

Critical Educommunication: education, dialog, and public policies

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ABSTRACT – Critical Educommunication: education, dialog, and public policies. This article analyzes the dialogic-critical potential of educommunication to foster critical thinking. On the basis of interviews with experts and questionnaires sent to 141 Education and Communication students at UPV/EHU, analysis using NVIVO identified four key areas: conceptualization, critical educommunication, humanistic potential, and public policies. The analysis highlights the urgency of integrating critical media competencies into educational curricula by implementing public policies and teacher training. We conclude that critical, dialogic, and reflexive educommunication is essential to transform the relationship with the media and prevent information disorders.

Keywords: Educommunication. Critical media literacy. Critical thinking. Dialog. Public Policies.

RESUMEN – Educomunicación Crítica: formación, diálogo y políticas públicas. El artículo analiza el potencial dialógico-crítico de la educomunicación para fomentar el pensamiento crítico. A través de entrevistas a expertos, cuestionarios aplicados a 141 estudiantes de Educación y Comunicación de la UPV/EHU y el análisis de los datos con NVIVO, se identificaron cuatro áreas clave: conceptualización, educomunicación crítica, potencial humanista y políticas públicas. Se destaca la urgencia de integrar competencias mediáticas críticas en los planes educativos mediante la implementación de políticas públicas y la formación docente. Se concluye que la educomunicación crítica, dialógica y reflexiva es esencial para transformar la relación con los medios de comunicación y prevenir los desórdenes informativos.

Palabras-clave: Educomunicación. Alfabetización Mediática Crítica. Pensamiento Crítico. Diálogo. Políticas Públicas.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a fascination with technology (Medina-Borges, 2021) that focuses on learning to comprehend and use new technology at both the user and the consumer level. However, the importance of offering tools to citizens to enable critical use of digital technology has been neglected, despite its ability to facilitate learning and nurture the development of critical thinking (González-Mohino; Callejas Albiñana; Castillo Canalejo, 2023). In the education sector, the widespread use of technology opens new avenues but also leads to certain gaps resulting in exclusion (Teba Fernández, 2021), leading to a need for critical coexistence. This study investigates what we call the humanistic potential of educommunication and how it can, and should be, conveyed through educators and supportive public policies to generate critical thinking on the use and consumption of digital technology and media.

Although the term “educommunication” began to circulate in academia in the 1980s, its appearance as a paradigm dates back decades. Since the middle of the twentieth century, a field at the intersection between communication and education has developed specifically in Latin America, with theoretical and methodological approaches linked to its own social and cultural context (Trejo-Quintana, 2017). The concept of educommunication was constructed by figures such as Mario Kaplún (2001), Paulo Freire (1967), Martín-Barbero, and Prieto Castillo (Toth; Mertens; Rodrigues Makiuchi, 2012) as a field based on critical action, promotion of dialog, and the link between education and communication as tools for social transformation, laying the foundation for the construction of the educommunicative field as a “systematic search for the autonomy of the word” [*“búsqueda sistemática de la autonomía la palabra”*] (Soares, 2009, p. 197).

Educommunication originated in the movements of popular communication and critical pedagogy developed in Latin America and is structured around a permanent dialog between communication and education (Soares, 2011). Moreover, it also implies a civic commitment, seeking to strengthen critical autonomy, active participation, and the exercise of democratic citizenship through conscious and transformative use of media and communication technology (González; Contreras, 2014). Educommunication is based on a recognition that all communication implies an educational intentionality (Gué-Martini, 2020). Latin America has seen the most contributions related to the critical perspective of educommunication (Aparici, 2010) in both formal and informal educational environments.

In the field of educommunication, two main strands can be identified: firstly, the English-speaking approach, which prevails in Europe (being identified as *media literacy* or *media education*) and focuses on education in and with the media from a technical and technological perspective; and secondly, the Latin American perspective that emphasizes a critical reading of communication through a political, cultural,

and social lens (Santos Albardía; Agirreazkuenaga Onaindia, Peña-Fernández, 2023). Despite their differences, these two currents have now converged to form a dialogic, critical, and participatory conception of educommunication (Bermejo-Berros, 2021).

Meanwhile, information and communication technology and digitalization have continued to develop, with dizzying growth in recent decades (Aguaded; Civilá; Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2022), leading to a certain obsession with achieving excellence in their use. Smartphones have become an almost omnipresent part of human existence, and their excessive or inappropriate use can lead to serious problems such as “changes in the subject’s behavior and capacity for self-control” [*“cambios en la conducta del sujeto y en su capacidad de autocontrol”*] (Roig-Vila; López-Padrón; Urrea-Solano, 2023, p. 36) if the large amount of information received via such mediated messages is not managed adequately.

One can thus say that digital literacy for handling technology has become quite widespread. However, it is necessary to go beyond just operational use of devices to establish a technosocial perspective (Martínez Bravo; Sádaba Chalezquer; Serrano-Puche, 2021). There is a need to expand media and digital literacy along the critical dimension to provide citizens with tools and give meaning to the human–technology links created on a daily basis. The educational environment is considered to be a fundamental space in which to address these issues (Mesquita-Romero; Fernández-Morante; Cebreiro-López, 2022).

Technology education, which often focuses simply on how to use devices but is rarely implemented in a coherent or comprehensive manner (Buckingham, 2020), should take the opportunity to provide a structure to think critically about their use (Kellner; Share, 2007). The communication–education binomial reaches its greatest potential when combining digital and critical media competencies, thereby helping to address the *infodemic* scenario in which we find ourselves (Sánchez-Reina; González-Lara, 2022). There is therefore an urgent need to return to the social technology of critical dialog to mediate our relationship with the technology, devices, and media that now permeate our daily life. This is not a question of being a technology luddite, but rather ensuring that its use by the population favors the development of human and educommunicative skills (Freire; Guimarães 2013). Likewise, this is a matter of “taking advantage of the potential of technology for our own purposes and according to our cultural, scientific, and technological characteristics” [*“aprovechar el potencial de la tecnología para nuestros propios fines y de acuerdo a nuestras peculiaridades culturales, científicas y tecnológicas”*] (Orozco, 2000, p. 108).

For all of the reasons mentioned above, we use the term “critical” together with the concept of “educommunication” in response to the need to differentiate this critical perspective from the more instrumental meanings of media literacy or media education that focus solely on the inclusion of technology in the classroom and in society at large. This study thereby adopts an approach that promotes the analysis of

power relations conveyed through the media, the questioning of hegemonic discourses, and citizen education in information and communication technology from a critical perspective.

To achieve this, the study gathered and analyzed voices from the fields of literacy, media education, and educommunication at the national and international level, as well as the perspectives of students in the Education and Communication Department of the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) to discuss urgent issues discussed in the educational agenda of international organizations such as UNESCO (2024) but not necessarily being enacted appropriately in educational environments.

Methodology

The general objective (GO) of this article is to discuss the potential of educommunication from a dialogic-critical standpoint, as a solution to provide citizens with tools that can generate critical thinking with the help of educators, the main axes of critical media literacy.

In addition, the specific objectives include:

SO 1. To determine the differences and commonalities among various concepts used to designate the common area of education and communication, namely educommunication, media and information literacy, and media education.

SO 2. To analyze the obstacles to and key points regarding critical educommunication and media literacy.

SO 3. To define the requirements and key agents so that educommunication or critical media literacy can be implemented in higher education.

To achieve these objectives, this study adopts a qualitative approach to both data collection and analysis. For data collection, in-depth semistructured interviews were conducted with experts in the field and a diagnostic questionnaire was applied to students in the field of Education and Communication at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). Discourse analysis and content analysis were used to analyze the data collected.

In-Depth Semistructured Interviews

The in-depth semistructured interview method, described as “a communicative process of information extraction in a research context” [“*un proceso comunicativo de extracción de información en un contexto de investigación*”] (Vallés, 2002, p. 43) was chosen owing to its suitability for the topic and its ability to answer the questions posed above. The interview, being based on the “art of speaking and the art of listening” [“*arte de hablar y el arte de escuchar*”] (Sierra Caballero, 2019, p. 318), enables not only the collection of explicit information but also the observation of nonverbal codes, highlighting the fundamental role of the interviewer in the construction of the observed reality. The number of interviews was determined by following the principle of theoret-

ical saturation (Glaser; Strauss, 1967), which is reached when new information relevant to the research stops emerging (Guest, Bunce Johnson., 2006), because “the information collected is surplus in relation to the research objectives. That is, new interviews do not add anything relevant to what is already known” [*“la información recogida resulta sobrada en relación con los objetivos de investigación. Esto es, nuevas entrevistas no añaden nada relevante a lo conocido”*] (Vallés, 2002, p.68). For this study, seven experts from the area of educommunication and critical media literacy were interviewed, coming from different regions, including North America, Latin America, and Spain (Table 1).

Table 1 – Interviewees

Name	Institution
Dr. Ignacio Aguaded	Professor of Education and Communication at the University of Huelva, President of Grupo Comunicar, a veteran group in Spain in <i>media literacy</i> .
Dr. Jesús Bermejo Berros	Professor of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising at the University of Valladolid
Dr. Mónica Bonilla del Río	Professor and researcher at the European University of the Atlantic, whose doctoral thesis targeted media literacy and educommunication
Dr. Sherri Hope	Professor and researcher at Temple University, where she is director of the Center for Media and Information Literacy (CMIL), and also vice-president of the Global Media and Information Literacy Alliance
Dr. Douglas Kellner	Distinguished Professor and Research Fellow in Education at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
Dr. Jeff Share	Professor and researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and lecturer in the Teacher Education Program and Education and Information Studies degrees at UCLA
Dr. Julio César Mateus	Associate professor and researcher at the Faculty of Communication of the University of Lima Coordinator of the research group in Communication, Education, and Culture (CEC-IDIC) and director of the academic journal <i>Contratexto</i>

Source: Authors' own creation.

The interviews, conducted online and digitally recorded, used common questions with some adaptations (Table 2).

Table 2 – Questions asked to the interviewees

<i>Questions common to all interviewees</i>	<i>Specific questions according to interviewees</i>	
1. On the basis of your academic experience, how would you define the concept of educommunication? 2. What would you say is the relationship and differences between the concepts of educommunication, media literacy, and media education? 3. Some studies carried out on educommunication in recent decades speak of the predominance of two main aspects: the more technological facet of educommunication and that focusing on a critical reading of communication and the possibility of generating critical thinking through educommunication. Do you agree with this division? Would you propose any nuances? 4. What would you say is the current situation of educommunication in your country? What is its current state, and what aspects would you highlight in contrast to the global situation? 5. Several authors affirm the need to reinforce the dialogic dimension of educommunication. What do you think is the current situation of this in your country? What do you think is necessary to reinforce the dialogic dimension of educommunication? Should changes be made at the political level, at the individual level, or at the level of teaching itself? 6. What do you think would be a possible solution to a scenario in which the use of technology or mediated education is reinforced, but not necessarily education mediated by dialog? How could media education, designed to encourage critical thinking and not exclusively technological skills, be strengthened? 7. Where do you think work on educommunication should begin? In primary, secondary, or higher education, so that future teachers can transmit these competencies to the student body? 8. In your opinion, do you think there has been any considerable change in teacher training in media education, in terms of overcoming the exclusively technological paradigm, in recent years? 9. Do you consider that educommunication is present in educational curricula? Do you think it is feasible for it to be implemented as a subject in undergraduate curricula? 10. Do you think it is possible to implement practical tools based on critical dialog as a tool for future teachers? On the basis of your experience, do you think that media dialog	Dr. Jesús Bermejo Berros	14. In your work, you talk about the dialogic–critical method to foster narrative thinking and you work with children between 6 and 11 years old. Why did you choose this audience? Have you worked with audiences of other ages, and how has that worked? 15. You work by differentiating groups, applying conversational dialog with some but critical dialog with others. Have you ever combined these to evaluate the differences before and after? 16. You work with fictional content. Have you ever worked with content about reality and news events? 17. Do you think it would be beneficial to apply the dialogic–critical method in educommunication with future educators, so that they can implement it in their teaching work?
11. Do you think that media dialog is a tool for future teachers? On the basis of your experience, do you think that media dialog		14. In your work “<i>Critical media literacy, democracy, and the reconstruction of education</i>,” you affirm that educommunication has the potential to redirect the educational process toward social transformation and raising awareness of the existence of a society based on gender, race and class inequalities, and discrimination. How would you say this works? 15. Do you use your <i>Critical Media Literacy Framework</i> with future teachers, who are studying to become educators?

can be a useful tool and has the potential to foster educommunication skills? 11. Do you think there is a fascination with technology in society? 12. What distinguishes an educommunicator? What are the competencies that make an educator or communicator become an educommunicator? 13. Is there any information you would like to add to this conversation?	Dr. Jeff Share	14. In your work "<i>Critical media literacy, democracy, and the reconstruction of education</i>," you affirm that educommunication has the potential to redirect the educational process toward social transformation and raising awareness of the existence of a society based on gender, race and class inequalities, and discrimination. How would you say this works?
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Source: Authors' own creation.

The coding of the interview data followed a hypothetico-inductive model (Hernández Carrera, 2014), collecting all relevant facts, analyzing them, and reducing the information to categories (Corbin; Strauss, 2008) and codes designed with the support of NVIVO software. The interpretation was based on discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010), facilitating the understanding of how language, in conjunction with other nonverbal elements, participates in the configuration of social activities, identities, relationships, and power structures (Gee, 1999). Likewise, the critical discourse analysis approach was adopted, highlighting its ethical dimension and capacity to reveal the connections between language and power, considering the essential context in the construction of meanings (Gee, 2004). In addition, qualitative content analysis was employed, "Defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh; Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

Group Diagnostic Questionnaire

To complement the consistency of the data extracted from the interviews, a group diagnostic questionnaire was applied to 141 people in total. The questionnaires were answered by future educators and journalists who were students of the Journalism, Social Education, Early Childhood Education, and Primary Education degrees at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). All the groups were homogeneous, formed of students under 35 years of age, but with diverse demographic profiles, ensuring a minimum of 50% of people who self-identified as female gender, to ensure a gender equality threshold. Data collection was carried out at the Faculty of Education (Araba, Gipuzkoa, and Bizkaia campuses) and at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Communication (Bizkaia campus).

The sample size was determined by applying a statistical formula with a reliability level of 99.9%:

n = appropriate sample size

N = universe (657, the average number of students enrolled in the degrees the participants were studying).

Z = reliability level ($Z = 2.57$, to obtain a reliability level of 99.9%)

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + \frac{(0.5 \cdot 0.5)2(N-1)}{Z^2 \cdot 0.5 \cdot 0.5}}$$

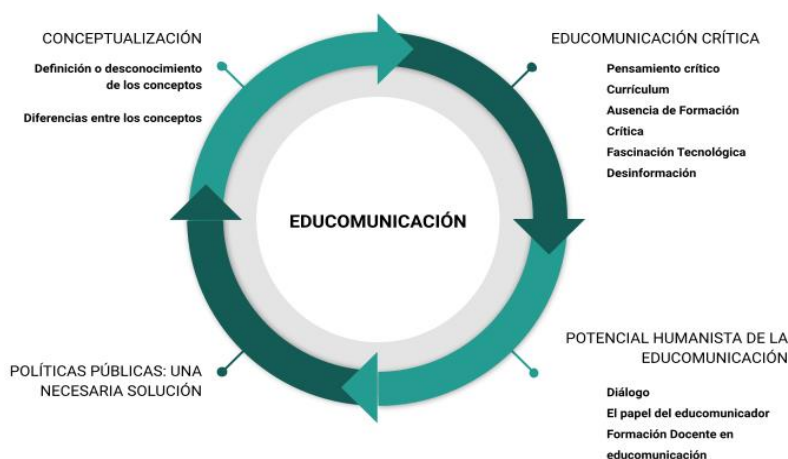
This gave a required sample size of 25.43 participants, far fewer than the 141 included in this work.

To apply the questionnaires, participants were invited to access an online questionnaire designed using *Google Forms*, which contained 3 open and 20 closed questions. The questionnaire was used to structure and capture collective perspectives and was a useful tool to identify initial patterns for analysis. Being applied before the discussion process, the questionnaires sought to understand young people's prior notions regarding educommunication, literacy, and media education and whether these form part of their higher education studies; as well as to determine how they use, consume, and build relationships with the media.

Results

NVIVO software was used to facilitate the organization and coding of the data for qualitative analysis, identifying four major themes and eleven codes (Fig. 1). The first theme was the conceptualization of terms used at the intersection between education and communication, where we identified codes, definitions, and differences between the concepts. The second theme, viz. critical educommunication, includes codes related to critical thinking, the curriculum, the absence of critical education, fascination with technology, and disinformation. The third theme deals with the humanistic potential of educommunication in terms of the codes for dialog, the role of the educommunicator, and teacher training in critical educommunication. Finally, the fourth theme includes a single code addressing public policies as a necessary solution.

Figure 1 – A schematic of the themes and codes of analysis



Note Translation: CONCEPTUALIZATION
Definition and lack of awareness of concepts
Differences among concepts
PUBLIC POLICIES: A NECESSARY SOLUTION
CRITICAL EDUCOMMUNICATION
Critical thinking
Curricula
Absence of critical education
Fascination with technology
Disinformation
THE HUMANISTIC POTENTIAL OF EDUCOMMUNICATION
Dialog
The role of the educommunicator
Teacher training in educommunication

Source: Authors' own creation.

Conceptualization

The first topic deals with the definitions and differences between the concepts that describe the field combining education and communication. The interviewees agreed that a diversity of terms are used, depending on the context and the organizations and institutions concerned. The need for all definitions to include criticality as a central axis of educommunication to foster democracy and address social problems was emphasized, as well as integrating both technological and sociocultural factors, without being limited to any one of these. Furthermore, it was stated that focusing exclusively on a discussion of terms might hinder the practical implementation of educommunication, so a critical and reflective coexistence between the communicative–dialogic and technological–digital aspects is urgently required.

The analysis of the student questionnaires revealed that 25.53% of those surveyed were not aware of any of the terms “educommunication,” “media literacy,” or “media education.” Meanwhile, the percentages confirming that they had heard of “educommunication,” “media literacy,” and about “media education” were 9.93%, 59.57%, and 44.68%, respectively. However, only 11.35% stated that any of these three terms were mentioned explicitly during their undergraduate

studies. This reinforces the idea from the interviews that terminological differences are mostly institutional and that academic knowledge regarding these concepts has not yet permeated in a practical way into the general education of the student body.

The first code of this theme showed that all the interviewees knew and used the term “educommunication” in their work, except for Kellner, who uses the term “critical media literacy.” The term “educommunication” is more common in Latin America, but all agreed that it requires a critical and reflective attitude to foster critical citizenship with regard to the media. Aguaded stressed the importance of literacy in new languages and codes, pointing out that educommunication “is not a curricular process that responds to conceptualizations, but rather is in the emotional, attitudinal sphere and requires a process of reflection” [*“no es un proceso curricular que responde a conceptualizaciones, sino que más bien está en el ámbito emocional, actitudinal y que requiere un proceso de reflexión”*] (personal communication, 2024). Mateus affirmed that educommunication is a popular vocation to address social problems and defined it as a “pedagogical political movement that integrates the main contributions of democratic communication to the field of education” [*“movimiento político pedagógico que integra los principales aportes de la comunicación democrática al campo de la educación”*] (personal communication, 2024). Monica Bonilla reinforced its importance within democratic societies, in a multi-screen environment characterized by digitalization, while Kellner and Share insisted on the necessity of defining boundaries regarding society, ethnicity, and gender. Meanwhile, Bermejo Berros highlighted the dialogic essence of educommunication, as reinforced by North American authors, that is, the need for teachers to go beyond mere lectures and invite students to discuss social reality and generate knowledge on the basis of their own reflections, by using educommunication.

The second code addresses the differences between concepts such as educommunication, media literacy, or media education. All the interviewees agreed that these differences tend to be institutional and recognize that they fit different definitions depending on the context. Mateus stated that this is “a debate among academics locked in ivory towers” [*“un debate de académicos encerrados en un mundo académico”*] (personal communication, 2024) and points out that, in practice, both teachers and institutions are often unfamiliar with the terms, even if they do use educommunicative tools. Along the same vein, Sherri Hope adds that “I feel sometimes that as a field, we get caught up in arguing about the definition differences as opposed to recognizing that, overall, what we’re all talking about is an ability to bring a critical lens to the media that we consume in all of its forms, not just digital” (personal communication, 2024).

Aguaded distinguishes between digital and media education or competency, highlighting that only those related to the media include the necessary factors of criticality, reflection, participation, and dialog.

He does not advocate for isolating the digital, but rather treating it critically, beyond the simple use of technology. Mateus adds that technology should be understood as a cultural matrix that runs through life in society, “influencing the economic, political, and institutional flows related to the control of this technology” [*“influyendo en los flujos económicos, políticos, institucionales que tienen que ver con el control de esas tecnologías”*] (personal communication, 2024). Monica Bonilla claims to use the term “media” to encompass everything that refers to the universe of everything digital, information and communication technology, and media, highlighting the differences between education (process), literacy (outcomes), and competencies (skills and abilities). Finally, all the interviewees agreed that it is essential to include technology in education in a critical way, promoting a coexistence between the technological–digital and dialogic–reflexive aspects.

Critical Educommunication

The theme “critical educommunication” stresses the need for media literacy that considers the perspectives of gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and political persuasion when interacting with the media and technology. It should also be dialogic, analyzing the power relations between the media, information, and audiences. In addition, it is considered essential to strengthen critical media literacy in education, equipping both teachers and students with the skills to face current challenges such as disinformation and fake news. Warnings were also sounded regarding the risk of a fascination with technology that can reduce media literacy to the simple use of devices but without critical reflection.

In this regard, 55.32% of those surveyed considered that they do not have the tools to manage the amount of information they receive daily through the media, while 54.6% stated that they do not have sufficient resources to analyze it critically, thus confirming the concern expressed by the interviewees regarding the absence of critical approaches in academic education and the relevance of this for dealing with information disorders. In addition, 97.87% of respondents showed an interest in receiving education in this area throughout their university education, thus reinforcing the need to incorporate critical educommunication as a formal component of higher education curricula. The analysis of the survey responses also revealed that 59.57% of students perceived that the media negatively affect how they form opinions, while 97.16% believed that the media create stereotypes based on people’s ethnic or cultural origin. This perception is consistent with the interviews, which emphasized the need to include critical educommunication in order to question the media’s construction of reality and its impact on citizens.

This theme includes critical thinking as a first code, to which all the interviewees contributed. Aguaded stated that a critical viewpoint can turn the media from “instruments of hypnosis and manipulation” [*“instrumentos de hipnosis y manipulación”*] into instruments of “personal growth” [*“crecimiento personal”*], but that this will largely depend

on the “education attainment, competence, filters, and skills that users obtain” [*“cualificación, competencia, de los filtros y habilidades que los usuarios desarrollan”*] (personal communication, 2024). For Bermejo-Berros (2021), this is based on the use and development of critical dialog, as he has verified through empirical studies. Sherri Hope states that, without the aspect of reflective critical thinking, media literacy remains incomplete. Meanwhile, both Kellner and Share emphasize the importance of including gender, ethnicity, class, and politics, as well as promoting classroom conversations and bringing students into contact with critical theories (Paulo Freire and John Dewey, among others), feminist theories, or critical race theories. All of these should be part of what they call “critical media literacy.” Share also points out that critical media literacy implies the inclusion of popular culture and states that the adjective “critical” here invites one to critically analyze the relationships between media and audiences, and thus evaluate the direct relationship between information and power. For Mateus, teachers must understand that technology education should be critical and that media education goes beyond taking students to a computer room.

The second code, that is, curriculum, reveals that educommunication is not integrated into the educational programs of the regions studied (Spain, Peru, and the USA). Although it sometimes appears as a cross-cutting competency, this is insufficient. The contributors agreed that the presence of educommunication in different educational stages depends exclusively on teachers, since in these contexts, educommunication is not a subject but a “profession” (Aguaded, personal communication, 2024). According to Mateus, this depends on having educators who are interested in the subject, since the curriculum does not provide it, apart from rare exceptions in Uruguay, Chile, Peru, and Brazil.

Regarding the third code, viz. the lack of critical education, Aguaded and Mateus confirm that, in general, there is a lack of critical education to manage our relations with the media, which facilitates disinformation, false news, and information manipulation. They stress that people relate to the media constantly without understanding their languages or being aware of their ideological dimension.

All the interviewees mentioned this problem in relation to the misinformation code, but it was especially emphasized by Aguaded, Hope, Keller, and Mateus. The contributors agreed that disinformation is a global phenomenon and that critical educommunication is a key tool to address it. Mateus adds the risk of incidental information, which mainly affects misinformed or uninformed people who are influenced by clickbait and do not reflect on it afterward. Meanwhile, Hope stresses that polarization is also a direct consequence of the lack of media literacy education.

Finally, the code on fascination with technology was highlighted by Kellner and Mateus, who pointed out that some teachers reduce educommunication to digital competencies. Mateus also mentioned the existence of a techno-fetishist approach, mainly promoted by institutions, affirming that technology often appears to be imposed. Also,

depending on one's location, it is also imported, so it becomes appropriate to take a position in this regard. Moreover, Kellner affirmed that technology can provide both the best and the worst, and that educommunication should provide specific education to ensure that the relationship between people and the media and technology is the least destructive and as critical as possible. He takes a critical view of both technophobia and technophilia as two possible approaches to technology, noting that "There's the technophobic and the technophilic. I rejected from the beginning both the people that said this 'It's wonderful' or 'This is terrible'. And I've always said: this is both. It depends on how you use it. How you use it critically, productively" (comunicación personal, 2024).

The humanistic potential of educommunication

The theme related to the humanistic potential of educommunication emerged during all the interviews, albeit mentioned in different terms. We define this concept as the ability to perceive and critically analyze reality, making educommunication a task with an aim that is both social and popular, beyond purely technological. In short, we are talking about knowing how to use technological tools in the service of humanity. One of the main findings of this theme is that the interviewees who appealed directly to Paulo Freire and take him as a reference talked more about dialog in their contributions. It is important that this dialog becomes critical and goes beyond mere conversation, necessarily raising questions that invite reflection. Another point that was emphasized is the need to overcome teacher–student roles and understand that knowledge is not unidirectional but built via group interactions. Finally, the profile of the educommunicator was sketched as someone with skills in education and communication and who integrates the media in a critical way into the educational environment.

The analysis of the surveys indicated that, although 46.81% of students consumed information on a daily basis, only a minority analyzed it critically. In addition, 47.52% have worked with media content in the classroom, but only 24.82% claimed to have participated in dialogic dynamics proposed by the educator during this learning process. These results confirm the need to strengthen the humanistic perspective of educommunication not only to guarantee access to information but also to promote the development of reflective and dialogic skills. This would contribute to the education of citizens who are active and critical in their relationship with the media and society.

Regarding the first code, all interviewees emphasized the importance of dialog in educommunication. Mateus emphasized that "everything that inspires dialog embodies the educommunicative approach" [*"todo aquello que inspire el diálogo tiene la clave educomunicadora"*] (personal communication, 2024). Bermejo-Berros points out that teachers must conduct dialog in a critical manner, fostering questions beyond a simple conversation. The three interviewees from North American universities appealed directly to Paulo Freire, mentioning his dialogic praxis as essential to their teaching. They insisted that it was

important for teachers to abandon a posture of superiority, verticality, and unidirectional transmission to assume the role of educommunicators. They claim that this allows students to develop critical thinking through presentations and discussions regarding classroom content. In addition, according to Sherri Hope, the American educational style emphasizes dialog, with the most effective teachers being those who facilitate such interactions. However, she adds that “in many parts of the world, that is not considered effective education” [*“en muchas partes del mundo eso no se considera una educación eficaz”*], which underscores the importance of dialog to improve learning (personal communication, 2024, our translation).

The second code analyzes the role of the educommunicator, defined by the interviewees as someone who goes beyond being a simple educator or communicator. This type of person has a social vocation and adopts a reflective approach, based on a critical understanding of reality and the media. Aguaded describes an educommunicator as “someone who has contextualized the importance of the media in society and in their own life” [*“alguien que ha contextualizado la importancia de los medios en la sociedad y en su propia vida”*], acting critically but constructively, without demonizing or idealizing the media and promoting its positive use in everyday life (personal communication, 2024). Kellner and Share emphasized the need for educommunicators to implement classroom dialog, highlighting the *Critical Media Literacy Framework* (Kellner; Share, 2019), a tool they developed to address issues of gender, ethnicity, class, and power and integrating media literacy with critical pedagogy.

The final code in this category focuses on teacher training in educommunication, which was emphasized by six of the seven interviewees. The importance of keeping educational curriculum up to date for future educators was emphasized. Aguaded criticizes the fact that curricular content has remained almost untouched for three decades, stressing the urgency of incorporating educommunication strategically into education. At UCLA, Share and Kellner apply critical media literacy with their students, although they acknowledge that few of their colleagues do so from a critical educommunicative perspective. For Hope, education must inculcate critical evaluation of media and technology as a permanent habit:

We don't want it to be something where you have moments in your day where you think like a media literate person. I want anyone to consider to bring our critical thinking skills to all of our interactions with media all the time. So it has to become part of just how we live, just in the same way we think about what we eat (communication personal, 2024).

Mateus, from Peru, whose work includes educating educommunicators, indicated that the lack of initial teacher training hinders the critical integration of technology into the classroom. He also noted that, although some educators may use educommunicative tools, they often lack the criteria necessary to adequately evaluate these practices, which are not included in the official curriculum.

Public policies: a necessary solution

Regarding the last theme and code (public policies: a necessary solution), all the interviewees agreed on the importance of public policies to implement educommunication at the societal level, extending from basic to higher education. They advocate that it should be integrated as an ongoing state policy (rather than a government policy or mandate), involving multiple stakeholders. Bermejo Berros stressed the requirement to “defend before political institutions the need for educommunication in education” [*“reivindicar la necesidad de la educomunicación en la educación ante las instituciones políticas”*] (personal communication, 2024), as it is a central and core issue that, with the new education law, is even ignored, according to Aguaded. Mateus reinforces the idea that, although some public policy-makers support educommunication, this is insufficient without leadership to drive this vision: “we need politicians and policies aligned with the belief that media education, along with other literacies, is vital for the development of society” [*“se necesitan políticos y políticas que crean que la educación mediática, junto con otras literalidades, son vitales para el desarrollo de las sociedades”*] (personal communication, 2024). Regarding US universities, Sherri Hope notes the importance of a joint effort, from teacher training to parent education and the involvement of media companies, in order to make this literacy an integral part of education and media content, especially for children.

Conclusions

Although educommunication as a concept has been present in academia for several decades, it is currently gaining renewed relevance owing to the urgent need to unite digital and media skills through a critical approach. More than a theoretical discipline, educommunication should be translated into practical applications that allow for a reflective and dialogic analysis of the media content to which we are exposed on a daily basis. In a situation that varies from information overload to news evasion, along with a growing fascination with technology, it is essential to build a critical and reflective relationship with the information and devices that form part of our daily lives.

The results of the questionnaires and interviews reveal a significant lack of education on educommunication in the university curriculum, as well as demands from students to provide specific tools and education so they can critically analyze the information they consume and that affects them. This lack of critical media literacy affects both the academic and social sphere, making it essential for critical thinking to be present in all educational stages. Beyond teaching digital or technological skills, it becomes essential to prioritize the development of critical and reflective skills in both teacher training and curricular design.

For educommunication to have a real impact on the construction of critical citizens, public policies that integrate critical media literacy in a transversal manner into the educational system must be imple-

mented. This requires a nexus of various actors (educational institutions, the media, civil society, and other entities and organizations) that are committed to critical media literacy as well as the political will to enact a real transformation in this direction.

Meanwhile, educators trained in educommunication play an essential role in this process by encouraging critical analysis of reality and transcending a merely instrumental vision of technology. An effective educommunicative approach should not only combine digital competencies with humanistic values but also promote dialog and reflection about the power of information and its effect on society.

Learning in educommunication must be built through effective dialogic practices, supported not only by faculty but also by institutions and students' own interest. However, educommunication cannot achieve the intended social change without critical media literacy that includes dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Only through comprehensive and contextualized education can the relationship with the media be transformed and a more well-informed and critical society be established.

Finally, this study has some limitations that open up possible lines of future research. On the one hand, the interviews focused on the voices of experts from Spain, Latin America, and the USA, suggesting a need to incorporate perspectives from other regions to broaden this comparative dimension. On the other hand, the fact that the surveys were only conducted among students at the University of the Basque Country limits the generalizability of the results. Future research could extend the analysis to include diverse national and regional contexts, thereby deepening the understanding of critical media literacy in different education systems.

Discussion

The public is faced with several informative disorders (Moreno Bobadilla; Martínez Isidoro, 2022) such as an increase of fake news (Rodríguez-Martelo, 2021) with specific intentions (Pérez Forteza; Izquierdo Cuellar, 2020; Hernández-Rodríguez; Londoño Pardo, 2023), the risk of suffering infoxication or disinformation (Gómez Nieto, 2016), and a decrease in the credibility of the media that can drive news avoidance (Hasell; Harvensen, 2024) or incidental consumption (Díaz-Noci; Pérez-Altable, 2023). These issues, together with the impacts of artificial intelligence, are reshaping debates on the media and technology and highlight future lines of research on how educommunication could address these challenges in a comprehensive manner. Faced with these risks, receivers can choose to become active audiences by selecting and critically analyzing what they consume, and educommunication or media literacy can provide an essential preventive tool to assist this (Marta-Lazo, 2023).

Educommunication and critical media literacy are essential to foster critical thinking in citizens (López-González et al., 2023). To implement these effectively in all areas, it is crucial to reinforce the train-

ing of teachers so that they can transmit it (Cañas Encinas; Pinedo González; Palacios Picos, 2022), since their role is key in the establishment of a critical public that is conscious of its media consumption. Media literacy courses are in limited supply, and it is essential that they do not focus only on the technological dimension (Masanet; Ferrés, 2013) but also include digital and technological competencies together with human, dialogic, and critical skills. The tendency to prioritize technology education over media education should be questioned (Gutiérrez-Martín; Pinedo-González; Gil-Puente, 2022), while the reflective and critical use of technology should be promoted.

In this regard, it is worth highlighting that, in countries such as Brazil, educommunication has reached a considerable level as a public policy, becoming established in various municipalities and states, with federal guidelines for initial and ongoing teacher training (Soares, 2018). This situation highlights the potential of educommunication when implemented as a state policy, and orients the debate around an evaluation of its limitations and legacy, especially with the emergence of new technology that demands critical approaches in order to “read the world.”

Promoting and making educommunication effective in the educational system also requires the establishment of alliances and networks among various actors, including the media, companies, educational institutions, and other organizations (Gil; Marzal-Felici, 2023), as well as nonformal education initiatives, which have the potential to consolidate educommunicative practices (Ortiz Sobrino; López Vidales; González Pérez, 2022).

In addition, there is an urgent need to implement educommunicative, dialogic, and reflective practices in classrooms (González Morales, 2021), such as critical readings of media content (Alvarado-Miquilena, 2012; Ojeda Sánchez; Del Valle Rojas; Del Valle Rojas, 2015), based on critical pedagogies and supported by public policies and a well-trained faculty (Rodríguez-Vázquez; García-Ruiz; Aguaded, 2020). In contexts where the educommunicative tradition remains incipient, addressing these priorities can help to move past a merely theoretical discussion, thus contributing to the practical development of the field and favoring its applicability in society.

We conclude that critical media literacy is fundamental to participatory democracy in the twenty-first century and that the question is no longer whether it should be taught, but how to approach and optimize its teaching.

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