

Media and Information Literacy Research in Latin America¹

La investigación en Alfabetización Mediática e Informacional en América Latina

Pesquisa em Alfabetização Midiática e Informacional na América Latina

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Abstract: This article examines the evolution of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) research in Latin America, highlighting its trajectory as a critical field linked to communication and education since the 1960s. Through a historical and conceptual approach, it explores the challenges facing MIL in today's context, marked by technological inequality and fragmentation in research. The article also emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinarity and regional integration to consolidate MIL as a pillar in critical and emancipatory citizenship education in the digital age.

Keywords:

Media Literacy, Research in Latin America, Digital Inequality, Critical Communication, Emancipatory Education

Resumen: Este artículo examina la evolución de la investigación en Alfabetización Mediática e

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Informacional (AMI) en América Latina, destacando su trayectoria como un campo crítico vinculado a la comunicación y la educación desde la década de 1960. A través de un enfoque histórico y conceptual, se exploran los desafíos que enfrenta la AMI en el contexto actual, marcado por la desigualdad tecnológica y la fragmentación de las investigaciones. El artículo también resalta la importancia de la interdisciplina y la integración regional para consolidar la AMI como un pilar en la formación crítica y emancipatoria de la ciudadanía en la era digital.

Palabras clave:

Alfabetización mediática, Investigación en América Latina, Desigualdad digital, Comunicación crítica, Educación emancipatoria

Resumo: Este artigo examina a evolução da pesquisa em Alfabetização Midiática e Informacional (AMI) na América Latina, destacando sua trajetória como um campo crítico vinculado à comunicação e à educação desde a década de 1960. Através de uma abordagem histórica e conceitual, exploram-se os desafios enfrentados pela AMI no contexto atual, marcado pela desigualdade tecnológica e pela fragmentação das pesquisas. O artigo também destaca a importância da interdisciplinaridade e da integração regional para consolidar a AMI como um pilar na formação crítica e emancipatória da cidadania na era digital.

Palavras-chave:

Alfabetização midiática, Pesquisa na América Latina, Desigualdade digital, Comunicação crítica, Educação emancipatória

1. Introduction

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is a concept proposed by Silvia Bacher,⁴ a Latin America and Caribbean representative in the International Monitoring Committee of the UNESCO MIL Alliance. A concept that seeks to harmonize different traditions and perspectives such as media, information, and digital literacy, aiming to designate the commitment of citizens

⁴ We refer to Silvia Bacher's presentation at the CIESPAL Webinar "Media and Information Literacy in a Crisis Situation" on March 22, 2024.

<https://ciespal.org/alfabetizacion-mediatica-e-informacional-en-situacion-de-crisis-2/>

to current forms of communication from a critical perspective "(...) in all areas of life to search, evaluate, use and create information, media, and digital content to achieve personal, social, work, educational and development objectives" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 4).

We are interested in pointing out this conceptual dimension of the term MIL, from which we propose to make this brief tour of the field of research on this issue to displace it from any specific reference to specific experiences or projects in Latin America.

In this sense, we start from what is proposed by the UNESCO (2021) MIL Curriculum document, which states that: "There is a growing consensus on the need to promote the concept of UNESCO Media and Information Literacy or MIL, a general term that encompasses diverse and changing skills necessary to navigate today's increasingly complex communications environment" (p. 7). In this sense, it can be defined broadly as the set of "(...) skills that allow people to interact critically and effectively with the content of communications; the institutions that facilitate this content and the use of digital technologies" (UNESCO, 2023, p. 11). From there, we recover Bacher's proposal, who proposes to understand this term as an umbrella that houses different views and paths and allows a dialogue between different perspectives and proposals that, in Latin America, already have a long history and that, with other names, have fundamentally dealt with the dialogical relationship between education and communication with a rights perspective. We assume, then, that MIL is an adequate term to be used in dialogue with a field of encounters, debates, and diverse experiences that in Latin America, with nuances by country and educational modalities, has been built since the 1960s as a plural space for communication and popular education practices and projects with a critical and emancipatory perspective for vulnerable communities. In this sense, we do not consider in this field of experiences those who seek the inclusion or pedagogical use of media and technologies in educational spaces. These practices are referenced more in an instrumental-didactic matrix inconsistent with the concern for citizen formation, critical reception development, and messages' active production. This last perspective can be recognized in founding referents of the communication/education field of the 1960s, such as the Brazilian Paulo Freire or the Argentine-Uruguayan Mario Kaplún. Thus, in this review, we will consider research that has as its object of study practices, projects, and public policies that are aimed at school spaces as socio-educational spaces and that aim to develop critical capacities in the face of the socio-technical-communicational environment, whether that of traditional, alternative, or digital media.

In this framework, it is essential to point out that research in Latin America was established as an emerging process and often complementary to intervention in communication and education. However, it is important to point out that in its beginnings, this set of experiences was closely related to theoretical thinking and methodological reflection, which is fundamentally linked to action research or participant research. As Oliveira Soares⁵ points out, from the beginning, media education in Latin America was established from a critical perspective in dialogue with various authors and theories aimed at "confronting the system and supporting the alternative". Although we could say that communication and education to promote citizenship and defend human rights in Latin America emerged and developed as a field of intervention practices at different levels, these experiences were always in close dialogue with theoretical reflection and methodological reflexivity in their various forms. They had the unifying force of organizations such as CIESPAL, which early systematized scientific work in communication. (Fuentes Navarro, 2014, p. 14). However, in the last decades of the 20th century, around the 1980s, it is possible to recognize a process of expansion and institutionalization of research linked to the differentiation of this activity within the framework of universities, centers, and institutes and with the development of the promotion of public policies and specific lines of financing. With the advent of democratic processes and the development of the methods of information communication globalization in the region, exchange and collaboration increased significantly, expanding research into more extensive projects, conferences, publications, and research grants.

This field expansion developed in a complex growth process, in a specific regional fragmentation, and disintegrated internationalization, as Fuentes Navarro (2014) says concerning other academic geographies, especially in the central countries. We agree with the cited author that we are still going through a "transition marked by the tension between convergence and fragmentation" (op. cit, p. 14) that applies to communication research and, more specifically, to MIL's thematic area.

2. Some marks in this process of tension

In what we will designate under the concept of MIL, research is not alien to this expansive process with marked features of disintegration and fragmentation typical of the field

⁵ Ismar de Oliveira Soares, "¿Qué es la educomunicación?" video *CriarCiencia. ECA*
<https://abpeducom.org.br/educom/conceito/>

of communication research. However, in recent years, it has been possible to recognize a notable increase in initiatives that aim at confluence and dialogue in the subfield of communication and education, particularly MIL. We refer to proposals such as those promoted by UNESCO through the development of MIL and the acquisition of digital skills⁶, but also to Congresses such as ALAIC⁷, FELAFACS⁸ or certain already traditional publications such as the Journal *Comunicação & Educação*, published by CCA-ECA/USP or the book *Media Education in Latin America* edited by Julio-Cesar Mateus, Pablo Andrada and MaríaTeresa Quiroz published by Routledge in 2020 that tend to strengthen bridges of dialogue and integration in the region between research and researchers from different countries. This process has its counterpart at the national level with the expansion of thematic roundtables, seminars, and specific meetings of national associations of communication researchers in Mexico (Mexican Association of Communication Researchers, MIL), Colombia (Colombian Association of Communication Researchers, ASICOM), Brazil (National Association of Graduate Programs in Communication, COMPOS or Brazilian Congress of Communication Sciences, INTERCOM) and Argentina (Red Com, Afacos), among others. In the case of more limited but specific regional networks and spaces that are systematically sustained over time, such as the COMEDU Network in Argentina, created in 2015⁹, the Seminar on Critical Digital Literacies in Mexico¹⁰ that has been operating since 2017, the Digital Communication seedbeds in Colombia¹¹, among other spaces in which specific lines are located, or ABPEducom in Brazil since 2011¹², the Latin American Association of Popular Education and Communication based in Quito or the Latin American Association of Radio Education that has been sustained since 1972. These spaces support research programs and

⁶ Consult the initiatives at <https://www.unesco.org/en/media-information> -literacy, particularly in the section dedicated to the University Network.

⁷ In particular, this issue, with its different emphases and conceptual traditions, is addressed in the meetings and publications of the ALAIC Thematic Group on “Communication and Education” which, in its more than 20 years of work and in its successive coordination (Delia Crovi Druetta, Luz María Garay Cruz, Gladys Ortiz Henderson, Beatriz Marín Ochoa and Paula Morabes).

⁸ FELAFACS is the Federación Latinoamericana de Facultades de Comunicación Social [Latin American Federation of Social Communication Faculties]

⁹ National Network of Chairs, research and intervention teams in Communication/Education of the National Universities of Argentina. COMEDU Network, formally consolidated in 2015, reflects the concept of Communication/Education developed by Jorge Huergo in Argentina since 1995.

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¹² The ABPEducom network is chaired by Ismar de Oliveira Soares <https://abpeducom.org.br/abpeducom/quem-somos/>

projects linked to MIL's proposals for intervention, training, or advice in the design of public policies.

Let's look mainly at the conceptual articulation of Communication and Education. We will observe that, progressively, since the 1970s. It has acquired its profile as a subfield of critical communication studies, particularly interested in the techno-media-communication ecosystem's impact on citizenship and school and socio-community education. This diverse field has been named in various ways according to the different perspectives assumed in the context of Latin America: educational communication (Kaplún, 1985), education in communication (Martín-Barbero, 2002), communication and education (Crovi Druetta, 2001), communication in education (M. T Quiróz), communication/education (Huerco y Fernández, 1999), educommunication (Oliveira Soares, n.d.), pedagogical mediation (Prieto Castillo, 1991), education for reception (Orozco Gómez, 1991), among others. These approaches are nourished by familiar sources, such as the Freirean matrix present in most of the proposals, but with different emphases and conceptual paths, such as some strands of cultural studies, critical pedagogy, popular or alternative communication, cultural mediations, socio-semiotic studies, to mention the most notable. In recent decades, the accelerated processes of mediatization and technification have raised numerous questions in the field of communication and education, particularly around the literacy processes of various social groups, especially children and youth as sectors whose rights appear to be particularly at risk in contemporary communication environments and teachers as a social group where the task of literacy mainly falls (UNESCO, 2023, p. 19). In this line of questioning, research into these processes has been constituted with an emphasis on communication processes but with a clear inter and transdisciplinary vocation due to the complexity of the phenomena studied. Thus, studies of media and information literacy processes have assumed operational categories originating in the social sciences and humanities to relocate them to a horizon of political-cultural intervention that has been a characteristic feature of the field since previous decades. Research, in a more direct or elliptical way, is associated with concerns about how to provide subjects and communities with critical and productive capacities in the face of violent, antidemocratic, or stigmatizing communication environments. Thus, research in communication and education enters into a specific dialogue with media and digital literacies, reinforcing, for Latin America, its critical problematizing approach from the territories and appropriations of popular subjects.

3. Research approaches

In the perspective mentioned above, MIL, among other aspects, given its affiliation with different disciplines, seeks to place a name and position itself in different interdisciplinary boundaries. As Tomás Durán Becerra (2016) maintains in his doctoral research on MIL in Latin America: "different theoretical constructs confront and coexist with each other within their definition spectrum, such is the case of information literacy, media literacy (simply), digital literacy and the multiple combinations that arise from these three currents". Likewise, the research methodologies oriented to its study are varied, highlighting qualitative approaches with an ethnographic imprint that seek to understand the processes, actors, and contexts in which these phenomena occur. In this way, communication skills and abilities are explored, as well as strategies against processes of misinformation, incitement to hatred through stigmatizing speeches, or recently developed tactics regarding innovations caused by Artificial Intelligence in educational contexts. It is also possible to recognize meta-research studies that, through bibliographic tracking or bibliometric studies, analyze the presence of these investigations in conference proceedings, bibliographic citations in academic journals, or training curricula. However, in recent times, it has been possible to recognize the presence of experimental studies that analyze specific cases with contrast groups to acknowledge how media and digital literacy are taught and fundamentally learned in school contexts.

In this way, and considering the different denominations, it is possible to recognize that MIL has a broad and diverse space. It strengthens its relevance in Latin America within the inequality framework, which is characteristic of the region and constitutes a specific topic that runs through most studies and research. This process was deepened by the transformations brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic¹³, some of which are still in place after the pandemic. Research in this line on MIL carried out during the pandemic, including the methodological challenges of researching amidst health restrictions and the consequences in the years immediately following, are compiled in a publication by UNESCO and the Public Defender of

¹³ We refer to studies such as "Pensar la Educación en tiempos de pandemia" compiled by Ines Dussel, Patricia Ferrante and Darío Pulfer edited by UNIPE.
<https://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/Argentina/unipe/20200820015548/Pensar-la-educacion.pdf>

Argentina¹⁴. There, experts from Latin America analyzed MIL and its impact on citizens' rights in the context of the "infodemic".

This context of regional inequality is conducive to the development of narratives of hate towards vulnerable groups, reaching the point of going beyond the framework of Human Rights. In this sense, an incipient line of research in this perspective broadens the reference of MIL studies toward social and symbolic dimensions that exceed the study of instrumental skills in media and platforms. In this sense, it is important to consider human rights as an axis in the reflections and actions on MIL¹⁵.

In the research and publications of the region, when we talk about MIL, communication, and education are combined as two fundamental fields of knowledge and two fundamental human rights that challenge the constructions of citizenship in contemporary media literacy¹⁶.

4. Thematic cores and future agendas

To conclude this brief review of the field of MIL research in Latin America, we will focus on some thematic cores around which studies are currently organized and highlight emerging themes that define future research agendas.

MIL today is developed in different social spaces and dimensions. It is linked to training processes, curricular design, public policies, public welfare campaigns, outreach projects, and intervention in territories and communities. This diversity of how MIL is expressed also defines how research on MIL is developed and the themes. Locating some nodal points of the characteristics of the problems that MIL research addresses implies considering two issues that make up the characteristics of this specific field in line with the trajectories and traditions of communication and education. The first is its close relationship with the processes of social intervention and training, both with teachers in formal education and social organizations. The second is its more significant presence in the disciplinary fields of social sciences in general and communication in particular (Trejo Quintana and Oliver Espinoza, 2022, pp. 64-65).

In this line, we can affirm that although its presence in spaces of academic production

¹⁴ This is the compilation *Navegando en la Infodemia con AMI. Alfabetización mediática e Informativa* (Chibás Ortiz & Novominsky, 2022) published by UNESCO and the Public Defender's Office of Argentina.

¹⁵ Bacher, Silvia develops this research emphasis in the CIESPAL Webinar "Alfabetización Mediática e Informativa en situación de crisis" March 22, 2024.

¹⁶ De Charras, D, Kejval, L., Hernández, S. (Coords.) (2024). *Vocabulario crítico de las Ciencias de la Comunicación*. Taurus.

generally began in the decades of 1970-1980 and was substantially strengthened in the second half of the nineties. At the beginning of the current millennium, its presence considered in terms of impact and nominal referentiality as MIL or "with synonymous phrases" in the scientific canon is just beginning to emerge, and its denomination is certainly dispersed (Garro Rojas, 2020, p. 9). Some research on bibliometric measurements and external impact placed it on an incremental curve starting in 2018 and fundamentally since 2020 (Trejo Quintana and Oliver Espinoza, 2022).

Without providing a conclusive overview and considering the previous considerations on the emergence and instability of the denomination forms, we present a set of thematic nodes that we understand are also a contribution to a possible agenda for discussion and strengthening of the MIL in Latin America. This is how we can organize the field of research around problems linked to the topics described below¹⁷.

4.1 The conditions for the development of the MIL

In this node, we can group the various investigations considering the regulatory frameworks at different incidence levels and the development of public policies by country and region.

4.2 The systematization and classification of MIL experiences and projects

This node develops studies that aim to map and systematize the diversity of experiences and denominations to identify common aspects and strengthen the field of studies. This is the most classic core in the research traditions on the subject. This aligns with the historical trajectories of intervention and action research in communication and education.

4.3 The presence of the MIL theme in the academic field

¹⁷ For this enumeration we consider the works presented to the GT4 of Communication and Education of ALAIC 2018, 2020, 2022 and 2024 and texts by Garro-Rojas (2020), UNESCO (2023), Livingston (2011), Mateus, Andrada and Teresa Quiroz (2020), Chibás Ortiz and Novomisky (2022). Trejo Quintana and Olivier Espinoza (2022), Cruz-Sánchez, I. and García-García, C. (2020), Duque-Méndez, N. and Sánchez-Obando, J. (2022). In addition to the texts of the Revista Comunicación y Educación (2024) and the contributions of the " Seminario de Alfabetizaciones Digitales Críticas " Webinar, Garay, L. M. Coord. Third Roundtable "El futuro de las alfabetizaciones digitales: Horizontes y agenda de discusión", Mexican Association of Communication Researchers, <https://fb.watch/vfOKpi77kK/>.

This node contains bibliometric studies, those of bibliographic (Trejo Quintana y Oliver Espinoza, 2022) impact and incidence, and, in general, those meta-research studies that aim to evaluate the consistency and academic consolidation of the field of studies on MIL. Here, we locate the research that analyzes and develops specific methodologies and indicators for assessing the scope of MIL in different countries (Durán Becerra, 2016).

4.4 The development of MIL capacities and skills and transmedia literacies

This node contains studies exploring teacher training instances, school learning, and transmedia literacies acquired in communities of practice by various ages, work, cultures, ethnic, gender groups, etc. This line of work emerges in the region, especially from the research of Carlos Scolari (2018)¹⁸, who states, "Transmedia Literacy starts from a different reading of the reality of adolescents, which expands and complements the postulates of media literacy with other research questions and intervention proposals". It focuses on what young people do with the media and networks and their capacities to generate and share content. Here, we also find studies on the transformation of reading and writing practices and the use and appropriation of new languages. Questions regarding the communicational dimension of reading and writing and its teaching and learning changes.

4.5 Access and digital and information gap

This node includes research that emphasizes inequalities linked to infrastructure and internet connectivity, the possibilities of media and content consumption and access to platforms, and those related to the capabilities for their use. Dialogue with the line of the political economy of communication and studies on the commodification of education in Latin America pay special attention to structural inequalities in the region and the importance of public policies of national states.

4.6 Citizenship and access to rights

¹⁸ From a Transmedia perspective, the analysis of appropriations by young people from European countries and some from Latin America that published by the Transmedia Literacy Project (transmedialiteracy.org) and referred to as the White Paper is already considered a classic in this line. Scolari, C. A. (2018). Transmedia literacy in the new media ecology: white paper [Paper]. Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

In this node, we can identify a set of investigations that question the access and exercise of rights in techno-mediated societies, particularly the processes of disinformation, fake news, information manipulation, and censorship, as well as the development of critical information consumption capacities and issues related to expression and alternative production. Questions about regulations, their scope, relevance, and the way they intervene in the region's countries.

4.7 Media and information education

This node contains research that, since the 1980s, has questioned educational processes aimed at critical training in the reception and use of media and the production of content and messages in media and social networks. In line with communication studies of reception, particularly in formal educational institutions, these investigations articulate some of their dimensions with the studies of the educational subfields of pedagogy and didactics.

4.8 Subjective and intersubjective transformations linked to MIL

This node includes studies on forms of subjective and identity constitution linked to the use and appropriation of products, environments, and platforms around which communities of practice, social, cultural, and political collectives, and contemporary modes of subjective modeling are organized. In connection with studies on youth identities, feminisms, and gender studies, the transformations that MIL promotes in the face of positions of subordination in these collectives are raised.

4.9 The artistic and socio-cultural dimension in MIL

Here, we locate the research that delves into socio-community processes and the potential of the various artistic and digital languages, particularly in formal education. As well as the evaluations of educational and organizational cultural productions and research work on appropriations from artistic languages.

The specific articulation of the line of communication, education, and culture of an extensive tradition in Latin America, with a strong emphasis on countries such as Brazil, but also in regions of Mexico and Argentina, clearly emerges in these investigations. MIL incorporates a dimension that reinforces its communicational and critical connection with popular cultural languages and formats.

4.10 The Challenges of Algorithms, platforms and AI

In this emerging node, research is included that asks about the impact of AI on school educational processes, citizen processes, participation, and cultural production. Studies that analyze biases, manipulations, and rights at risk are also included, as well as the challenges to the technological sovereignty of nations. Likewise, transformations in the production and circulation of information (fake news) and communication and educational practices in various territories are investigated. Although it has acquired specificity, it is a recent topic that has a transversal impact on the discussions of the rest of the thematic nodes identified.

5. Final thoughts

The cores described here and their locations allow us to maintain that although there is still an inevitable fragmentation and dispersion in their scope, research on MIL has consolidated, based on the expansion of work in digital networks in recent years, lines and spaces of thematic convergence, with greater force at the country level and increasingly between the region's countries. Access to work, meetings, seminars, and conferences remotely, although it does not replace the dimension of in-person presence in research work, generates a transformation and a potentiality, particularly in regions such as ours where economic resources are often limited.

These cores of problematizations with different emphases are included in the debates regarding the current development model, which is marked by economic and social inequalities and technological ones. Suppose we look at the emerging problems, especially those related to questions about Artificial Intelligence. In that case, we must pay special attention to ensure that the new instrumental challenges do not overshadow MIL's communicational and critical dimensions. In this line, we believe it is vital to continue working on the challenge of consolidating increasingly democratic and inclusive processes of building citizenship that MIL proposes. To put back into the analysis, the processes of subjectivization, the existing inequalities, the violated rights, the inclusive forms of participation, those questions that the critical traditions of Latin American communication and education leave us as a legacy and a perspective.¹⁹

¹⁹ We would especially like to thank Bettina Martino, Ileana Cruz-Sánchez and Miriam Herrera for their generosity in sharing documents and reference materials for this text.

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