Organizational Media Competence: Thinking the Collective to Enable a Critical Attitude

Competencia Mediática Organizacional: pensar lo colectivo para habilitar la actitud crítica

Competência Midiática Organizacional: pensar o coletivo para possibilitar uma atitude crítica

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Abstract: This essay presents Organizational Media Competence (CMO) as an innovative and Latin American theoretical-methodological proposal that seeks to overcome individualistic and instrumental approaches to media literacy. From a holistic, ecosophical and complex perspective, it is argued that media competencies are built collectively within educational organizations understood as communicative ecosystems. The CMO protocol and its application in a Brazilian university are described, with the aim of revealing the structural tensions and training potentialities. Finally, the contributions of this perspective for Latin America, and in particular for Uruguay, are updated, highlighting its value as a critical tool for diagnosis, training, and institutional transformation.

Keywords:
Media literacy, media education, communicative ecosystems, critical attitude

Resumen: En este ensayo se presenta la Competencia Mediática Organizacional (CMO) como una propuesta teórico-metodológica innovadora y latinoamericana que busca superar los enfoques individualistas e instrumentales de la alfabetización mediática. Desde una mirada holística, ecosófica y compleja, se sostiene que las competencias mediáticas se construyen colectivamente dentro de organizaciones educativas entendidas como ecosistemas comunicativos. Se describe el protocolo CMO y su aplicación en una universidad brasileña, con el objetivo de revelar las tensiones estructurales y potencialidades formativas. Finalmente, se actualizan los aportes de esta perspectiva para América Latina, y en particular para Uruguay,

destacando su valor como herramienta crítica para el diagnóstico, la formación y la transformación institucional.

Palabras clave:
Alfabetización mediática, educación mediática, ecosistemas comunicativos, actitud crítica

Resumo: Este ensaio apresenta a Competência Midiática Organizacional (OCM) como uma proposta teórico-metodológica inovadora e latino-americana que busca superar abordagens individualistas e instrumentais da alfabetização midiática. A partir de uma perspectiva holística, ecosófica e complexa, argumenta-se que as competências midiáticas são construídas coletivamente dentro de organizações educacionais entendidas como ecossistemas comunicativos. Descreve-se o protocolo CMO e sua aplicação em uma universidade brasileira, com o objetivo de revelar as tensões estruturais e as potencialidades formativas. Por fim, as contribuições dessa perspectiva para a América Latina e, em particular, para o Uruguai, são atualizadas, destacando seu valor como ferramenta crítica para diagnóstico, treinamento e transformação institucional.

Palavras-chave:
Alfabetização midiática, educação midiática, ecossistemas comunicativos, atitude crítica

1. Introduction

In recent decades, Latin America has witnessed numerous efforts to promote media, digital, informational, and communication literacy, fostering critical, autonomous, and democratic citizenship. Notable initiatives to this end are those carried out in the region by the Latin American and Caribbean Chapter of UNESCO's Global Partnership on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and the persistent work of researchers belonging to the Euro-American Interuniversity Network for Research on Media Competencies (Red Alfamed), who are actively promoting policies, research, and practices that strengthen the development of media competencies in Latin American citizens.

However, many of the studies, programs, and assessment models proposed for media competency, including those by international organizations, have tended to focus on the

individual as the unit of analysis, learning, and transformation. This perspective, although relevant, is anchored in a predominantly instrumental and rationalist approach, where the notion of "critical thinking" is presented as the primary training horizon. An example of this can be seen in the UNESCO publication (2023): Thinking Critically, Clicking Wisely: Media and Information Literate Citizenship (Grizzle et al., 2023). What often remains in the background is the structuring influence of the institutional environments in which this thinking is formed, developed, or blocked.

As Martín-Barbero (2004; 2011) and Soares (2000; 2011) argue, organizations are not neutral environments for the transmission of information, but relatively open and dialogic communicative ecosystems where power relations are configured, meanings are contested, and citizenship practices are shaped. Recognizing organizations as symbolic spaces implies assuming that their communicative logics not only reflect their institutional culture, but also produce, reproduce, or transform it.

This essay proposes Organizational Media Competence (OMC) as a theoretical and methodological framework that allows us to shift the focus from the individual to educational organizations, understood, as Soares (2009) points out, as formative communication environments, where communicative practices are central to the development of critical citizenship. OMC is presented as a perspective that establishes an intrinsic relationship between the development of individuals' media competence and the organizational conditions that enable or restrict it, integrating Ibero-American approaches and proposing a relational, holistic, and transformative perspective.

Thus understood, OMC establishes a procedure for interpreting the subject-organization relationship in a given spatiotemporal context. The data obtained provide input for a subsequent strategic stage of intervention, based on educational communication actions that seek to empower organizational subjects to act critically and autonomously in media communication processes that shape organizational and social reality.

From this perspective, OML conceives the organization as a "place-not-place" (Augé, 1994), which delimits space and time for the development of media competencies and, at the same time, acts as an agent of change in media society. Within its autopoietic limits (Maturana & Varela, 1990), the organization is understood as a territory where it is possible to develop the

media competence of organizational subjects and, reflexively (Giddens, 1991), of society as a whole.

Inspired by a holistic, ecosophical, and complex vision, OML is based on the premise that media competence arises from a relational production between the subject and the organization. Media literacy should not only involve teaching critical thinking, but also transforming the organizational conditions that enable critical thinking and collective action.

The proposed methodology is based on the intersection of two dimensions: on the one hand, organizational entities (documents, policies, structures, institutional culture); on the other, organizational subjects (teachers, students, technical and administrative staff). This relational reading enables a deeper examination of how official discourses intersect—or not—with actual practices, and how processes of symbolic production and media citizenship are manifested (or inhibited) in institutional everyday life.

The objective of this essay is to present this proposal in dialogue with contemporary debates on media literacy in the Global South, to demonstrate its concrete application in a Brazilian public university, and to discuss its emancipatory potential as a critical tool for diagnosis, training, and intervention in other institutional realities in Latin America, with a special emphasis on Uruguay. Through this approach, we aim to offer a paradigmatic and situated perspective that complements and challenges traditional frameworks of media literacy, fostering a critical citizenship grounded in the collective, relational, and transformative.

2. Beyond Critical Thinking: Toward a Critical Attitude

Historically, media literacy has been linked to the development of critical thinking as an analytical, rational, and reflective capacity. This approach has been widely promoted by organizations such as UNESCO and academic networks, including Alfamed, which recognize it as an essential dimension for citizenship education in media-driven environments. However, various studies, including those by Ferrés and Montero (2024), have questioned the sufficiency of this model when approached from a neuroscience perspective.

Authors such as Damásio (1996), LeDoux (1999), Ratey (2003), and Evans (2002) have shown that human decisions are not driven solely by reason, but by the interaction between emotional and rational processes. Thought without emotion does not mobilize action, and understanding without affection is unlikely to translate into commitment.

Based on this critique, a conceptual shift is proposed: moving from critical thinking to a critical attitude. This does not deny the importance of thought, but insists that knowing is not enough; it is necessary to want, feel, and act. It is an ethical, emotional, and intellectual disposition that encourages one to take a position regarding media messages and structures, not only to interpret them, but also to intervene in them.

Media literacy, from this perspective, should not focus solely on individual cognitive skills, but rather on collective empowerment processes that recognize institutional influences, connections, and silences as part of both the problem and the solution.

The studies analyzed by Ferrés and Montero (2024) highlight this tension: individuals may be aware of the risks associated with the media, identify manipulative discourses, or recognize the impact of social media on their lives, yet they continue to engage in media practices that they rationally consider harmful, without adopting a critical attitude. From a OML perspective, it is argued that organizational mediation can provoke a shift from rational to attitudinal. If the organization is concerned with creating spaces and conditions that develop a critical attitude in its constituents, this shared knowledge can translate into individual and social transformation.

In this sense, a critical attitude is not an isolated personal competency, but rather a relational practice that is learned, developed, and sustained within a community. This attitude is not formed in a vacuum, but in institutional contexts that enable or inhibit it. The OML proposes conceiving critical thinking as a relational and organizational practice that transcends the individual and offers a framework for analyzing not only what people think, but also how the environment is configured to enable, or limit, them to think and act critically.

3. A Paradigmatic Perspective: The Holistic, the Ecosophical, and the Complex

Organizational Media Literacy (OML) is based on a paradigmatic vision that challenges the fragmented approaches prevalent in many media literacy policies. Instead of assuming a linear and cumulative logic of knowledge, OMC relies on three interrelated paradigms: holism, ecosophy, and complexity. This articulation enables us to understand educational organizations as symbolic ecosystems where subjectivities, communicative practices, and structural conditions are configured, allowing for the development of media citizenship.

3.1 The Holistic: Part and Whole in Continuous Dialogue

The holistic paradigm, initially proposed by Smuts (1926) and subsequently adopted in the UNESCO Venice Declaration of 1986, posits that the whole is not the simple sum of its parts, but rather the totality of its components that interact and participate in an integrative dynamic. This view has been revived in Latin American thought (Crema, 2015) and aligns with epistemologies from the South that reject the Cartesian dissociation between parts and the whole. Within the framework of OML, holism allows us to understand that media competence does not develop exclusively in individuals but instead emerges from their interaction with the organizational environment. Organizational structures, discourse, policies, and technologies determine not only what its members can do, but also what they can imagine, desire, and express. The organization is, therefore, a constitutive part of the formative process.

This perspective integrates subject and organization in a part-whole dynamic, in which both dimensions mutually shape each other. This approach allows us to understand media competence as a process that emerges from the interaction between actors and structures within the organizational ecosystem.

3.2 Ecosophy: Communication as Relational Ethics

Inspired by the "deep ecology" of Naess (1989)—an environmental activist and professor at the University of Oslo—and further developed by Bugallo (2011; 2023), ecosophy introduces an ethical and political interpretation of interdependence. It is not only about recognizing that everyone is connected, but also about assuming responsibility for those connections. It proposes a relational ethic that recognizes the interdependence between humans, technologies, knowledge, and environments. From this perspective, media competence cannot be reduced to technical skills; instead, it involves sustainable and conscious practices in relation to both the symbolic and material mediums. In the field of communication, this entails recognizing that the way an organization communicates expresses its worldview: whether it listens or silences, whether it enables or excludes, whether it cares or discards. As Soares (2011) suggests, institutions also educate through their silences, their communicative architecture, and their approach to managing relationships between social subjects.

Applied to media literacy, ecosophy enables us to reframe the relationship between subjects, technologies, and culture in terms of a logic of care and interdependence. The

educational organization ceases to be a neutral container and is conceived as a space of enunciation, where media citizenship, social justice, and marginalization are symbolically produced.

3.3 Complexity: Thinking in a network, acting in context

Complexity thinking, developed by Morin (2011), offers a key epistemological tool for addressing organizational processes. Complexity does not mean chaos, but rather the recognition that social phenomena are intertwined, contradictory, and nonlinear. In this framework, it is not about seeking single truths, but rather about mapping tensions, paradoxes, and relationships. This paradigm encompasses uncertainty, ambiguity, and change as integral components of any training and communication process.

From this perspective, OML proposes a perspective that integrates the subjective and the structural, the emotional and the institutional, the spoken and the silenced. The accompanying OML methodological protocol is constructed as a situated reading strategy, which articulates both quantitative and qualitative data to understand how organizational conditions influence the development or blockage of media literacy within the organizational complex.

These three paradigms articulate the OML proposal as a comprehensive approach that transcends reductionisms and fosters a deep and situated understanding of media literacy in real-world institutional contexts.

4. From the Individual to the Organizational: A Relational Perspective

One of the central contributions of Organizational Media Literacy (OMC) is its invitation to transcend the focus exclusively on the individual as an isolated agent of the literacy process. Instead of solely assessing personal knowledge, understanding, and expression, this approach proposes analyzing the organizational conditions that enable, mediate, or restrict the development of critical media citizenship.

This perspective is part of a sociological tradition that understands organizations not only as functional structures but also as symbolic, cultural, and political systems (Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1983; Navarro, 2001). From this perspective, the educational organization is a space where meanings are produced and circulated, communicative hierarchies are established, and forms of

symbolic power are exercised. Subjects' media competencies, therefore, cannot be understood or developed outside of this context.

Berger and Luckmann's (2008) theory of the social construction of reality is especially relevant to understanding this link. According to these authors, everyday reality is shaped through processes of objectification and subjectification, through which institutions organize, naturalize, and reproduce social meanings. The OML adopts this logic to argue that media literacy cannot be limited to what a subject knows, understands, or expresses, but must also consider the organizational structures that shape what that subject can know, express, understand, and transform.

From the field of organizational communication, authors such as Baldissera (2008) warn that organizations are not neutral spaces of transmission, but rather territories where organizational meanings are produced and contested. From this perspective, evaluating organizational media competence involves analyzing how organizational policies, structures, narratives, discourses, and practices shape the ecosystem in which subjects produce—or perceive their critical media competence as limited.

This approach enables us to identify areas of structural incoherence, such as organizations that promote discourse on participation but maintain closed channels of communication, or those that invest in technologies without creating real conditions for their critical appropriation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). In this sense, the OML shifts the focus from technique to context, from the individual to the collective.

From the proposed relational perspective, organizational subjects (teachers, students, technicians) are both producers and products of the institution's communicative dynamics. What they say, do, or think cannot be separated from the environments in which they coexist (Wolton, 2006). Therefore, media literacy also requires transforming organizations, enabling listening processes, generating coherence between discourse and practice, and building institutional policies that recognize communication as a transformative cultural practice, oriented toward the development of critical citizenship in the face of the challenges of the 21st-century media context (Montero et al., 2024).

This shift from the individual to the organizational level does not deny the importance of individuals acquiring media competence. What it proposes is to recognize that such acquisition is insufficient if the symbolic, material, and relational structures that condition the development of

media competence through the communication process are not also addressed. Ultimately, critical media literacy cannot be an individual effort in a communication environment that discourages criticism, silences participation, or normalizes verticality.

5. Methodological Innovation: The OML Protocol

Organizational Media Literacy (OML) is not limited to a theoretical proposal; it translates into a concrete methodological tool that enables the diagnosis, understanding, and transformation of the institutional conditions influencing the development of critical media competences. This articulation is innovative in the fields of media literacy, education, and competence because it broadens the traditional subject-centered approach, incorporating the structural, symbolic, and political dimensions of the organizational context. The OML protocol proposes a relational, situated, and dialogic analysis strategy that articulates the structural with the symbolic, the organizational with the personal. This protocol was conceived within the framework of a doctoral thesis (Montero, 2019), supported by a systematic literature review (Montero et al., 2017), and empirically applied in university organizations. Its interdisciplinary design combines elements of educational communication, organizational sociology, pedagogy, critical psychology, and the epistemology of complexity.

The methodological proposal is structured around three major analytical dimensions:

a) Organizational subjects:

This includes teachers, students, and technical and administrative staff, conceived as active actors who not only learn or teach, but also produce meaning, reproduce communication models, and configure cultural practices within the organization. Their media competencies are assessed through a structured survey, adapted from the Ibero-American models of Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012) and Pérez and Delgado (2012), which includes 10 dimensions grouped into three levels: (1) Knowledge: access to and search for information, language, technology, production processes, media policy; (2) Comprehension: ideology and values, reception; and (3) Expression: creation, communication, citizen participation. This reading allows us to observe both individual strengths and weaknesses, as well as collective patterns, group contradictions, and intersectoral gaps that are not always visible from an evaluation of separate groups.

b) Organizational Entities

This includes the analysis of institutional documents, curriculum plans, research and outreach projects, communication policies, and technology management structures. Through a document review and thematic content analysis, the OML protocol aims to identify the presence, absence, contradictions, or transversalities related to the dimensions of media literacy. Four organizational entities are considered for exploration and analysis: management, teaching, research, and outreach.

This analysis is not limited to a policy audit, but seeks to interpret institutional discourses as cultural texts, understanding that institutional silences also convey meaning. The evaluation of these entities allows us to observe whether media literacy is present as a transversal policy, as a fragmented practice, or as a disjointed discourse.

c) Relational Cross-Referencing

The originality of the OML protocol lies in its relational reading model, which cross-references data from both dimensions: subjects and organizational entities. This relational reading allows us to identify coherences or contradictions between the performance of subjects and institutional actions; Detect critical gaps, such as a sound technological infrastructure accompanied by low critical development, or isolated individual initiatives in the absence of a systemic vision; and identify conditions that enable or hinder the development of media literacy in real-life contexts.

Thus, this methodological approach does not merely seek to classify individual media literacy levels, but rather to provide a nuanced understanding of how institutional processes influence the development—or inhibition—of media citizenship.

From this perspective, the protocol not only seeks to diagnose but also to propose inputs for educational and communication transformation, supporting institutional planning processes, ongoing training, and organizational improvement from a critical and contextualized perspective.

6. Application of the OML Protocol at a Brazilian Public University

The OML protocol was implemented at a Brazilian public university (Montero et al., 2022), which has an outstanding academic track record, a strong commitment to public education, research excellence, and a recognized policy of inclusion and democratization of

knowledge. With a university community comprising 40,000 people, including faculty, students, and technical and administrative staff, this institution provided a fertile context for evaluating how institutional conditions shape the development of organizational media competence. It was an ideal setting to test the proposal, as it combined advanced technological resources, academic excellence, and a discursive openness to educational innovation.

Quantitative and qualitative instruments were applied to the three groups of organizational subjects—faculty, technical and administrative staff, and students—revealing intermediate levels of media competence. Although each group demonstrated specific strengths, such as greater conceptual mastery among teachers and creative skills among students, none achieved a level considered sufficient on a sustained basis, reflecting a lack of institutional coordination to sustain these developments. Collectively, all three groups demonstrated potential in accessing information and creating content, but also shared weaknesses in critical understanding of the media and technology-mediated citizen participation.

The quantitative results indicated that the most developed dimensions were access and content creation, while the most critical areas were ideological understanding, civic participation, and critical reception of media messages. In particular, teachers demonstrated greater knowledge of media production processes but faced obstacles in incorporating this knowledge into their teaching practices. Technical and administrative staff expressed difficulties in the expressive dimension, particularly in relation to institutional public communication. Students, for their part, demonstrated high competence in creating digital content, but showed little reflection on its circulation and political implications.

In parallel, a significant sample of institutional documents, academic projects, and management structures was analyzed, revealing a lack of comprehensive media literacy policies. Despite having an advanced technological infrastructure and specific innovative experiences, these remained isolated, lacking a cross-cutting strategy or systemic vision. The organizational research body revealed little academic output related to the topic, and university outreach showed multiple communication initiatives lacking institutional coordination. The documentary analysis also revealed a weak presence of media literacy in curricula and the lack of an institutional policy for teacher training in media education and communication.

Regarding management, it was evident that, although formal organizational structures and institutional communication channels exist, these are not always aligned with the principles of a

democratic media communication culture. Decision-making tends to be concentrated in hierarchical groups, and institutional policies lack coordination with communication strategies that promote critical media participation.

In the teaching area, the analysis of curricula and curricular practices revealed that media literacy is not integrated transversally into pedagogical proposals. The teaching of critical media skills is limited to specific subjects and is not consistently integrated as a global competency. Furthermore, a gap persists between the technical use of media and critical reflection on their social and cultural implications.

In the research area, a low presence of studies linked to organizational media literacy was observed. Although there are lines of research in the fields of communication or education, these rarely interact with each other, reflecting an epistemological fragmentation that limits transdisciplinary approaches. The lack of institutional incentives to investigate the communicative dimension of educational organizations reinforces this gap.

In the extension area, numerous initiatives with educational communication potential were identified, but without institutional planning that articulates these efforts under a shared vision. Projects often depend on the individual commitment of teachers or specific teams, without structural support to guarantee their continuity or collective impact. The communication dimension of outreach appears weakened by the absence of policies that integrate media, participation, and territory as strategic axes.

The relational analysis between subjects and organizational entities was crucial in revealing deep-seated tensions.

Structural inconsistencies were observed, such as a curricular policy that values critical citizenship, but which was not reflected in the institution's communication culture. Conservative practices also emerged that hindered active student participation, especially in decisions related to media and organizational communication.

This experience empirically validated the potential of the OML protocol as a comprehensive diagnostic tool. It demonstrated that media competencies cannot be fully developed without favorable structural conditions, nor without an organizational culture that promotes participation, dialogue, and coherence between discourse and practice.

In summary, the study allowed: (a) to identify gaps between institutional discourse and actual practices; (b) make visible symbolic and cultural barriers to the exercise of critical

thinking; (c) map existing potential that could be articulated in integrated communication policies; and (d) generate concrete input for the design of training strategies with a relational and ecosystemic approach.

The experience showed that, even in contexts with resources and institutional will, organizational media competence does not develop spontaneously. On the contrary, it requires a conscious, structured, and participatory approach that articulates policies, training, and institutional culture around an ecosystemic vision of media communication.

7. Contributions of the Organizational Media Competence Framework for Uruguay and Latin America

The proposal for Organizational Media Competence, developed in the Latin American context, not only establishes itself as a valid tool for interpreting the dynamics of media communication in Brazilian educational institutions but also offers a framework adaptable to other contexts in the Global South, such as Uruguay. In Uruguay, where established digital inclusion policies exist—such as Plan Ceibal—challenges persist regarding the critical appropriation of media and teacher training in media education and competence. The Organizational Media Competence Framework can play a strategic role in enhancing organizational effectiveness.

Its application would allow:

- To participatively diagnose the gaps between institutional discourse and actual mediated communication practices.
- To strengthen teacher training with an ecosystemic approach and a critical attitude as a cross-cutting theme.
- To design institutional media communication policies that integrate teaching, management, outreach, and research from a relational perspective.

Furthermore, OML engages with deeply rooted conceptual and pedagogical frameworks in Latin America (Koffermann et al., 2022), such as educommunication, Paulo Freire's critical and dialogical pedagogy, or educational and popular communication, the legacy of Mario Kaplún. This theoretical convergence reinforces its regional applicability and its potential as a catalyst for transformative organizational processes.

Thus, OML is projected as a concrete contribution to current debates on media literacy, providing a comprehensive approach that responds to the structural, symbolic, and political challenges facing educational institutions in Latin America, including critical teacher training and the design of cross-cutting communication policies. By articulating critical pedagogies, educommunication, and epistemologies from the South, OML reinforces a collective, situated, and transformative media literacy.

8. An Invitation from the South

The OML invites us to view organizations as territories of communication and civic education, where the exercise of collective critical citizenship is either built or limited.

This vision reinforces the essay's initial argument about the need to overcome the individualistic perspective and adopt a relational approach that considers organizational dynamics as central determinants of media competency development in Latin America. The challenge is not only to teach media education and communication, but to practice it in a critical, coherent, and transformative way.

As a Latin American methodological proposal, the OML is positioned as a concrete tool for rethinking communication practices in educational organizations, highlighting structural tensions and activating transformation processes from an ecosystemic perspective. It is an invitation to build situated knowledge, open to dialogue with other epistemologies from the South.

The application of the OML protocol at a Brazilian university (Montero, 2019) demonstrated this approach's ability to identify structural tensions, inconsistencies between discourse and practice, and invisible potential. At the same time, it demonstrated that media literacy cannot be fully developed if the organizational conditions that enable it are not addressed.

From Uruguay, this approach is projected as a contribution that can enrich public media literacy policies, strengthen critical teacher training processes, and pave the way for considering organizational communication not as a technical procedure, but as a political practice that shapes citizenship. In this sense, Organizational Media Literacy is not just a protocol; it is an ethical, political, and pedagogical commitment to organizations that communicate with media literacy,

that listen to their members, and that are capable of transforming themselves in order to transform.

In times of information saturation, generative artificial intelligence, discursive polarization, and institutional fragility, the OML proposes rethinking our organizations as communicative territories, where we also learn—or not—to be critical citizens in a media-driven society that is here.

The OML is not presented as a closed model, but rather as a tool open to dialogue with other theoretical and pedagogical frameworks from the South. It aligns with the tradition of educommunication (Soares, 2000), Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (2013), Martín-Barbero's (2002) notion of "territories of knowledge," and the defense of dialogic culture as a form of resistance (Kaplún, 1998).

Thus, the OML connects with historical struggles for critical, educational, and liberating communication, updating these approaches within the framework of contemporary digital cultures and media ecosystems.

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