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South Africa's e-Skills Policy. From e-Skills to Media Literacy?

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Abstract: This paper starts from the observation that media literacy is gaining traction on the agenda of policy makers in the EU, in EU Member States, in international organizations such as UNESCO and progressively in countries worldwide. In markets - such as in the EU - where access to media, the Internet, and ICTs is less and less an issue, and where general literacy is high, it is not surprising that media literacy is gaining more prominence in policy. There is however very little research on whether and how critical media literacy is implemented in developing countries and more specifically in Africa. This paper focusses on how components of media literacy are slowly emerging in the South African policy context. Media literacy in a South African context emerges in relation to discussions on e-skills and digital literacy.

Keywords: e-skills, digital skills, media literacy, policy.

1. Introduction

This paper starts from the observation that media literacy is gaining traction on the agenda of policy makers in the EU, in EU Member States, in international organizations such as UNESCO and progressively in countries worldwide [1]. In markets - such as in the EU - where access to media, the Internet, and ICTs is less and less an issue, and where general literacy is high, it is not surprising that media literacy is gaining more prominence in policy [2]. Benefits from investing in media literacy policy and initiatives '(…) are conceived in terms of national competitiveness (a skilled labor market, strong creative industries), harm reduction (via responsible and aware consumers), empowerment (…) and social inclusion' [3]. In most conceptualisations of media literacy, the focus is put on the skills and competences to critically engage with media and to use ICTs in day to day life.

For the moment, there is very little research on whether and how critical media literacy is implemented in developing countries and more specifically in Africa. Although initiatives are taken by UNESCO in relation to Media literacy in the framework of GAPMIL, there is few research about policies and initiatives at the country level. In markets - such as African markets - where access to media and the Internet are still an issue and general literacy is substantially lower, media literacy will most probably be framed rather differently.

This paper focusses on how components of media literacy are slowly emerging in the South African policy context. Media literacy in a South African context emerges in relation to discussions on e-skills and digital literacy. Digital literacy is enshrined in the Electronic Communications Act and falls under the responsibility of the Department of Telecommunications and Postal Services and is also addressed in SA Connect (SA's broadband policy)[4]. Furthermore, the draft iNeSI bill has been opened up for public

comment at the end of last year (2017), describing the role and functions of a national state-owned Company (iNESI) with the main objective to fulfil a coordinating and catalytic role to promote the national digital skills development agenda.

This paper will 1) briefly discuss trends in the theoretical discussions in media literacy, 2) on the basis of document analysis and desk research, the paper will map and analyse South Africa's policy discourse in relation to e-skills and e-literacy.

2. Media Literacy and e-Skills: A converging field

The theoretical field of media literacy is extremely wide and diverse. Giving one central definition is therefore difficult. As a working definition we refer to the classical definition, constructed at the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy [5]: 'Media literacy is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms.' Most authors now adhere to the empowerment approach of media literacy, which starts from the idea that media are an integral part of our mediated society. Users are considered capable of actively engaging with media and media literacy stimulates the critical engagement with media.

e-Skills were first defined in a 2004 EU report 'e-Skills for Europe: Towards 2010 and Beyond'. The report states that 'The term "e-skills" encompasses a wide range of capabilities (knowledge, skills and competences) and issues with an e-skills dimension span over a number of economic and social dimensions. The ways individuals interact with ICT vary considerably, depending on the work organisation and context of a particular employer, or home environment'. The report then moves on to define three categories of e-skills: ICT practitioner skills, ICT user skills, and e-business skills [6].

In recent years, most authors on media literacy advance a skills-based approach [7]. Potter identifies seven cognitive skills: analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis and abstraction [8]. This skills-based approach is strongly related to other skills and competences discussions around digital skills, e-skills, Internet skills, coding skills, etc. All these approaches list and/or map a number of skills, sub-skills and competences deemed necessary to be able to function within a modern ICT or media-based society. Current models focus on two types of competences: 1) competences and cognitive skills to understand media and the media industry, and 2) competences and operational skills to be able to use media.

Whereas media literacy initially focused on cognitive skills to deconstruct media and media content, the more digital skills-oriented discussions focused more on operational skills in order to be able to actively use technology in the industry and work environment. As indicated, recent theories start to move towards each other. Theories on media literacy start to focus on the creative and communicative skills needed to handle interactive aspects of media and Internet. Digital skills frameworks integrate more cognitive or strategic skills in their frameworks or competence models [9].

In principle all these models are grappling with increasingly converged media. The underlying goals of media literacy and e-skills frameworks are however often different in terms of their final goals. Media literacy is informed by broad humanistic and aesthetic goals in relation to citizenship and enjoyment of media, entertainment, games, culture and art. e-Skills debates are informed by much more utilitarian goals such as employment, economic development, digital inclusion, and direct individual growth. In this sense, the e-skills debate largely neglects the fact that media play an important social and entertainment function in people's day-to-day lives.

The solution seems to be to integrate different literacy approaches into a unified approach. There are two tendencies in bridging the diverging strands of literacy, such as text literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, numerical literacy, etc. Some authors plead for an approach of multiple literacies [10]. Other authors try to integrate the different forms of

literacy into one single concept of literacy. Divina Frau-Meigs introduces the concept of transliteracy, which is: 1) the ability to embrace the full layout of multimedia which encompasses skills for reading, writing and calculating with all the available tools; 2) the capacity to navigate through multiple domains, which entails the ability to search, evaluate, test, validate and modify information according to its relevant contexts of use [11].

The difficulty in integrating both debates is that the academic discussions only partially overlap. Figure 1 graphically depicts the academic discussion. e-Skills competence models encompass skills needed at the level of individual use for private purposes, individual use in employment and professional/expert use. e-Skills models have a progressive nature covering these three levels. The media literacy debates are mainly restricted to individuals' use of media for private purposes. They only discuss media literacy in relation to employment at the level of educators and teachers teaching media literacy or in relation to media professionals in public service broadcasting. The fact that the discussions only partly overlap is the main reason why the debates are difficult to integrate.

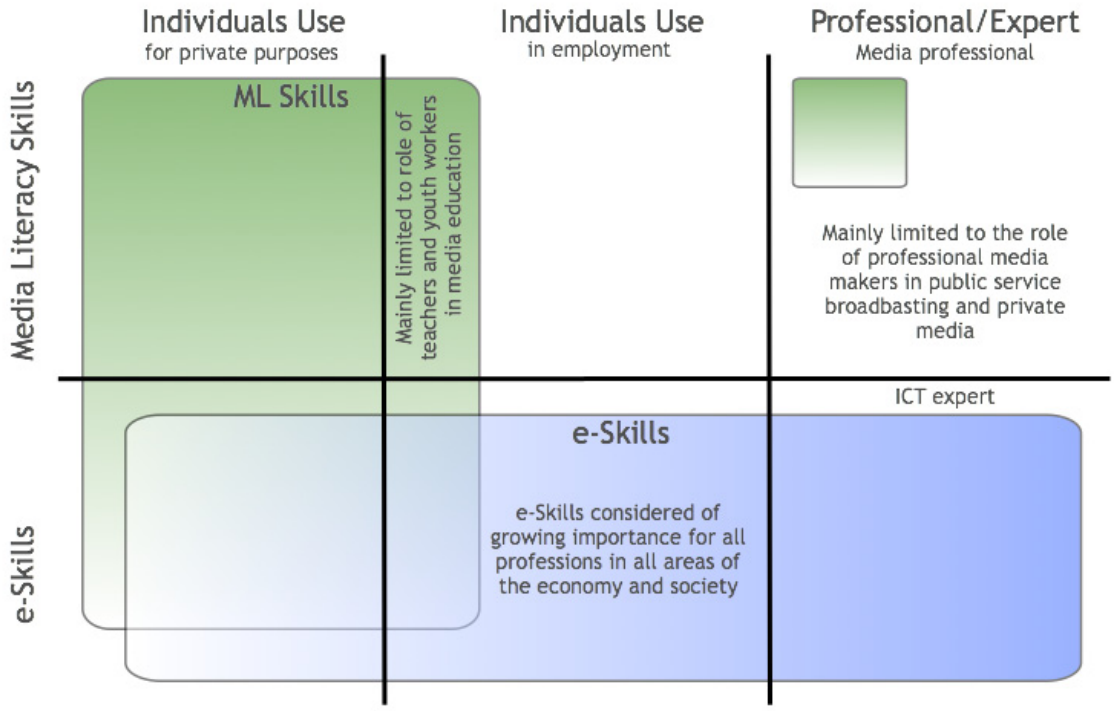

Figure 1: General Framework

3. Media Literacy and media education in South Africa

In the 1990s - four years before the first democratic elections - some activists, scholars and NGOs tried to move the topic of media education onto the political agenda. They organized the Developing Media Education in the 1990s conference which took place in Durban and was attended by 270 educators and media workers. The conference aimed to '(…) formulate a vision for media education in South Africa' [12]. The conference concluded with Resolutions and Conclusions of the First National Media Education Conference. The document stated that:

> 'The organizers believe that Media Education (…) has the potential to make a positive and crucial contribution to progressive education in a new South Africa.'
>
> 'Delegates believe that the bulk of media, and in particular South African media, presently reflects race, gender and class prejudices which reinforce the authoritarian and discriminatory nature of South African society and education. Media education (…) has the potential to contribute to a democratic and equitable future for all

citizens by nurturing a critical understanding of the media which would allow readers to be conscious of these prejudices and stereotypes' [12].

The Resolutions and Conclusions moved on to urge for 1) policy development in the area of media education, 2) the gradual integration of media education in specific courses (…), 3) the production of material that can be used by teachers in class.

In the period between 1994 and 1998 policies were reformed in almost all areas of society, with specific attention for access to technology and the potential role of ICTs in service delivery [13]. Media literacy and media education did however not move onto the policy agenda of the first Mandela government. The Mandela agenda was much more focussed on the emerging Information Highway and Information Society, in line with the more deterministic thinking of access to ICTs *en vogue* in the 1990s [14].

4. The e-Skills Debate in South Africa

The issue of e-skills was squarely put on the South African agenda in 2007 by the Presidential International Advisory Council. The Council—consisting of international captains of industry—was established by former President Thabo Mbeki to inform the presidency on ICT related issues. One of the main challenges identified by the Council was the shortage of e-skills at various levels in South Africa. As a result of the work of the Council, the South African government, through the Department of Communication, established an e-Skills Institute and started a participatory process to formulate an e-skills policy called National e-Skills Plan of Action (NesPA) [15]. In what follows we take 2007 as the starting point of our discussion and analyse the NeSPA documents and the changing discourse on e-Skills.

The institutional setup and implementation of NeSPA has changed over the years. First, the e-Skills Institute had its name—and partly its mandate—changed over the years and is currently incorporated under Nemisa (a state-owned company)—which, in turn, is in the process of becoming iNeSI (iKamva National e-Skills Institute). Second, further development of e-skills in general and the implementation of NeSPA is considered a multi-stakeholder endeavour and, although conceptualized at the national level, is pursued and implemented at the level of the provinces. Third, due to the split up of the Department of Communication (DoC) into two departments being the DoC and the Department of Telecommunications and Postal Services, in 2015 the mandate on e-skills has largely been transferred from DoC to DTPS. An analysis of the institutional setup and implementation is out of the scope of this paper [16].

4.1 National e-Skills Plan of Action (NeSPA) 2010

The National e-Skills Plan of Action (NeSPA) of 2010 is the result of a two-year consultative process culminating in the first e-Skills Summit. In this plan a definition, a conceptual framework and an approach/plan of implementation are presented and were confirmed at the e-Skills Summit. The definition of e-skills proposed in the South African context is: '(...) the ability to use and develop ICTs within the context of an emerging South African Information Society and global Knowledge Economy, and associated competencies that enable individuals to actively participate in a world in which ICT is a requirement for advancement in government, business, education and society in general' [17]. The document goes on to state that: '(…) it is important to view this e-skills concept within a broad context that encompasses the ability of people to use and create all forms of ICT to improve life opportunities in their: 1) Personal and educational spaces; 2) Work environments; 3) Community interactions, and 4) Participation in and contribution to governance processes' [17].

In the document, e-skills are considered to encompass a broad set of skills including the following:

- e-Literacy Skills: aimed at employment readiness, particularly targeting unemployed and unskilled youth and rural society (including starting own small business);
- e-Participation and e-Democracy Skills: focusing on enhancing citizen interactive engagement with communities, local, provincial and national governance processes to increase participation, self-reliance and equity;
- e-Government/Governance Skills: focusing on increasing efficiency and productivity, interactive bimodal approaches to service delivery of governments and its agencies across all ICT platforms including new cell phone technology, community radio, and the like;
- e-Business Skills: aimed at increasing organisational efficiency and productivity;
- e-User Skills: focusing on enhancing efficiency of public and private sector knowledge workers;
- e-Practitioner Skills: aimed at enhancing capacity of public and private sector to manage, support and service ICT; and
- e-Community Skills: aimed at increasing self-reliance, participation and community support in a socio-economic setting to build social cohesion in ways that can better build local solutions to societal matters such as crime, health, education and the like [17].

In appendix E of the document it becomes obvious that the e-Skills are considered as staged and build on each other.

e-Literacy, e-Participation and e-Democracy provide the underlying Foundation e-Skills required for successful engagement with the emerging South African Information Society and global Knowledge Economy. This Foundation layer supports up-skilling and re-skilling youth, women, the unemployed and disadvantaged for work, while enabling necessary understanding and capacity to empower citizen engagement. (…).

Based on these societal oriented Foundation e-Skills, e-Government and e-Business skills training provide a framework supporting increased organisational efficiency and productivity in the Public and Private Sectors. Both e-Government and e-Business delivery are based on a premise of workers having basic digital literacy skills, an appreciation of how technology is used in any working environment (…). Such skills are increasingly a necessary requirement of many people in employment today, (…).

The next level of e-Skills is that required of the E-User or Knowledge Worker. Knowledge Workers (employed across Government, Business, Education and Civil Society/Labour) typically could not fulfil their job requirements without the use of ICT systems and devices. User skills cover the utilisation of common generic software tools and use of specialised tools supporting various sectoral functions outside the ICT industry. While having a sophisticated appreciation of ICT (…) they are not organisationally responsible for managing, supporting or servicing ICT.

The top level of e-Skills is that of the E-Practitioner who are responsible for researching, developing, designing, managing, producing, consulting, marketing, selling, integrating, installing, administrating, maintaining, supporting and servicing ICT systems. (…) [17].

The document goes on to indicate that: ‘The e-Skills Institute is charged with developing e-Skills in relation to the following goals against which, in conjunction with the NeSPA impact areas, the monitoring and evaluation will be performed:

1. Employment readiness: aimed at improvement of the employment figures for graduates from tertiary institutions and shortened time from employment to productivity (…).
2. Effective e-governance and service delivery: aimed at effective use of ICT for service delivery that is developmental, agile, competent, and citizen-centric. This will result in government having better communication with the people of South Africa thus focusing service delivery on real needs.

3. Business development: aimed at providing skills needed within corporates, small, medium businesses and micro-enterprises (SMMEs) to exploit opportunities provided by ICT, (…) to ensure more efficient and effective performance, (…), and to establish new businesses.
4. Socio-economic development: aimed at an increased national productivity and competitiveness (more competitive workforce), which inter alia should increase return on ICT investments. The further aim is to increase the uptake of online (e-government) services as well as to support the creation of relevant (local) content by more educated and cohesive citizens.
5. Research and development: aimed at informing policy and curriculum development, defining applications and evaluating progress (…) [16].

The NeSPA document describes the implementation of the plan in great detail. It also develops in more detail the different forms of e-skills. What is interesting is that the categorization of skills is sector or field oriented. Some of the fields are however closely linked. E-User skills are linked to the efficiency of public and private sector knowledge workers. e-Government skills are linked to the efficiency of service delivery processes. What exactly the difference is from the point of view of the individual user is not that clear. Many e-skills can be used in different sectors and in different areas. The reason why these skills were classified as such is probably due to the fact that the process started from the question of what was needed in terms of e-skills in a South African context.

In conclusion, the goals against which e-skills are charted are almost exclusively focused on economic development and employment. The South African definition of e-skills might refer to competences that: "enable individuals to actively participate in (…) society in general". The latter is certainly not the primary focus and as such it is not developed in great detail in the policy documents. The only area in which there is any reference to individual use is related to e-Literacy skills which have a focus on employability of citizens and in e-Participation which assumes skills by citizens to be able to interact with government. The whole debate on media literacy and media literacy skills does not figure in the NeSPA 2010 plan and debate. There is very little focus on competences and cognitive skills to understand media, ICTs and the role they have in society and industry. The approach of NeSPA seems largely focussed on operational skills that are directly functional in relation to specific tasks or/and employment. Making use of our framework introduced earlier, NeSPA 2010 can be mapped as follows.

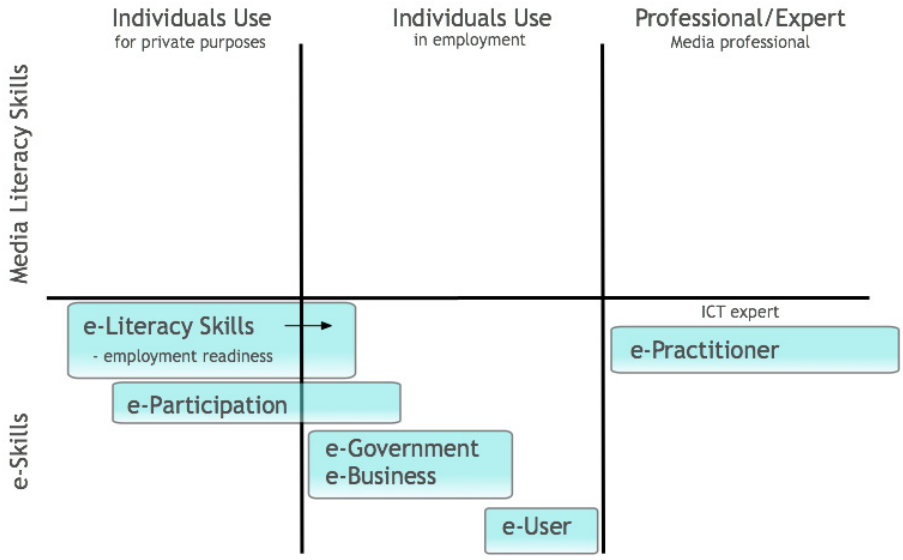

Figure 2: NeSPA 2010 Mapped on Framework

4.2 National e-Skills Plan of Action (NeSPA) 2012

The National e-Skills Plan of Action (NeSPA) 2012 advances the base laid by NeSPA 2010. The document is based on further rounds of input and is driven by people from the e-Skills Institute and experts at the University of the Western Cape. NeSPA 2012 states that: '(it) recognises that any sustainable approach to addressing poverty and in building self-reliance, self-respect and a more cohesive society with a future for generations cannot be achieved without the social appropriation of ICT for local and personal benefit. This simply cannot be achieved without recognising the need to build an ICT-related astuteness, i.e. e-social astuteness, across the full spectrum of South African society: as consumers, clients, customers, entrepreneurs, businesses, workers, learners, communities and families' [18].

e-Astuteness is defined in the glossary as: '(…) closely related to developing e-competent individuals by giving them appropriate ICT-related knowledge and skills and training them to develop a competent attitude and knowledge to use it and to adapt to the rapidly changing new forms of ICT devices and associated software'. e-Social Astuteness is further defined as: '(…) a smart way of applying acquired e-skills and e-Astuteness for everyday socio-economic development and better life opportunities for local benefit in a socio-economic dynamic increasingly impacted by new forms of ICT' [18].

With the introduction of the concept of e-astuteness and the way it is defined, the use of technology and its importance in everyday life is much more recognized. Where the NeSPA 2010 document focused much more on e-skills in relation to work, employment and innovation, NeSPA 2012 complements and extends into private use and private life opportunities. It is therefore also not surprising that whereas NeSPA 2010 focuses much more on formal training, the NeSPA 2012 document explicitly recognizes the existing aggregated network of e-centres and community e-learning centres, in that it '(…) needs to harness the skills, energy and interests of formal and informal learners - as a component of formalising and embedding e-astuteness in social capacity development' [18]. How e-astuteness relates to higher level e-skills in employment and for media professionals is not developed in detail. The place of e-Astuteness in our model can be represented as follows.

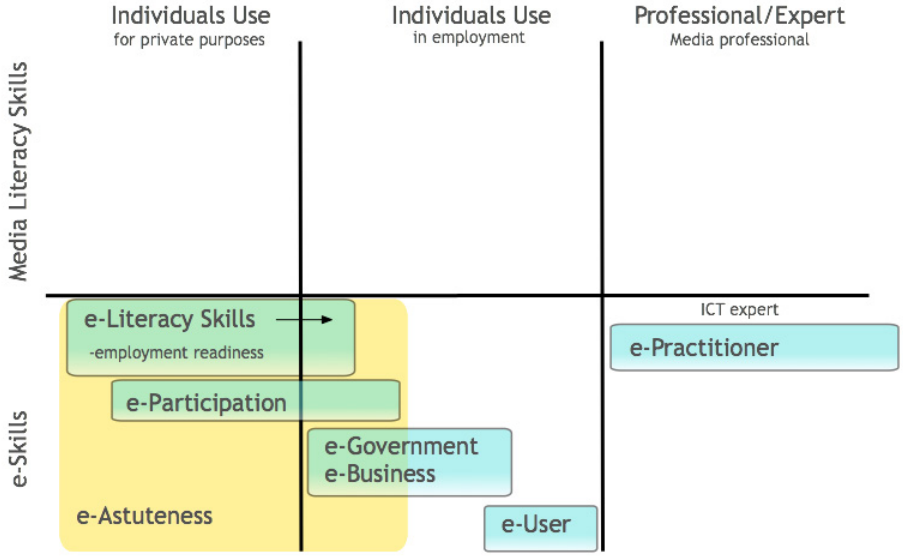

Figure 3: NeSPA 2012 Mapped on Framework

In the section on New Dynamics and New Interventions it is recommended that an e-Skills Framework and Taxonomy would be developed [18]. It is indicated that a National e-Skills Curriculum and Competence Framework (NCCF) is being developed by the e-Skills Institute. The NCCF document was published in February 2013. The document starts from the assumption that: '(…) there is high need for a National Curriculum and Competencies

Framework to ensure a common, responsive and focused approach that ensures capacity is developed right across South African society in a timely manner' [19]. The e-Skills Institute positions itself as the national hub to realize this goal through skills development throughout South Africa. The document introduces a new—and more consistent—framework that partly builds on NeSPA 2010 and NeSPA 2012.

e-Literacy is seen as the foundation layer for all e-skills. The second layer consists of skills again directly related to employment and services. The outer layer refers to overall goals as defined in overall policy documents such as the National Development Plan and the Medium Term Strategic Framework. To realize the model: '(…) resources are currently being developed to ensure: 1) e-Inclusion, social innovation and e-literacy for all; 2) Tools for re-skilling and up-skilling for existing jobs; and 3) Tools and services for skilling for new jobs that arise to meet the needs of the developing information and knowledge economy' [19].

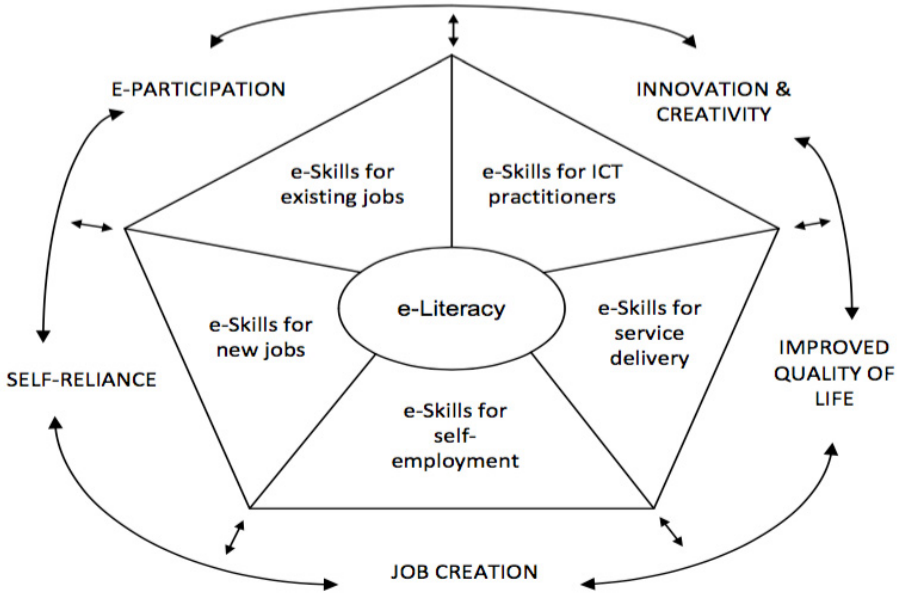

Figure 2.1. High Level Framework: Outline of the e-Skills National Curriculum and Competency Framework for South Africa

Figure 4: NCCF High Level Framework

The NCCF framework is developed in further detail throughout the document and is linked to the National Qualifications Framework. This NCCF is also the first document to identify media literacy as part of basic e-literacy. It is seen as part of a subset of skills contributing to e-Literacy such as Basic Literacy, Basic Numeracy, Life Skills, Computer Literacy, Information & Media Literacy, and Mobile Literacy. The document in its glossary refers to the European definition of media literacy: 'Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, understand, critically evaluate and create media content. It is essential for the development of active and aware citizenship. It gives ... citizens the opportunity to better pinpoint the cultural and economic dimension of all types of media associated with digital technology (television, cinema, video, websites, radio, video games and online communities). A high level of media literacy can contribute to (…) the emergence of a knowledge economy and by boosting competitiveness in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and media sectors' [20]. The NCCF is the first document that identifies media literacy as part of e-literacy. However, apart from mentioning its importance, it is not developed in further detail.

One could depict the NCCF model as follows:

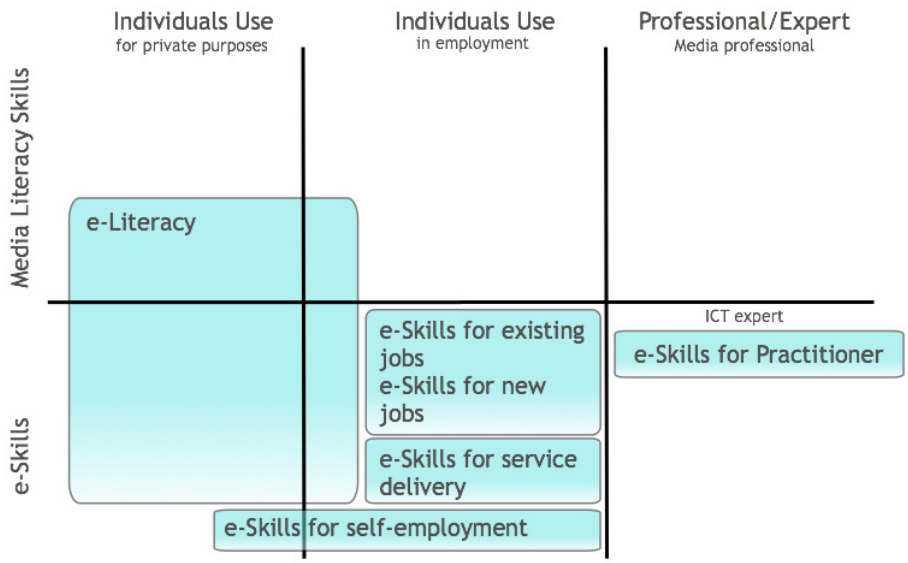

Figure 5: NCCF Mapped on Framework

5. Conclusion

The e-skills debate in South Africa is of rather recent date. The concept of e-skills is put on the agenda in 2007 in the context of the Presidential International Advisory Council which mainly reflects the interests and views of the industry. Within that debate, the concept of media literacy is certainly not of central concern. As already noted in our introduction this is in line with e-skills debates in general, that are more informed by utilitarian goals such as employment, economic development, and direct individual growth. It should therefore come as no surprise that e-skills are conceptualised in line of this kind of thinking in the first NeSPA document. The focus of the document is on employment and e-skilling the workforce. In its first version, the e-skills debate thus largely neglects the fact that ICTs, media in general and social media in particular play an important social, educational and entertaining function in people's day-to-day lives.

The utalitarian industrial focus slowly starts to change in subsequent policy documents. By introducing the concept of e-astuteness in the NeSPA 2012 document more emphasis is placed on the role of e-skills '(…) for everyday socio-economic development and better life opportunities for local benefit in a socio-economic dynamic increasingly impacted by new forms of ICT' [21]. In the NCCF document media literacy itself is introduced—referring to the definition of the European Commission—for the first time as part of the broader concept of e-literacy.

This move towards a stronger focus on media literacy raises several questions. As we already indicated media literacy is mostly informed by broad humanistic and aesthetic goals in relation to citizenship and enjoyment of media. It focussed both on 1) competences in relation to understanding media, and 2) operational skills to handle and create media. There is a strong focus on cognitive skills and critical thinking. In South Africa there is no real precedent to media literacy debate at the policy level. Change will thus have to come from integrating it further into the e-skills debate. It remains to be seen what the outcome will be. A challenge will certainly be that by focusing on media literacy the debates and the implementation will move into even more areas including the media sector. This needs a highly integrated approach, something South Africa is often struggling with [22].

This being said more and more people—at all levels of society—use media, the Internet, and social media as part of their day-to-day lives and are trying to benefit from them in a meaningful way for life, family, community, work and learning, also in a South African context. These people need the skills to critically understand and engage with

content and applications, they need the skills to operate, produce and meaningfully use technology. An important challenge remains how to reform policy in almost all areas and to co-ordinate policy between and over different layers of government in order to integrate 'e-skilling' and 'media literacy skilling' into all areas of government policy.

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