

Other expected outcomes of the UNESCO Chair are the continued development of research projects and training programs; publication of materials such as guidelines, policy briefings, toolkits, books, and book chapters; active engagement with civil society

through outreach activities; release of media campaigns; and strengthening and leveraging networks and partnerships to develop further initiatives.

2.4. The UNESCO Chairs Program

The UNESCO Chair held by ESCS-IPL is part of the UNESCO Chairs Program/UNITWIN, which was launched in 1992 to promote international interuniversity cooperation and knowledge sharing. “This network of universities around the world supports UNESCO’s work in education, the natural and social sciences, culture and communication, to help address pressing challenges and contribute to the development of their societies” (UNESCO, n.d.). As of 2025, the program includes around 1000 Chairs across 125 countries (UNESCO, n.d.).

In Portugal, currently there are 20 UNESCO Chairs, with topics ranging from cultural heritage, biodiversity, and ocean conservation to peace education, artificial intelligence, and media literacy – reflecting a wide commitment to sustainable development, cultural diversity, and global citizenship.

Conclusion

The UNESCO Chair of Communication, Media and Information Literacy and Citizenship of ESCS-IPL aims at contributing to a sustainable society where communication among citizens respects human rights and human dignity.

At the UNESCO Chair, communication is perceived as more than the transmission of information – it is the act of listening, engaging in dialogue, and fostering mutual understanding. Literacy extends beyond decoding symbols – it involves critical thinking, responsible action, and the capacity to imagine alternatives. And citizenship is more than a legal status – it is a living practice, continually shaped in schools, on the streets, across digital networks, and within communities. This is a place where knowledge evolves into participation, and participation into full and active citizenship.

All those interested in joining ESCS-IPL in this endeavour are welcome. The entire community – including students, scholars, professionals, and society at large – is invited to engage with the activities of the UNESCO Chair and to propose new initiatives and partnerships that can be developed collaboratively.

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