Media and Information Literacy and Harm Reduction

Alfabetización Mediática e Informacional y Reducción de Daños

Alfabetização midiática e informacional e redução de danos

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Abstract: This article explores the integration of the Harm Reduction (HR) concept into Media and Information Literacy (MIL) practices within the educational and digital context in Brazil. It examines how HR can be applied to promote responsible technology use, particularly among children and adolescents, balancing freedom of expression with the protection of vulnerable audiences. The connection between HR and MIL offers practical tools to strengthen digital citizenship, foster critical media consumption, and promote online safety. The article concludes with recommendations for involving educators and parents in developing these skills.

Keywords:

Harm Reduction, Media Literacy, Digital Citizenship, Technologies, Brazil

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Resumen: Este artículo explora la integración del concepto de Reducción de Daños (RD) en las prácticas de Alfabetización Mediática e Informacional (AMI) dentro del contexto educativo y digital en Brasil. Se analiza cómo la RD puede ser aplicada para promover un uso responsable de las tecnologías, especialmente en niños y adolescentes, equilibrando la libertad de expresión y la protección de públicos vulnerables. La vinculación entre RD y AMI ofrece herramientas prácticas para fortalecer la ciudadanía digital, fomentar un consumo crítico de medios y promover la seguridad en línea. El artículo concluye con recomendaciones para involucrar a educadores y padres en el desarrollo de estas competencias.

Palabras clave:

Reducción de daños, Alfabetización mediática, Ciudadanía digital, Tecnologías, Brasil

Resumo: Este artigo explora a integração do conceito de Redução de Danos (RD) nas práticas de Alfabetização Midiática e Informacional (AMI) no contexto educacional e digital no Brasil. Analisa-se como a RD pode ser aplicada para promover o uso responsável das tecnologias, especialmente entre crianças e adolescentes, equilibrando a liberdade de expressão com a proteção de públicos vulneráveis. A ligação entre RD e AMI oferece ferramentas práticas para fortalecer a cidadania digital, fomentar o consumo crítico de mídia e promover a segurança online. O artigo conclui com recomendações para envolver educadores e pais no desenvolvimento dessas competências.

Palavras-chave:

Redução de danos, Alfabetização Midiática, Cidadania digital, Tecnologias, Brasil

1. Introduction

This text aims to present reflections on the possibility of applying the concept of Harm Reduction (HR) in university teaching, research and extension activities related to Media and Information Literacy (MIL). This perspective seems important to us because of the accumulated texts and analyses on the potential of DR and the maturing of ideas that seek to transcend, on the one hand, a more integrated view that indiscriminate use does not bring risks, and also a merely restrictive perspective in which any use of information and communication technologies, especially by children and adolescents, should be blocked.

This importance extends to the context of this reflection, especially in Brazil, where

debates on prohibitionist and protectionist approaches to the use of cell phones in schools are expanding[4] and MIL guidelines are being strengthened as a public policy with the Brazilian Media Education Strategy (Brasil, 2023). A scenario in which concern is intensifying about the effects of children and adolescents living in digital environments (24% of children aged between 9 and 17 accessed the internet for the first time in early childhood; 83% say they access the internet at least once a day, 88% have a profile on social networks[5]), reflecting on the need for guidelines and actions for the conscious use of screens.

In summary, the text seeks to make the exercise of the right to communication and freedom of expression compatible with the protection of vulnerable audiences, such as children and adolescents in their interactions in the contemporary media-technological ecosystem. To this end, it first presents a systematization of ideas linked to HR and then presents relations between DR and Media and Information Literacy (MIL).

2. Origins and applications of Harm Reduction.

Over the last almost 50 years, HR has presented itself as a pragmatic strategy for tackling the challenges related to drug use. In contrast to traditional approaches that aim for total abstinence, HR focuses on minimizing the negative impacts of substance use, both for individuals and for society. Its perspective recognizes the complexity of the phenomenon of drug use and the need for flexible interventions adapted to individual needs and social contexts (Rhodes, 2009; Chaibub, 2009).

The genesis of HR dates back to the late 1970s, mainly in Europe, in response to the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic among injecting drug users. Syringe exchange programs were implemented as an emergency measure to contain the spread of the virus, seeking to reduce the sharing of contaminated needles and syringes (Single, 1995). This pioneering initiative demonstrated the feasibility of effective interventions to prevent and/or reduce the effects of diseases, even without requiring immediate abstinence.

Since the 1990s, HR has expanded its scope to include a diverse range of interventions aimed at reducing the harm associated with drug use. These interventions

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[4] In September 2024, the Brazilian Ministry of Education confirmed that it was working on a bill to ban the use of cell phones in schools. This proposal, although not formally presented at the time of writing this article, has generated discussions for and against such a measure.

[5] Data collected by the Tic Kids Online Brazil 2023 survey carried out annually by the Regional Center for Studies on the Development of the Information Society (Cetic.br). In 2023, the study was carried out with 2,704 children and adolescents aged between 9 and 17, as well as their parents and guardians, covering indicators on access, Internet use skills and Internet activities. https://cetic.br/pt/pesquisa/kids-online/.

include access to treatment for drug addiction, the provision of information on safe drug use, individual and group counseling, and social support for users and their families (Marlatt & Witkiewitz, 2002).

The incorporation of HR into public policies has been heterogeneous, varying between countries and regions. Nations such as Portugal and the Netherlands have adopted HR as the central axis of their drug policies, decriminalizing possession for personal use and investing in health and social assistance programs (Hughes & Stevens, 2010). In Brazil, HR has been implemented mainly in the public health sphere, with a focus on the prevention of HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis.

The Brazilian Ministry of Health, through actions such as the National STD/AIDS Program, has, for example, promoted harm reduction actions, such as the distribution of disposable syringes and needles, condoms and information materials on safe drug use (Ministério da Saúde, 2012). In addition, the Brazilian Ministry has accumulated experience in offering testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and referrals for drug addiction treatment.

HR has also been applied in sectors other than public health, such as criminal justice and social assistance. Therapeutic justice programs, for example, offer alternatives to incarceration for drug users who have committed non-violent crimes, seeking to address the underlying causes of drug use and promote social reintegration (Marlatt & Donovan, 2005).

Despite its acceptance and impact, HR still faces resistance and criticism. More conservative sectors argue that HR can be interpreted as a form of collusion with drug use, and that total abstinence is the only acceptable solution (MacCoun & Reuter, 2001). Other critics point to the need for greater investment in treatment for drug addiction, arguing that HR can perpetuate the cycle of drug use.

The difficulty of measuring the results of HR is also a recurring point of criticism. Evaluating the effectiveness of HR requires the use of indicators that go beyond the reduction of drug consumption, including the improvement of quality of life, the reduction of illnesses and the social reintegration of users (EMCDDA, 2010).

HR has been widely recognized as a humane and effective approach to dealing with the issue of drugs, taking into account the complexity of the problem and the need for interventions that respect the autonomy and dignity of users.

3. Harm Reduction and Media and Information Literacy as strategies to promote media and digital citizenship

Contemporary society is characterized by the centrality of digital technologies, which permeate aspects of social, cultural and economic life. Children and adolescents, immersed in this hyperconnected universe, navigate a sea of information, images and online interactions, facing a set of unprecedented challenges and opportunities. In this context, the articulation between the concepts of Harm Reduction and Media and Information Literacy (MIL) emerges as a fundamental strategy to promote the responsible and safe use of digital technologies, empowering young people to build full digital citizenship. The pragmatic and humanized approach of HR (Harm Reduction International, 2017) finds resonance in Media and Information Literacy (MIL), which aims to develop individuals' critical capacity for the analysis, interpretation and production of media content, promoting autonomy and protagonism in the use of technologies (Livingstone, 2019).

This means going beyond perspectives that vary between utopianism, which gives the internet a revolutionary potential, and pessimism in response to the social transformations that accompany its use. In order to overcome the 'pedagogical traps' of media education, which take prohibitionist and protectionist approaches to the effects of the media or praise creativity to the detriment of creativity (Buckingham, 2010; 2022), applying the logic of HR to the field of MIL implies recognizing that the internet, like other tools and/or technologies, has ambivalent potential and can be used for more or less constructive purposes.

Rather than adopting a prohibitive or alarmist stance on the use of screens, the proposal to link MIL with HR aims to help strengthen young people's critical capacity, allowing them to explore the potential of the digital world, while protecting themselves from the risks inherent in this environment and enjoying the potential that these environments provide (Buckingham, 2019). It is understood that this articulation takes into account the experiences and knowledge already developed by these users in their daily lives, refuting a moralistic, verticalized and authoritarian premise of MIL.

MIL, in this sense, acts as an HR instrument by providing young people with the tools to:

    a) critically navigating the ocean of information: the proliferation of false content, manipulated content and hate speech online requires the development of skills to identify, analyze and combat disinformation, building a culture of responsibility and ethics in the digital environment (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). MIL has

the capacity to encourage young people to be protagonists in the search for reliable information and in building a more democratic and plural digital space.

b) Building a digital fortress to protect privacy and security: oversharing personal information, accessing unsafe websites and interacting with strangers can expose young people to cyberbullying, online harassment, data theft and other forms of digital violence (UNESCO, 2018). MIL can raise awareness about the importance of privacy and online safety by providing tools for self-protection in the digital environment, such as creating secure passwords, managing digital identity and being careful with shared information.

c) Mastering time and avoiding the pitfalls of digital addiction: excessive use of the internet can lead to digital addiction, social isolation and physical and mental health problems, such as sedentary lifestyles, sleep disorders, anxiety and depression (Király et al., 2018). MIL encourages self-regulation, balance in the use of technologies and the search for offline activities, promoting a healthy and balanced lifestyle.

d) Exercising digital citizenship and conscious consumption in a connected world: the internet offers a privileged space for exercising citizenship, social participation and conscious consumption. MIL can enable young people to use digital media to express themselves, mobilize for social causes, consume critically and ethically, and contribute to building a fairer and more democratic society (Jenkins et al., 2016).

In order for the results mentioned above to be partially or completely achieved, educators and parents play a fundamental role in mediating the use of technologies by children and adolescents. The formulation, implementation and evaluation of public policies, together with building bridges between schools and families, are essential to creating a learning environment that integrates MIL into young people's daily lives, providing them with the support they need to use screens safely and critically (Hobbs, 2017).

4. Conclusions

Strategies to strengthen the participation of educators and parents in promoting MIL linked to HR include preparing educators for the digital age: offering courses, workshops and

teaching materials that enable teachers to integrate MIL into their teaching practices, using digital technologies in a critical, creative and innovative way (Silva, 2018). Continuing education in MIL should address topics such as the pedagogical use of media, critical evaluation of information, the production of digital content and the promotion of digital citizenship.

One way of building bridges between the school and the family can be through the promotion of meetings, talks and workshops to make parents aware of the importance of MIL and provide guidance on how to monitor and mediate their children's use of the internet, creating an environment of dialogue and trust (Chaves, 2019). It is essential that parents and educators are aligned on the challenges and opportunities of the digital world, working together to promote the responsible use of technologies.

Another necessary measure is the creation of accessible and engaging educational resources, through booklets, guides, games and apps that address topics such as online safety, privacy, cyberbullying, digital addiction and conscious consumption, in a playful and interactive way, adapting the language and content to the different age groups (Takeuchi & Stevens, 2019). Educational resources on MIL should be attractive, informative and accessible, using clear language and visual resources that make it easier for young people to understand.

Finally, it is essential to amplify the voice of young people and encourage active participation, stimulating the creation of projects, debates and campaigns that promote the participation of young people in building a safer and more responsible digital environment, valuing their experiences, perspectives and potential as agents of social transformation (Martins & Ribeiro, 2018). Listening, in this sense, is very important to understand the experience of young people in digital environments, the new challenges and possibilities that arise as new generations integrate and use new technologies. Young people must be protagonists in building a safer and more ethical digital environment, actively participating in debates, projects and initiatives that promote digital citizenship.

The convergence of HR and MIL offers a promising path towards building a safer, more ethical and democratic digital environment for the younger generations. By promoting the development of critical skills, the adoption of responsible practices and the active participation of young people, educators and parents can contribute to digital technologies being used as tools for empowerment, learning and social transformation.

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