

## Media Literacy meets Open Channels

### Why do we need media literate individuals?

In a democracy the right of free speech and the right of access to information are the indispensable rights of a citizen. In order to guarantee these rights we need independent, pluralistic and responsibly-minded media. Freedom of the press, free exchange of information and ideas and an open discussion without the influence of government are of great significance for the development of a free, stable and democratic society in a united Europe.

The development and preservation of independent, pluralistic and responsibly-minded media require citizens to be aware and to support this process as well as being actively involved. Encouraging media competence lays a foundation for this awareness and is therefore an important contribution towards a democratic society.

In an age when most people get most of their information from television not textbooks, pictures not print, we need a wider definition of what it means to be literate.

Media literacy is more than just consuming information. A media literate individual is able to produce, create and successfully communicate information in all its forms, not just print

Media Literacy is an important approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy.

### Open Channels – a tool to become media literate

For a better understanding of the categorisation of the Open Channels within a media-political and legal landscape, it is necessary to describe briefly the development of broadcasting (radio and television) in the Federal Republic of Germany.

It was after the Second World War that in the Federal Republic of Germany a public controlled radio and television system began to develop. This system is characterised by the Broadcasting Corporations' independence from state influence, as well as by the fact that the fulfilment of programme commissions (information, education and entertainment) is controlled by the relevant groups. Licence fees and advertising provide the financial backing. The licence fees are received from those in possession of a radio or a television set.

Ever since the introduction of private broadcasting in 1984, a dual system has existed. The main aims behind the private broadcasting corporations current ventures is the gathering of profit and obtaining of political influence. Private broadcasting is financed exclusively by advertising.

Broadcasting Regulatory Authorities have been set up in each federal state to deal with licensing and the supervision of private broadcasting corporations. These authorities are financed by a proportion of the respective licensing fees.

Cultural matters, which also concern broadcasting organisations, come under the regulation of the legislative authorities of each German federal state. Affairs concerning either a number of or all federal states are regulated by the minister presidents in the form of state treaties which can then be adopted by the affected parliaments of the federal states via the appropriate laws of approval. Arising from the individual federal states' cultural sovereignty and their subsequent legislative powers each federal state has different broadcasting regulations (media laws).

The first Open Channel in Germany was launched in 1984. In 2004 there were 69 Open Channels on air throughout Germany. The history of their existence goes back to the end of the seventies, when the minister presidents of each federal state agreed to introduce private commercial broadcasting and to try out as many new television and radio programmes possible as part of the pilot projects involved with broad band cable.

Open Channels are both regional and local stations where, instead of professionals, citizens produce programmes as a means of communicating something via radio or television.

Open Channels are television and radio stations accessible to anyone and everyone. Making use of open channels is utilising the right of free expression which is part of the German constitution.

Open Channels offer everyday people the opportunity to use a camera and a microphone to improve and strengthen local communication, to establish dialogues between different social groups, and to be both seen and heard.

Open Channels do not compete with professional broadcasting corporations. To do this would contradict the ideas behind these channels.

The equipment available has to be easy to operate and as a result does not achieve the quality produced by the professional broadcasting corporations. The relatively short training given to Open Channel producers cannot be compared to the years of training and experience received at professional TV and radio stations. Resourcefulness, then, is the key and open channel producers make more with less. A producer has no choice other than to work with fellow producers. The nature of this production process establishes the first step towards communication.

The restrictions at Open Channels turn out to be the advantages for the producers, for instance there is no tyranny of ratings.

An Open Channel producer has more freedom and flexibility. He can afford to make changes and risks, and even to offend a few people. He does not have to sell the products of the sponsors because there are no sponsors. He does not have to serve a broad audience. He can concentrate strictly on the local area, and serve specific interests.

So, in an age of modern methods of communication and the highly advanced technology serving such methods, open channels reflect the right to free expression (Article 5 of the German constitution) using electronic media. Within open channels, opinions and ways of looking at life can be aired over television or radio by those who have no voice in the mainstream media. The programming is unpolished, direct and plain, truthful and rough. It is what the producer wants it to be.

Open Channels are in reality neither radio nor television, but rather an integral part of a democratic society. Democracy assumes communication, and as instruments of communication, the Open Channels offer the chance for further development of democracy. Not taking advantage of this opportunity would imply a baling out of democracy.

Open Channels provide publicity for the opinions of individuals, groups and associations, who are otherwise not represented in the other media. This represents an essential precondition for a functioning democratic process, which lives on the exchange of arguments, continual public debate and the fight for opinions in public.

There are certain regulations and rules common to all Open Channels throughout Germany:

1. Open Channels are in principle first come, first served channels. Irrespective of how important a producer of his programme is or is not, everybody is treated equally.
2. The Open Channel staff has no influence over the contents of the productions.
3. The staff does not produce the programmes. The staff members encourage citizens to use the Open Channel. They train the producer, support him and motivate him.
4. There is no censorship.
5. The producer is legally responsible for the programme he wants to be aired. If he breaks the law he will be prosecuted.

6. All commercial activity is forbidden.
7. Access to and use of technological equipment, training and assistance are free.

The legislative basis for the Open Channels can be found in the separate media laws of the different federal states.

In Germany, everybody in possession of a radio or television has to pay a licence fee which is mainly used to finance the two public controlled nationwide TV and radio programmes. A small proportion of these fees is used, in the states where one or more Open Channels exist, to fund, either in part or in full, these channels.

Open Channels are the ideal partners for projects in the field of media literacy. In such a cooperation they can provide all their resources and publicity for the results of such projects.

The following examples illustrate the successful cooperation between the Open Channel Berlin and three EU Socrates Projects:

## **EU Socrates Project 'MEAC – Media Education across the Curriculum'**

**2003-2006**

### *Summary*

'MEAC' plans to illustrate and promote ideas related to critical media education in the school. The main output of 'MEAC' will be a multilingual web portal that will provide online teaching resources, online seminars and workshops. The ideas will be disseminated through European media educational events such as the Berlin Media Literacy Conference, which will be held at the Open Channel Berlin in November this year, or the upcoming Athens 'MEAC' conference in October this year.

### *Current status*

After the initial theme of 'Media Literacy and Democracy' the project currently works on '*Media Literacy and Sport*' and we are developing a module for the school which can initiate a critical discussion of media constructions of 'Olympic Stars'. This module includes issues of identity, gender, commercialism and nationalism and will link with the European initiative 'European year of Education through Sport'. Questionnaires, practical and analytical activities are offered online for interested teachers. An 'Olympic' casting show will be published online before the summer.

### *Take part*

The activities can be done by just downloading the pdf files from the website and we welcome any material and feedback - especially from the Slovakia!

### *Online*

[www.mediaEducation.net](http://www.mediaEducation.net)

## **EU Socrates Project 'Speech Bubbles' 2003-2006**

### *Summary*

"Speech Bubbles" seeks to awaken and develop interest in European languages through the medium of television. Children will present a series of short programmes introducing and investigating the characteristics and history of languages. A core team of media educators from Germany, Spain and Sweden will produce the material with partners in Bulgaria, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The programmes will initially be broadcast in Berlin, Stockholm and Segovia and subsequently through a network of local and national television channels.

### *Current Status*

'Greetings' is the pilot programme of the Speech Bubbles programme and is currently in progress. The pilot will be broadcast on the European day of Languages, which is the 26th September 2004. First material can be seen on the Speech Bubbles website already. The themes for the first series for the coming school year will be: Food, tree/nature, body, clothes, my neighbourhood and sport.

### *Take part*

If you work with children and have experience with video recordings then we would happily include your video material either in the Speech Bubbles series or in one of the additional programmes which will be broadcast on the Open Channel in Berlin.

### *Online*

[www.SpeechBubbles.net](http://www.SpeechBubbles.net)

## **EU Socrates Project 'DVD – News on Europe' 2003-2004**

The DVD 'News on Europe' presents the results of the EU Socrates Project 'Television News on Europe.' 'Television News' began in September 1999 and concluded in August 2002 involving teams from England, Germany and Spain. One primary school from each country was in the foreground of all activities and produced the video material. Universities from the three countries observed and documented the project activities.

The goal of the project was to explore communication between different cultures using digital video technology as a medium. During the three project years the children were given five tasks or themes in which they were expected to produce short video articles for each one. This production required the children to investigate the subject, write the script and operate the camera. Their productions were then exchanged with the partner schools. Editing was introduced in the second year and by the end of the project most of the articles were edited by the children themselves. From the vast amount of original video material, a range of video articles were selected to form five short television programmes which were broadcast on the Open Channel Berlin.

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### **Open Channel Berlin**

The Open Channel Berlin (OKB) is part of the Broadcasting Regulatory Authority of Berlin-Brandenburg. It is a non-profit organisation. The OKB is controlled by the Media Council, a body of the aforementioned authority. The council decides on the annual budget for the OKB, which in 2003 was 1.5 million euros.



**OFFENER  
KANAL BERLIN**

The OKB took off in August 1985 as part of the "Pilot Cable Project". These Projects were carried out in five different parts of Germany as a way of introducing private radio and TV. A former factory site in Berlin-Wedding has housed the OKB headquarters from day one. Back at the start, the location was right next to the East-Berlin border, but due to the fall of the Berlin wall, it is now almost in the centre of town.

Many thousand producers have used the OKB. Anyone over the age of 18 who, at present, lives in Germany has the right to use it. This right is set down in and protected by the Berlin media law. Only a majority in parliament could alter this. The government does not have the authority to do this.

The OKB radio and TV channels are broadcast via the Berlin cable system which has more than 1,100,000 subscribers. The OKB transmits 24 hours every day. We employ a staff of 12. They are responsible for the management, administration, equipment and public relations, as well as for the

consultation, support and training of producers. We offer one TV studio, two radio studios, cameras, microphones, editing facilities etc. All of our resources may only be used to produce programme material aired on our channel.

As is the case with all Open Channels, there is a broad range of topics. One of Berlin's specialities is that the producers of the television programmes come from 30 different countries and 30 % of the productions are aired in a foreign language. The radio producers come from 10 different languages and 10 % of radio output is in a foreign language. The majority of the non-German producers come from Turkey. The great need for foreign groups to broadcast in their native language strongly illustrates the idea of Open Channels. Those lacking a voice in the professional media get the chance to speak here.

Throughout its many years of existence, the OKB has developed three different sectors of programming:

1. The genuine public access sector which means first come, first served. Apart from the individual's right to equal access, there is opportunity for groups to obtain regular time slots every week.

One of these groups is "Students TV". Independent student groups from the universities in Berlin do their own programme.

Another group are the "Heroes of Unemployment" who criticise, among others, the negative social effects of globalisation.



2. The OKB imparts media literacy. It thereby provides the prerequisites for critical and self-determined dealings with the media, which the latter increasingly influences the development of our society, and in some cases to a disquieting degree.

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By empowering children and youth to grow from being critical consumers of media to being effective communicators through the media, the OKB helps to create and preserve a democratic process.

The OKB has started cooperation with a municipal media centre for schools: kids on media – kom. The results of this cooperation are being aired daily in a regular one hour time slot.

For each unit of the kom-project we offer non-linear editing, two digital camcorders and light and sound equipment.



3. OKB on the spot (event TV) offers certain institutions the opportunity to air their events in full at their own liability. Such events are 100 per cent, unedited live coverage without intervention from the OKB. The associated foundations of the main political parties (socialist, social democrat, liberal, green and conservative) often make use of this offer. Additionally, the OKB covers a lot of cultural events.

We have just purchased an outside broadcasting van which makes operation much easier and more effective. The studios' operation is carried out mainly by students.



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