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Defining the Levels of the Audience's Media Competence and Critical Thinking in Sociological Surveys

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Abstract

The author of the article agrees that sociological researches of the levels of media literacy/competence of different groups of citizens are very timely today. However such researches require a significant shift of emphasis: the most important indicator should be the audience's ability to analyze and evaluate media messages and media's role in society (including a media text's analysis); only afterwards such skills as creation and communication of own media production and skills to use media technology should follow. The article attempts to illustrate that otherwise the findings of sociological surveys on media competence will display a common flaw - the over-estimation of user's skills. The author emphasizes that media literacy does not benefit from its reduction as a technical matter.

Keywords: media education; media literacy; media criticism; media competence; analytical thinking; sociological surveys.

Introduction

In 2009 the results of a large scale sociological survey addressing the levels of media literacy development in different states of the European Union were published [Celot, 2009]. According to its findings, the countries of EU were divided into 3 groups:

- EU countries manifesting a heightened level of media competence: Austria, the UK, Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Finland, France, Sweden;
- EU countries with a median level of media education and media literacy of people: Belgium, Hungary, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Estonia;
- EU countries with a limited/basic degree of media competence of people: Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia [Celot, 2009, p.69].

In 2011 a similar European survey was conducted, according to which EU countries were also grouped into 3 clusters:

- EU countries with a high level of media literacy and media education: Austria, the UK, Germany, Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Finland, France, Sweden;
- EU countries with a medium level of media education and media literacy of people: Belgium, Hungary, Ireland, Spain, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic;

- EU countries with a low level of media education and media literacy of people: Bulgaria, Greece, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Estonia [Testing..., 2011, p. 38].

Materials and methods

Comparison of these groups/clusters shows that on the whole there has not been many changes in differentiation of EU countries according to the development levels of media education and media literacy over 3 years: Germany only managed to join the group of the most advanced in media education countries. Cyprus and Slovakia went up from the third group into the second, and Estonia, on the contrary, lowered its position and moved down to the third group.

Thus, Great Britain in both sociological surveys (2009 and 2011) along with France, Netherlands, Austria and some Nordic countries was included into the group of the most advanced in the sphere of media education EU countries. It is interesting that comparing and contrasting the development of media education in Great Britain and Russia, one can draw the conclusions about some similarities in current processes. Undoubtedly, media education in the UK has been developing more actively, national educational curricular include media literacy aspects (as a rule, in subjects like English, Citizenship, Social Studies, Arts, Health) [Bazalgette, 2010]. However, as in modern Russia, on the whole, media education in the UK is still largely dependent on the interest and enthusiasm of individual teachers, with the inevitable result of the inhomogeneous and different level of quality. Moreover, only a small minority of teachers are reasonably aware of media education, during which the cultural experience, critical methods of analysis, creative abilities of pupils are being developed due to the integrated approach embedded in the curriculum [Bazalgette, 2010].

Moreover, the initiative of the organization Ofcom, created in 2003 and aimed at regulating electronic media including telecommunications and Internet, quite differs from the cultural studies approach to media education, implemented by the educational department of the British Film Institute (BFI). Ofcom interprets media literacy very broadly, encouraging media industry to get interested in media education in new ways; it does useful researches ranging from people's access to media technologies to people's trust in media. However as a regulatory body, Ofcom unavoidably relies on the protection of people against the alleged negative effects of media, as well as on the development of media literacy in terms of basic technical skills (for instance, how to block spam, etc.). Taking into consideration that Ofcom belongs to the British Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), it does not have any significant impact on the actual educational policy [Bazalgette, 2010].

Ofcom argues that media literacy "enables people to have the skills, knowledge and understanding to make full use of the opportunities presented by both traditional and new communications services. Media literacy also helps people to manage content and communications, and protect themselves and their families from the potential risks associated with using these services". It defines media literacy as "the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of context" [http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/other/media-literacy/]. This definition has been widely spread in Britain. Since Ofcom primarily acts as an economic regulator, a regulator of the market, rather than a content regulator, in this context, "it would be possible to interpret media literacy as a familiar neo-liberal strategy. In a deregulated, market-driven economy, the argument goes, people need to be responsible for their own behaviour as consumers. Rather than looking to the government to protect them from the negative aspects of market forces, they need to learn to protect themselves. What does it matter if Rupert Murdoch owns the media, if we are all wise and critical consumers? And so media literacy becomes part of a strategy of creating well-behaved, self-regulating “citizen-consumers” (to use Ofcom’s term): it reflects a shift from public regulation to individual self-regulation that we can see in many other areas of modern social policy. Of course, this comes packaged as a democratic move – a move away from protectionism and towards empowerment. But it is also an individualising move: it seems to be based on a view of media literacy as a personal attribute, rather than as a social practice. Indeed, it could be seen to place a burden on individuals that they might not necessarily be disposed or able to cope with. And while it gives people responsibilities, it does not also extend their rights: it positions them as consumers rather than as citizens. It has become the

duty of all good consumers – and, when it comes to children, of all good parents —to regulate their own media uses" [Buckingham, 2009, p. 16-17].

The situation with Ofcom is very similar to the Russian 2013 case with "Roskomnadzor" (http://eng.rkn.gov.ru/), the regulatory body that has no influence of the system of education. In 2010, the Federal Law No. 436-FZ *On Protecting Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development* came into effect and Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media prepared the Framework of Information Security of Children, where in Chapter 20 there is a "Strategy, Aims, Objectives, and Methods of Information Literacy of Children and Teenagers" [Vartanova, Matvejeva, Sobkin, Soldatova, Sharikov et all, 2013]. Firstly, this Framework, likewise the Ofcom activity, is mainly aimed at the protection of the underage audience from harmful media impact. Secondly, it does not affect the real educational process in Russia.

The same line of development is characteristic of Zircon, a Moscow research group specializing in sociological and marketing researches and consulting (http://www.zircon.ru /en/about/). The purpose of its study "Monitoring of media literacy level of the population of Russia" (for The Ministry of communications and mass communications of the RF, 2009-2013) [Zircon, 2013] was to examine primarily the skills and abilities of using the media by the audience. The surveys of 1600 respondents were conducted annually. Findings from a national research project conducted by Zircon reveal the following:

- level of skills to use information sources;
- skills to use media gadgets, Internet, and frequency of use (defined by the territory and age);
- citizens' access to computers and Internet;
- access rate to traditional media vs. new media;
- types of attitudes of the people towards the information flow, its critical perception, and verification;
- people's activities when disclosing false information (grouped by gender, age, level of education, and location);
- types of assessment judgments about media flow [Zircon, 2013].

The large-scale survey studies report that from 2009 to 2013 1600 Russian respondents increased their use of mobile telephone communication dramatically (from 85% in 2009 to 93% in 2013), computers (from 49% in 2009 to 71% in 2013), Internet (from 37% in 2009 to 69% in 2013), the television consumption stayed at about the same level (99%-100%), as well as the use of own book library (53%-54%), MP3 players (27%-26%) and video cameras (22%-26%), in contrast, the number of radio consumers decreased (from 61% in 2009 to 41% in 2013) [Zircon, 2013].

In this sense, Zircon's research proves that in spite of the active growth of contacts with Internet, its television and mobile communication that remain the leading media in Russia. Nearly every day according to Zircon data, 95% of respondents use a mobile telephone, over 80% of people daily watch television, and 72-73% go on the Internet. Whilst 43% listened to the radio in 2013 daily, and still fewer people read press – only 17% in 2013 read newspapers and 10% read magazines [Zircon, 2013]. Do these numbers say anything about the level of media literacy of the people? In our view, no. On the whole, the high level of media consumption alone is not directly linked to the high level of media competence [Potter, 2014; Tyner, 2009, etc.].

Same oblique relationship to media competence is demonstrated by the findings of Zircon about the differentiation of media consumption according to one's location, age, education and gender. Evidently, media consumption is higher in big cities than in smaller towns and villages (although television remains the medium most liked by small towns/village residents and the amount of television exposure in the villages is bigger compared to other media). Young people, especially men, contact with new media more often than elderly people, and so on. Moreover, the frequent contacts with media may actually mean that a considerable part of respondents is only hooked on a particular reality show or tabloid websites.

Media activity, defined by Zircon as "a person's activity of creation of information artifacts and their dissemination (creating and maintaining own webpages, posting texts, photographs, etc., sending information to media (press, radio, TV)", comes closer to the identification of the media competence level [Zircon, 2013]. Zircon's research suggests that 47,3% of population have the low level of media activity, 29,4% have the medium level and 23,3% only have the high one [Zircon, 2013]. However one should not forget that such media activeness alone can not only be positively but also negatively charged, even anti humanistic. So it would be wrong to make a judgment of a person's high level of media competence solely based on his/her media activity index.

It seems that a person's attitude to the media flow can say more about his/her level of media competence. Zircon's research of 2013 shows that only 29% of respondents confessed that it is difficult for them to find their way in the information flow. However 40% are sure that such navigation is no problem for them, and 26% of people add that not only do they easily operate in the media world, but also do not see any problem in a huge amount of available media information [Zircon, 2013]. But can it be true? Psychologists [Rubinstein, 1973; Leontiev, 2002, p. 380; Potter, 2012] have long been aware of the effect of an inflated self-concept of one's skills, knowledge and abilities; but the verification of respondents' real skills in media field was not included into the research by Zircon.

In reference with the key indicators of media competence, the results of Zircon's research related to the audience's skills of critical/analytical thinking are more interesting. Thus, in 2013 58% of respondents admit that while watching TV, listening to radio, reading newspapers and magazines they often have a feeling of being deceived or misled, that is given false, unverified information, being imposed some views on. Whilst the respondents trust Internet as a source of information more (42% in 2013) than TV programs (only 15% in 2013), press (11%) or the radio (6%) [Zircon, 2013]. On the whole, the sum total of the audience that is critical about media texts is 58%. This correlates significantly with the identified by Zircon, data of the previous part of the survey, when 66% of people argue that they easily manage information flow [Zircon, 2013].

It is worth mentioning the answers to three theses that respondents needed to evaluate. Thus, the thesis "media should bear responsibility for low-quality information just as a manufacturer is responsible for the low-quality product" in 2013 was supported by 86% of respondents. The theses "I usually know where (from what source) I can get the information I need" and "media should only tell facts, and it is up to a person to derive their meaning" were approved by 76% of people [Zircon, 2013].

The research findings demonstrate that 74% of respondents in 2013 pointed out that different media repeat the same information, at the same time, 70% of people were sure that information messages from different sources often contradicted each other. Still 52% mentioned that they often compared information with other sources in order to verify it. Moreover, 41% of respondents answered that while evaluating the information they tried to find out whose interests a media agency served. But over one third of respondents (38%) admitted that they are used to believing media messages. On the whole only 19% of respondents revealed a basic level of evaluation skills, while 38% are in the middle, and 43% have highly developed evaluation skills [Zircon, 2013].

The comprehensive index of media literacy was calculated by Zircon by combining three indices: 1) the use of media devices activity index (partial index A), 2) index of self evaluation of skills to operate the information (partial index B), and 3) index of one's media activity (partial index C). Within the framework of a sociological survey, Zircon adopted the following estimation of the level of media literacy/competence: a media literate person is the one who demonstrates a high level of use of media gadgets (A), a high level of self evaluation of skills to operate the information (B), and a high or a medium level of one's media activity (C). 14,5% of all the respondents in the data set of the research conducted by Zircon met these criteria [Zircon, 2013].

Nevertheless, in our opinion, the technique of estimation of the integrated level of media competence of the audience proposed by Zircon, contains a methodological error, because by summing up the results of the sociological survey some key indices of media literacy were not considered. As we have noted above, a high level of media gadgets' use (A) in most cases does not testify for the similarly high level of analytical assessment of the information, of a media text, and a wide range of relations between a person and media sphere. The direct link between the high level of media literacy and a high level of self-evaluation of user's skills (B) looks quite vague, too. A high level of one's media activities, certainly, has to do with the level of media literacy much more than the level of media consumption. However it cannot be considered as the priority one in the ranking of markers of media literacy/media competence.

Broadly, one can agree that "these four components - access, analysis, evaluation and content creation - together constitute a skills-based approach to media literacy. Each component supports the others as part of a non-linear, dynamic learning process: learning to create content helps one to analyze that produced professionally by others; skills in analysis and evaluation open the doors to new uses of the internet, expanding access, and so forth" [Livingstone, 2004, p. 5].

Yet, to my mind, the ranking order (and therefore, the percent of its index volume) of the markers of any sociological research claiming to determine the levels of media literacy, should be the following:

1) level of the analytical evaluation of information, a media text, a wide range of interrelations with media sphere by a respondent;

2) level of one's media activity of a respondent;

3) level of activeness of using media gadgets;

4) level of self-evaluation of a respondent of one's skills to operate the information (although this marker could be omitted due to the possibility of inadequately elevated self-evaluation).

Consequently, if the level of analytical evaluation of media messages had been the main marker in the Zircon survey, then "the comprehensive index of media literacy" of the people would have been different. It would have much more depended on the fact that in 2013 the survey revealed that 38% of respondents had a medium level of evaluation skills when working with mass media, and 43% - the high one.

It should be noted that the level of analytical evaluation of media messages was detected only indirectly by Zircon. The direct evidence of this marker of media literacy/media competence could be received by and by working in focus groups and by respondents' actually completing some analytical assignments, related to media, and later assessed by experts.

Our opinion about the priority of the level of analytical evaluation of information in sociological researches is shared by other media educators, including those who produced the survey in European Union in 2011. The first place in the ranking of media literacy core markers was given to critical understanding of information that is presented by different media sources and skills in critically evaluating the credibility of information, comparison of information across sources with skills in managing privacy and protecting self from unwanted messages, content creation in various media forms following up [Testing..., 2011, p. 6-7]. The critical understanding of media contents can be found at the top of the pyramid of main criteria of media literacy in the EU research in 2009, as well [Celot, 2009, p. 8].

The importance of analytical evaluation of media information is stressed by Pérez Tornero and T. Varis. They insist that the development of analytical thinking in media education can be regarded as the way to use information for analysis and assessment, creation of new concepts, ideas, arguments and hypothesis. Critical thinking makes instruments for understanding the environment and its patterns develop. Taking into consideration that the huge part of information process is realized via media technologies, the development of media literacy should be aimed at stimulating critical thinking [Pérez Tornero, Varis, 2010, p. 79].

The ranking of indexes (according to their significance) in All-Russian sociological research headed by G. Soldatova is constructed more convincingly, compared to Zircon research. Soldatova's research was aimed at distinguishing the levels of digital competence of adolescents and their parents [Soldatova et al., 2013]. We should say that the authors of the research define "digital competence" as the one "based on continuing mastering the competencies (system of corresponding knowledge, skills, motivation and responsibilities), the ability of a person to choose and use information and communication technologies in various spheres of life (work with content, communications, use) confidently, efficiently, critically and safely; and his/her willingness to such activities" [Soldatova, 2013, p. 4].

This research of 2013 used a stratified sample of 1203 teenagers aged 12 to 17 and 1209 parents living in 58 towns from 45 regions of all 8 federal districts of Russia with the population of 100 thousand people and more [Soldatova, 2013, p. 4]. Setting up a questionnaire, the authors distinguished "four spheres of life that to a large extent reveal great opportunities and new risks of Internet space. These are the information (content) environment (creation, search, selection, critical evaluation of the content), communication sphere (creation, development, sustaining relationship, identity, reputation, self representation), consumption sphere (use of Internet as consumers - orders, services, shopping, etc.) and technological sphere (use of computer hardware and software, furthermore, technical safety)" [Soldatova, 2013, p. 16]. We think it is only fair that the analytical and evaluation activity of a person is placed first and foremost.

As one would expect, the sociological research headed by G.Soldatova shows that Russian teens surpass their parents in frequency of Internet use: 89% of teens use it daily vs. 53% of parents (moreover, 17% of parents do not use Internet at all). Yet, five types of teenage users were distinguished: "education oriented" (29%), "communicators" (25%), "web readers" (22%), "gamers" (17%), "universal users" (7%) " [Soldatova, 2013, p. 5-7].

As it's known, "Information Technology" is an obligatory subject in Russian schools, that is why it is this subject that should develop pupils' "digital literacy" in the first place. The large group of parents that took part in the survey by Soldatova also reported that schools should inform their kids about Internet threats (42%), teach safe surfing the Net (38%), and teach to use modern information and communication technologies efficiently (39%). Moreover, one in five parents would like to be informed about Internet security and safety rules on the Internet during school parent meetings" [Soldatova, 2013, p. 11].

However the sociological survey guided by G. Soldatova demonstrates that "teenagers evaluate school teachers' help low: only 40% of schoolchildren are fully or partially satisfied with the knowledge about using Internet that they got at school. While 44% of teenagers think that the school does not provide any useful knowledge in this field. Every tenth teenager believes that he/she knows more about the Internet than a teacher does. One in ten teens gets the information about safe Internet use at school" [Soldatova, 2013, p. 10]. Therefore, based on the findings of this research it can be concluded that IT school lessons achieve their objectives poorly and ineffectively.

On the whole, Soldatova's research shows that on average the level of digital literacy of Russian teenagers as well as their parents is about one third of the possible rate (31% by parents, and 34% by teens). The questions that were answered negatively both by parents and children (i.e. that they don't know how to do something, can't do this, don't want to learn it, don't lay emphasis on it, etc.) twice more outnumber the positive answers (meaning that they feel competent in doing something) [Soldatova, 2013, p. 6].

Nevertheless, if compared to the media literacy survey done by Zircon in the same year of 2013, there the number of media literate respondents was half – 14,5% [Zircon, 2013]. This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that firstly, the researchers had different criteria of media literacy and digital competence, and secondly, half of Soldatova's respondents were teenagers who in many ways surpass adults in media use skills.

Conclusions

Summing up, determining the media literacy/media competence levels of various groups of people is an important and well-timed task, however, it is not an easy task. It requires a significant shift of emphasis: the indices of the audiences' skills to analyze and evaluate media messages and their role in society should come first, and only then such skills as creation and communication of self media production, and skills to use media gadgets should follow. Otherwise the description of the research findings on the topic of media competence will reveal a common drawback – the predominance of the importance of user's skills.

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УДК 316

Уровни медиакомпетентности аудитории в зеркале социологических опросов

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Аннотация. Автор статьи считает, что социологические исследования уровней медиаграмотности / медиакомпетентности различных групп граждан весьма актуальны. Однако такие исследования требуют значительного смещения акцентов: самыми важными показателями должны быть умения аудитории анализировать и оценивать медийные сообщения и роль медиа в обществе; только после этого могут следовать показатели медиакомпетентности, связанные с умениями создания и распространения собственных медиатекстов, с практическим использованием медиатехники. В противном случае результаты социологических опросов, выявляющих уровень медиакомпетентности, будут страдать общим недостатком – доминированием компетенций, связанных с (медиа)пользовательскими навыками.

Ключевые слова: образование медиа; медиаобразование; медиаграмотность; медиакритика; медиакомпетентность; аналитическое мышление; социологические опросы.