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# Report about the Media Literacy Situation in the Basque School Community

## Estado de la alfabetización audiovisual en la comunidad escolar vasca

### ABSTRACT

This article gathers together the results of a quantitative and qualitative piece of research conducted between 2007 and 2010 by the HGH «Hedabideak, Gizartea eta Hezkuntza» (Media, Society and Education) research team at the University of the Basque Country. The main aim of the research was to examine the situation of Media Literacy in the Basque Country's school community. One of the newest aspects of this research was the study of the school community as a whole, at a specific moment and in a specific field; in other words, the students, teachers and parents of the same community. The results of the quantitative study have been taken from a survey done among 598 young people between 14 and 18 years old enrolled in Secondary or Further Education, or in Vocational Training courses. The qualitative study took into account the information extracted from ten focus groups and six in-depth interviews. Young people between the ages of 14 and 18, parents between 40 and 55, and eight experts of different ages took part in the discussions. Through the in-depth interviews the research team observed the opinions of eight educators who teach Education in Media. According to the results, the education system should include media education among its priorities.

### RESUMEN

El presente artículo recoge los principales resultados de una investigación cuantitativa y cualitativa llevada a cabo durante el período 2007-10 por el equipo de investigación HGH (Medios de Difusión, Sociedad y Educación) de la Universidad del País Vasco. El principal objetivo de la misma ha sido analizar el estado de la alfabetización audiovisual (Media Literacy) en el entorno de la comunidad escolar del País Vasco. Una de las principales novedades del presente trabajo radica en que se ha analizado el conjunto de la comunidad escolar en un momento y entorno concreto; es decir, teniendo en cuenta la opinión tanto de alumnado, como de profesorado y padres. Los resultados de la investigación cuantitativa se han extraído de una encuesta realizada a 598 jóvenes vascos de entre 14 y 18 años escolarizados tanto en institutos de Secundaria y Bachillerato como en centros de Formación Profesional. La investigación cualitativa se ha fundamentado en la información recogida a través de diez grupos de discusión y seis entrevistas en profundidad. En los grupos han participado jóvenes de la misma edad (entre 14 y 18 años) por una parte y padres y madres de entre 40 y 55 años por otro. En las entrevistas en profundidad, se ha testado la opinión de ocho profesores que imparten docencia en materias relacionadas con la educación en comunicación (educación en comunicación). A tenor de los resultados, el sistema educativo debería introducir la educación en comunicación entre sus prioridades.

### KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Media literacy, school community, media education, ICT.  
Alfabetización audiovisual, comunidad escolar, Educación en Comunicación, TIC.

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## 1. Introduction

This piece of work has been produced by the research team known as the HGH (Mass media, Society and Education) set up in 2003. It is a multi-disciplinary team that groups together lecturers belonging to different knowledge areas –media communication, journalism and art education– who work in various faculties of the University of the Basque Country.

The conclusions presented here are the result of the second research project carried out by this group. The work started at the end of 2007 and was completed during the first semester of 2010. The main aim was to research the current degree of media literacy of the Basque school community as a whole –pupils, teachers and parents or guardians– by applying sufficiently proven quantitative and qualitative methods which are dealt with in further detail below.

Over the last 40 years many authors have made valuable contributions to this subject (Media Literacy). In the Anglo-Saxon sphere the ones that stand out in particular owing to their global perspective are those produced by Mastermann (1979, 1980, 1985, 1993), Luckham (1975), Firth (1976), Golay (1973), Gerbner (1983), Jones (1984) and Duncan (1996). More recent are the contributions of Nathanson (2002, 2004), Buckingham (2005), Stein & Prewett (2009), Larson (2009), Livingstone & Brake (2010) and Gainer (2010). Some of the contributions in Spanish worthy of mention are Kaplun (1998), Aparici (1994), García Matilla (1996, 2004), Aguaded (1998, 2000), Orozco (1999) and Ferrés (2007).

Other authors have thrown themselves into applied research taken to the classrooms. This is the case of pieces of work by teachers like Hall & Whannel (1964), Galtung & Ruge (1965), Berger (1972), Cohen & Young (1973), Hall (1977) and Bonney & Wilson (1983). It would be unforgivable to omit from this list the French authority Celestin Freinet, the true father of popular pedagogy and pioneer of the introduction of the newspaper into the school. It would also be an indescribable oversight to ignore the work carried out over the last 25 years by the journal *Comunicar* in the Latin American sphere. In the last decade alone this journal has published many pieces of research on media literacy from a range of viewpoints. So worth highlighting are the theoretical pieces of work on media competences published by Ferrés (2007) or on digital literacy by Moreno (2008). Also relevant have been the contributions on Educommunication made by Barranquero (2007), Cortes de Cervantes (2006), Tucho (2006), Ambrós (2006) and Percebal &

Tejedor (2008). We end this list by citing the research which, like our own, has focussed its analysis on the media literacy of youngsters in the area of Argentina (Fleitas & Zamponi, 2002), Brazil (Esperón 2005) or Spain (Marí, 2006).

The data obtained in all these pieces of work have served to illustrate our working hypothesis better by focussing it specifically on Basque society, a community with its own identity, bilingualism and with a high degree of technological development.

A central hypothesis was an apparently obvious starting point for us but it needed the certification of the data: the failure to address the subject of communication in a mainstream way is leading to serious gaps in the media literacy of the Basque school community as a whole. This hypothesis necessarily entails a series of RQ Research Questions that the current research aims to shed light on. They are as follows:

- RQ1: How do teachers who have worked on this subject at high schools rate their own work?
- RQ2: What is the degree of media literacy of Basque youngsters between 14 and 18? Are they capable of interpreting the keys of media language?
- RQ3: Is it possible to achieve an acceptable level of media literacy without doing specific media studies?
- RQ4: In the family environment is there any kind of filter or criterion imposed by parents or guardians when it comes to consuming mass media?
- RQ5: How have guardians been experiencing the technology revolution in recent years?

## 2. Material and methods.

The results of this piece of research are based on methods for quantitative and qualitative analysis applied to the school community as a whole in its different strata: pupils, teachers and parents or guardians. The combination of the two techniques has been fundamental when correctly evaluating the global nature of the study, and this has allowed us to put the piece of data within the framework of its natural context without straying one inch from the accuracy of the number. Let us start by detailing the qualitative methodology. The group used two widely recognised techniques of qualitative analysis. We are referring to the focus groups or discussion groups (a total of ten were carried out; eight among pupils between 14 and 18 and another two with parents) and in-depth semi-structured interviews.

### 2.1. Variables used.

The composition of the eight focus groups conducted among the youngsters was structured

bearing in mind two independent variables:

- The age and academic levels of the participants. On the one hand, students in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years in Statutory Secondary Education (14-16 years) were chosen, and on the other, youngsters in the first and second years of the Sixth form (16-18 years).

- The syllabus. The groups were structured on the basis of the presence or absence of some kind of subject related to educommunication.

The dependent variable used in the three strata researched has been the state of media literacy itself.

## 2.2. Procedure.

- The opinions of the pupils were gathered in eight groups belonging to as many schools<sup>1</sup>. Four of them comprised students doing sixth form studies specialising in arts or having disciplines directly linked to educommunication included in their syllabuses. This variable did not appear in the remaining four. In all the cases the debate was initiated by the viewing of the opening sequence<sup>2</sup> of the film «The Lion King» (Walt Disney, 1994).

- To find out the views of the teachers, five in-depth interviews were carried out and seven educators participated in them<sup>3</sup>, (in one of them the people taking part numbered three).

- To find out the opinion of the parents or guardians, two focus groups were held. The first took place in Gasteiz (Vitoria); the second in Bilbao. In the first, the group was made up of a random selection, while the second was formed by the executive committee of the EHIGE, the organisation coordinating Parents in the Basque Country and which brings together 240 associations. In addition, a person in a position of authority in this association with broad experience in the subject gave an in-depth interview.

The quantitative data were extracted from a survey carried out between November 2009 and February 2010 by the company Aztiker. The universe of the survey was made up of 107,467 young school pupils in the Basque Country between the ages of 14 and 18, from high schools and vocational training centres. A representative sample made up of the 598

youngsters was selected from this broad universe<sup>4</sup>. The field work was carried out by means of the «simultaneous group application» method (Wimmer & Dominick, 1996: 136). This means that the information is gathered on the basis of a self-applied questionnaire. Each person surveyed fills in his/her own questionnaire. The team conducting the survey went to the schools, to the pupils' normal classrooms. Groups of 15 to 20 youngsters were formed. Prior to this, a person conducting the survey from the above-mentioned company explained to them in detail the

**Both the qualitative and quantitative results gathered here confirm the central hypothesis that gave rise to this research: the failure to address the subject of communication in a mainstream way is leading to serious gaps in the media literacy in the Basque school community as a whole. This community is set to undergo radical changes in a brief period of time. Within a decade teachers that are considerably younger than the present ones will be teaching a generation of students that is more skilled in digital strategies than present one.**

mechanics of the questionnaire, and projected the audiovisual material on which some of the questions were based.

## 3. Results

The main results of our research are summarised as follows.

### 3.1. Qualitative research

We will be starting with the qualitative research. We have structured these reflections on the basis of the three strata analysed: teachers, pupils and parents or guardians.

#### 3.1.1. Experiences of the teachers

The interviews carried out revealed a very broad teacher profile. In all the cases ITCs were determining factors, but their proximity to the educommunication sphere had sprung from various concerns: the world

of the videoclip, cinema, the photograph, the Internet or computing, for example. All the teachers interviewed were self-taught; they had trained themselves after many hours spent accumulating and contrasting multiple experiences.

Among the testimonies gathered some were particularly illustrative, like for example the experience of the Amara Berri public school in Donostia-San Sebastian. This school, founded in 1979, has come up with its own method of educommunication called the «Amara Berri Sistema». It is a benchmark in the Basque Country's school community to the point where it has been adopted by another 18-20 schools in the area. The main players are students in primary education. The pupils do not follow an ordinary text book for studying mathematics, for example; they learn the metric system as people in charge of an imaginary shop, or what a mortgage is when they have to repay a loan to the bank which is run by another classmate. Nor do they have ordinary language classes. Instead, they produce a newspaper every day, edit radio and television programmes, interact through their «txiki-web» website and even offer talks with those who have overcome their fear of speaking in public. The process is very co-operative and is always supervised by the teachers. Since 1990 when the Basque Government recognised the innovative nature of the school, the Amara Berri System has been perfected from year to year.

All the teachers interviewed have coincided when demanding greater commitment from people in charge of Education. In the view of these teachers, educommunication cannot be a mere technological discipline, but an instrument capable of training free, 21st century citizens. This need becomes more acute if one takes into consideration the background with which the students arrive in the classrooms. The teacher MPY reflected on this in the following terms: «This is a generation with a vast accumulation of technical knowledge: they have been glued to the telly, they obtain and swap materials, photos and masses of things over the Internet, they know how to look for new things on it. They have accumulated a vast background even though they don't often realise it. And when they get the chance, they surpass you immediately. The teacher has to be humble; he or she has to give them the bases and then let them flourish».

### 3.1.2. Interpretative competences of the youngsters

The main aim of the focus groups among the youngsters was not only to delve into their inter-

pretative competences, but also to find out if significant differences really exist in the degree of media literacy among those who have or have not done subjects linked to educommunication.

We would start off by saying that differences do exist. The adolescents trained in educommunication display an interpretative maturity greater than that of the ones who have not done these kinds of subjects. That is particularly clear when it comes to differentiating between denotation and connotation, when a determined shot is designated or when they interpret the communicative function of a specific frame. Nevertheless, it is equally true that for other youngsters without training in educommunication, the mere accumulation of cultural text throughout their lives has generated for them the necessary intellectual springboard to develop certain interpretative capacities. Even in the groups in which no one was capable of citing a «grammatical» film norm (frame, lighting), there were youngsters capable of making interesting reflections on another level.

In our research, the method of the focus groups itself turned out to be revealing. As the discussion progressed, many participants modified totally naturally and spontaneously their initial points of view and adopted those of their fellow group members. It is clear that leadership and inertias resulting from dominant opinions come into play during the group discussion. Nevertheless, group communication emerges as a very interesting method for social analysis.

Cultural maturity emerges as a determining factor in interpretative competences. The consideration of the low cognitive development of children is overcome as they get older. The new knowledge acquired with the passing of time can generate autonomous, critical thought. This was the reasoning in one of the interventions of a student of Secondary School with training in educommunication: «I saw the film when I was small and I didn't realise about these things; but now, when you watch it with your little sister, you say... crikey (...) They're trying to get an idea into your head, but then, when you start to think for yourself, you can change that idea, and that is what usually happens, isn't it?».

In the focus groups, Disney emerged as a megacorporation illustrating the symbolic, children's universe. We reproduce below a reflection in a group of Secondary School with educommunication training: «It's a typical Disney film. As it's made for kids, it has to respond to their capacity for understanding (...). That's why they use animals, because it's a film for kids. If people were presented it would be very strange

talking about these things with people; with animals it's easier to get the kids hooked (...) I don't think it's right to fill your heads with these ideas from childhood». The reflection displays a capacity to criticise Disney's communicative strategy. It is probably the result of the greater media training of this group. For the rest of the groups, Disney is something «parents trust».

**3.1.3. Parents' concerns**

Concern. this is perhaps the sensation that best defines the state that overwhelms parents when faced with these questions. It is a concern linked to a certain confusion caused by the lack of knowledge towards the new technologies that many confess to. The opinions collected through the focus groups were complemented by the information coming out of the in-depth interview given by one representative of the parents (AE) a person with decades of experience in the association and well-versed in the subject being studied.

However, it would be as well when addressing the phenomenon to point out that among the parents or guardians there are appreciable differences. As the aforementioned AE reveals, the digital gap is also present within this group: «Nowadays, there are considerable differences between people. The attitude towards the new technologies of a person of 35 is very different from that of a person of 55. In twenty years things have changed an awful lot, and you notice that when you speak to parents».

In general, parents accept the arrival of the new technologies. They believe that they are a reflection of the society and see in them more positive aspects (new forms of communication, interactivity, etc.) than negative ones. However, they do not conceal a feeling of uncertainty, especially when they find that their own children are way ahead of them.

Nostalgia could be another of the keys. Nostalgia for the co-operative street games that parents enjoyed

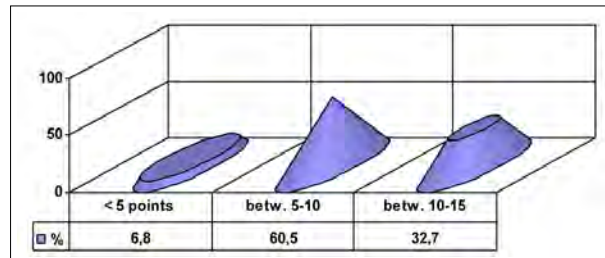
as children and for certain habits that are being lost, like going to libraries. That nostalgia is also linked to the hope of a better future. AE insists on linking the technological perspective and a critical attitude together: «The current panorama is going to change radically in ten years' time. Schools will be totally different. 40% of the teachers are set to retire. In the family environment more than half the parents will not be aware of hardly anything, but they going to have to adapt to the new times, thanks to the influence of their offspring. They will hang on to their values, their ideas, but it will be adaptation; not change».

**3.2. Quantitative research**

Below we reproduce the main results extracted from the survey conducted among 598 Basque youngsters between 14 and 18. The data are grouped into seven broad sections: media language (maximum 20 points), technological language (max. 15 points), production (12), critical reception (13), values and ideology (25) and aesthetics (15). This produced a grading system from 0 to 100 points which indicated to

**Graph 2: Degree of knowledge and use of audiovisual equipment.**

Range: 0-20 points. Source: Aztiker Survey



us the degree of media literacy of each person surveyed. The following graphs summarize the principle findings of our research.

**3.2.1. Media language**

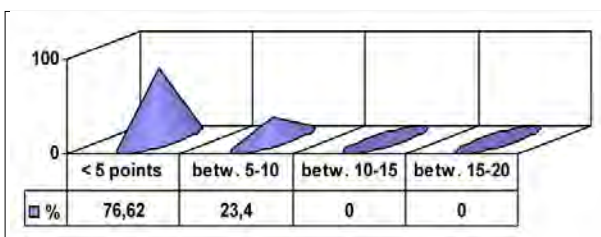
According to the responses gathered, we saw that school adolescents and youngsters were not very well trained in media language. Only a quarter of them were close to passing. The remaining three quarters failed miserably.

**3.2.2. Technology**

This is the section in which our team found the highest number of correct answers. In general, it can be said that Basque youngsters have a good idea about how audiovisual

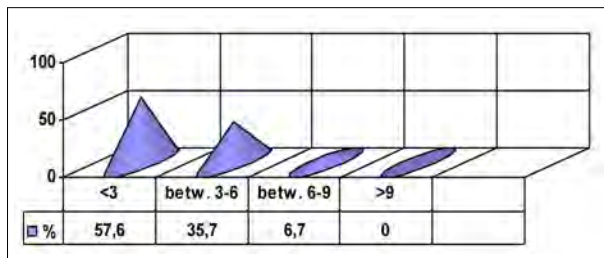
**Graph 1: Degree of knowledge of media language.**

Range: 0-20 points. Source: Aztiker Survey In-house production



**Graph 3: Degree of knowledge about the process to create an audiovisual product**

Range: 0-12 points. Source: Aztiker Survey



equipment works. The data show that nine out of ten are capable of using communicative technologies effectively as far as receivers are concerned. They are autonomous in this respect.

### 3.3.3. Production

This section was designed to verify the degree of knowledge the youngsters had about the creation process of a media product. The questions aimed to find out if those surveyed were capable of: a) describing the jobs of the professionals (for example, of the producers, stage managers, etc.) responsible for the work to produce media materials, and b) to produce a list of the tasks necessary to make a product.

According to the data gathered, it can be said that the level of knowledge about production is very limited among these youngsters.

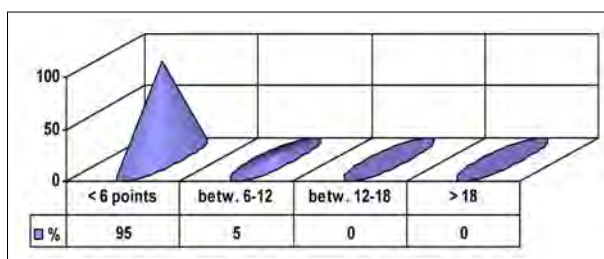
When it came to describing the world of production, two variables –age and gender– produced considerable statistical differences. As age increases, it is possible to appreciate a greater level of knowledge about the production system. As regards gender, the girls –in this section, too– were more capable than the boys.

### 3.2.4. Ideology and values

This aspect was developed on the basis of five questions. One of them was on the reflections

**Graph 4: Capacity for interpreting the ideology and values of media products correctly.**

Range: 0-25 points. Source: Aztiker Survey



prompted by one of the advertisements subjected to examination, and another two on whether they found a piece of news more credible if it was accompanied by an image. Those surveyed were not particularly skilful when it came to detecting the underlying ideology and values in the media texts subjected to examination.

In the evaluation of ideological competences we verified that the youngsters used very simple, weak reasoning when it came to grasping and describing the ideological veneer of a media product. Out of a maximum of 25 points allowed by this section no one managed to score even half.

### 3.2.5. Global Assessment

The summation of all the responses offers an alarming assessment. According to this survey, no Basque schoolboy or girl would today be media literate since none of them scored more than 50 out of the possible total of 100 points. Only three out of ten came slightly closer to passing without managing to do so. These data call for serious reflection.

## 4. Discussion

The results harvested in this piece of research reveal considerable interest on the part of the Basque school community in media literacy. This interest turns into an urgent need in the light of the quantitative results arising from the survey among the youngsters.

The research exposes a Basque education system that is incapable of making the school population media literate. The youngsters are ignorant of the basics of media language. They lack structured discourse to explain in a reasoned way what they have in front of their eyes. They find both the grammar and the rhetoric of media language foreign. Logically, the educational authorities should be taking note of the data compiled here and be including education among their curricular priorities. Only that way could they take effective steps forwards towards a common goal: the training of citizens who are free, media educated, capable of surviving autonomously in the self-called information society.

Notwithstanding the undoubted interest in the experiences that have been analysed in the area of education in this piece of research, the curricular isolation surrounding them is palpable. The very teachers involved complain about the lack of continuity and absence of global approaches. The technician perspective takes priority over the critical one. A

fascination for technology reigns, and it can even go as far as blinding and, consequently, hampering the capacity for critical reflection.

The profile of the teachers involved in these experiences is multidisciplinary. The mastery of the new technologies has been a determining factor, but each one has reached the world of educommunication along different roads. They detect gaps in their own experiences and put them down to the lack of mainstream training in these subjects. Although these teachers largely display a really commendable dose of enthusiasm, it is also true that in some of them one can sense a certain intellectual fatigue, which is partly the result of the passing of the years. Teacher motivation is crucial in this subject (as it is in all subjects). It has been extensively shown that if the educator is capable of linking the pedagogical aims with the pupils' social and emotional context, the goals can be achieved more easily. In this respect, the new technologies open up huge possibilities as long as specific content and aims that can be easily identified by the students are added to them.

The youngsters educated in Basque schools where specific experiences in educommunication have been developed display better media literacy. It would be as well to point out that the evolving maturity itself of the youngsters –linked to their age– facilitates greater capacity for interpretation.

The very methodology used in the qualitative research –the focus groups– has emerged as an effective tool in the implementation of the objective to be achieved: media literacy.

The technological revolution occupies and worries parents. They feel overwhelmed and lacking in criteria when faced with a reality which in many cases is beyond them. They even feel incapable of setting limits on the media consumption of their children. Despite this, they see more positive aspects than negative ones in the new technologies. They are demanding a more critical use of these tools.

The results of the survey gathered here should prompt a deep cause for concern among those responsible for education and society in general, particularly if one takes into consideration that the degree of media literacy of the population as a whole will not –presumably– be greater than that demonstrated by the youngsters. The scores achieved are very poor. They point to a youth that is illiterate from the media point of view. They have advanced equipment at their disposal. They are capable in terms of their mechanical skills, but they are ignorant of the basic questions relating to media culture, the production or

detection of ethical and aesthetic values underlying the media text.

The profile of the parents will evolve likewise towards more technological parameters. The research team understands that the Basque school community is facing a golden opportunity, an unbeatable opportunity to devote serious attention to a debate that affects the very backbone of the current education system: the media literacy of its citizens.

### Supports

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<sup>2</sup> Apart from the authors of this article, the following people are members of our research group: Juan Vicente Idoyaga Arrospe, professor of Audiovisual Communication in the Department of the same name in the Faculty of Social and Communication Sciences in the University of the Basque Country and Amaia Andrieu Sanz, lecturer in the Department of the Didactics of Musical, Plastic and Body Expression at the Teacher's University School (UPV).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The focus groups among the youngsters took place during the 2008-2009 academic year. Four groups were selected from the schools which had developed some kind of media studies. They were the Manteo Zubiri high school in Donostia-San Sebastian, the public high schools of Eibar and Sopela and the Mendizabala high school in Vitoria-Gasteiz. We were interested in contrasting the degree of media literacy of the pupils at the schools which did not teach these kinds of disciplines. That is why the following schools were approached: the Koldo Mitxelena in Vitoria-Gasteiz, the private Ikastola (Basque-medium school) of San Fermin in Iruñea-Pamplona and the Txurdinaga Behekoa and Gabriel Aresti public high schools in Bilbao.

<sup>2</sup> The sequence referred to is about the public presentation of Simba, the lion cub who had just been born and who becomes the king of his community.

<sup>3</sup> The people interviewed were: MPY, Ph.D. holder in media communication and graduate in English Philology. She taught until the 2008-2009 academic year when she retired. During her long career this interviewee carried out various experiences in media literacy at the public high schools in Sopela and Sestao in Bizkaia. The interview took place on 3 October 2008; IO, teacher at the Zubiri Manteo public high school in Donostia-San Sebastian and responsible for the European programme European Cinema and Young People within the Comenius 3 programme. The meeting took place on 7 November 2008 at the school itself; EL, teacher of Basque and person in charge of the media workshop at the Txurdinaga Behekoa high school in Bilbao. The meeting took place on 16 February 2009 at the school itself; TE teacher at the San Nikolas private Ikastola (Basque-medium school) in Getxo and head of the «Globalab» experience run at the school itself. The meeting took place on 12 March, 2009; EMG, AM and AP, director and heads of the media section and the laboratory, respectively, at the Amara Berri public school in Donostia-San Sebastian. They coordinate the «Amara Berri sistema», a pioneering programme in media literacy that works with primary school children. The

interview took place on 3 April, 2009 at the school itself.

<sup>4</sup> The field work was carried out between November 2009 and February 2010. The youngsters responded to the questions in line with the education model used in the classroom (in Basque, French or Spanish). The calculation of the margin of error (attributable to completely random samples) is  $\pm 4.1\%$  for the whole universe with a level of dependability of 95.5%, where  $p=q\%50.0$  for the most contrary hypothesis. In total, the questionnaire was filled in at 33 schools in Alaba, Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, Navarre and Lapurdi (Labourd), of which 15 were private and 18 public. To build the sample, the sex of the pupils, level of studies and their experience with respect to media activities were taken into account.

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