MSC 2020
International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY. COMMUNICATION»

MEDIA EDUCATION IN THE ERA OF FAKE NEWS

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Abstract

The following study has as its main research object media literacy and media education, which refers to a wide range of social skills required for a person to live in the media dominated environment. This work studies the concept of media education, its role and place in modern Russian Federation and various aspects of its introduction in the Russian educational system. Digital technologies and the inevitably following global transformations present new requirements for the basic skills that a modern person needs for successful socialization. One of these skills is media education: from a highly specialized field that is used exclusively in a limited circle of professions, it becomes relevant and in demand for every person who is in varying degrees in contact with media information. At the same time, media education is becoming more and more necessary not only in the professional and pedagogical environment, but also in wide public life. There is a growing demand to increase the inclusiveness of media education and the evolvement of wider social groups in the process of disseminating media knowledge, including the incorporation of media education in the system of compulsory school and even preschool education. With the analytic approach, the study aims to prove the necessity of incorporating media literacy as a part of national educational plan, given its exceptional role in the protection of the population from fake news and other methods of informational manipulation.

Keywords: Fake news, media education, media literacy

1. Introduction

The global expansion of the media space is fundamentally transforming both society as a whole and the life of each individual up to the characteristics of the personal thought process. Media influence modifies the channels for obtaining information and the features of its perception and the formulation of value judgments; it plays an increasing role in the formation of points of view, opinions and preferences, introduces patterns of behavior and makes an important contribution to the development and formation of personality.

In the context of the spread of the influence of both traditional and new media on all spheres of human life, the range of skills necessary for a person to live in these new realities is rapidly expanding. Researchers are talking about a phased transition from traditional literacy (the ability to write and read) to audiovisual, and now media literacy, which is characterized by the ability to work with traditional and new media.

The ever-increasing influence of the media has both positive and negative consequences for the individual, society and the state. On the one hand, the media space expands human capabilities by providing him with instant access to relevant information, as well as offering pluralism of points of view and the possibility of independent choice of message sources. A modern person has the ability to independently compare and analyze information, relying on a wide range of media adhering to different points of view.

On the other hand, a dense and unstructured information stream greatly complicates the process of verifying the information received, which is associated both with the fast pace of life of the audience and the reluctance to spend time checking the source, and with the need for journalists to quickly publish news after they are received by the editor. In turn, in the modern world, fake news is one of the main information threats to state security, which is enshrined at the highest level in the Russian Federation Information Security Doctrine (The doctrine of information security of the Russian Federation, 2016).

In this context, there is no doubt about the assertion that the problem of increasing the level of media literacy of the population is more acute than ever.

2. Problem Statement

Media literacy skills are gradually becoming a necessary basic knowledge and even a mandatory criterion for competence and full socialization of a person in modern society. However, the weakening of the critical thinking of the population, coupled with the decline in journalistic accuracy, simplifies the spread of propaganda, misinformation and fake news and strengthens their destructive influence. The problem is becoming more in more acute in Russia, where media education still does not form a part of the national educational strategy. Considering the informational security of Russian Federation, this work offers reasons to view media literacy as a compulsory skill in the modern world.

3.   Research Questions

This article is based on current literature about media education, media literacy and Federal laws of Russian Federation. Thus, the research question is: "Why do media education and literacy of citizens have strategic importance for strengthening state security and the effective functioning of civil society?"

4.   Purpose of the Study

The modern Russian education system includes a number of professions and disciplines in which media literacy is given special attention. While the importance of media education and the need for its introduction into the educational complex is not denied in Russian educational circles, there are a number of problems and obstacles that must be overcome to form a national media education policy. Current literature generated a lot of controversy about media education. The main purpose of this article is to explain the importance of media education in the era of fake news and the dangers of information attacks in Russian Federation.

5.   Research Methods

In the process of research, the following methods were used: logic analysis, inductive and deductive methods, analysis of scientific literature and other research methods. Works of Russian, European and American scientists lighting the problems of traditional media education and literacy, served as theoretical background for the data analysis in this study. Combined methodological approach allowed the author to structure the process of study and to identify its basic stages.

6.   Findings

6.1.   The current state of media education in the Russian educational system

According to. Ferres and Pizzitelli, the media competence of citizens of any state depends on three fundamental institutions: higher education (in theoretical and practical aspects), compulsory education and specialists working in the field of media communications (as cited in Zhizhina, 2016).

Regarding the situation in the Russian Federation, today the demand for media education, which includes such basic components as the ability to find, analyze, evaluate and independently create information messages, is recognized in a number of professions, such as journalism, PR and marketing, pedagogy and political science. Elements of media education are often included in the compulsory vocational training program for these specialties and are taught both as separate courses and in an integrated form within the framework of related scientific disciplines. Such areas of media education are considered generally accepted as the training of future specialists in the field of traditional and new media (journalists, editors, and reporters), teachers in higher educational institutions and schools, specialists in international relations and political analytics, PR-specialists, as well as in the process of increasing their qualifications.

The educational system of Russian schools still does not include media literacy lessons either as compulsory disciplines or as an option of elective classes (with rare exceptions). Moreover, the practice of

introducing similar programs into the school educational system has long been applied in the world. Mandatory media literacy standards have been introduced in English-speaking countries. For example, the US educational institutions, in accordance with media education standards approved by the Department of Education, offer integrated methods of media education in various school disciplines; explanatory work is being carried out on key concepts of media literacy. UK students are offered an elective course in media education, and the compulsory program includes requirements for passing media texts as part of reading instruction (Media education: school at school, 2020).

The situation in Russia is such that the media education system is extremely fragmented and is not guided by state policy, but by a private commercial initiative, or by an innovative educational experiment of higher educational institutions. Thus, the Higher School of Economics offers a media literacy course as part of a journalism training program (Media literacy, 2020); The Slavic Writing Center "Slovo" organized a paid course "Media Literacy and Fact Checking" in one of the Moscow educational centers (The course "Media literacy and fact checking: how to distinguish truth from fake", 2020). Media education also begins to be taught in the regions: for example, the Union of Journalists of the Republic of Tatarstan offers a continuing education course "Media Strategies and Media Literacy of Muslim Religious Organizations. Islamic discourse in modern media" for teaching modern methods of interaction of representatives of Islamic organizations with the media (Union of Journalists of the Republic of Tatarstan, 2018).

Digital transformation is considered as an inevitable process for higher education systems like all socio-economic institutions and systems (Kuzu, 2020). The fact that new generations get access to the Internet earlier and earlier (among children 5-7 years old, 89 % are Internet users, and by 11 years old this indicator rises to 97 %) (Loseva, 2019), and, accordingly, to media information - as a rule, in full and without any moderation – indicates the need for the planned formation of media literacy already at the initial stages of education. Moreover, media literacy should be considered as an inalienable right of all citizens of the Russian Federation, and not just the young generation: the need for competent work with the media is equally important regardless of age and sociocultural affiliation. It is shown that digital devices are an integral part of the identity of a modern person, which leads to the need to develop media literacy among students using media education (Shutaleva et al., 2019).

In summary, media education, although not a new concept in the Russian educational space, currently covers a limited percentage of the population. Getting media education is primarily associated with the requirements of the profession (journalism, PR and communication), as well as with personal initiative and self-education. This discipline is taught mainly in higher educational institutions and in continuing education courses. However, modern realities with a dominant media influence form a clear request for the formation of a national educational politics related to media literacy, and require the involvement of broad social classes in the process of media education. First, this concerns the modernization of the school program taking into account similar foreign experience.

6.2. Actual aspects of the introduction of media literacy in the educational system of Russia

Nowadays, there is a growing recognition of the role of media in life and educational practice of the person, determined by the development of media education and media educational activities. This requires

that modern teachers must possess a media culture, to work effectively in a new mediaenvironment, to form media competence and media literacy among students (Boronenko et al., 2018).

In order to determine the areas of public life and the groups of people who are most in need of media literacy, let us consider in more detail the elements that make up this concept. The concept of "media literacy" includes two key categories of skills: functional and critical. Functional skills are primarily associated with the technical ability to use the interface, tools and capabilities of digital media, the ability to access and find the necessary information, the ability to understand (literally) information, systematize media messages and new media, as well as independently generate media content. In turn, critical skills are more extensive and are associated with analytical and evaluative thinking, as well as conscious self-moderation of the produced content (Chen et al., 2011*).*

The critical skills that a media-educated person in the modern world should possess are the following:

1. The skill of critical thinking, allowing to develop independent judgments about media content; critical attitude to the consumed content and conscious responsibility for the consequences of choosing one or another content.

2. Understanding the process of mass communication: features and principles of the media, their structure and the process of preparing and publishing content. This includes knowledge of the ethical component of the media, as well as the trends and characteristics of modern journalism.

3. Understanding the impact of the media on people and society; the implementation of conscious control and monitoring of the process of changes that entails the increasing role of the media.

4. Possession of a strategy for analysis and discussion of media messages, thoughtful and meaningful perception of multimedia messages, the use of critical tools for interpreting media messages.

5. The ability to apply a versatile and integrated approach to media content, to extract diverse information from it.

6. The ability to create your own media messages and independently moderate the published information, which is especially true in the era of new media and the growing popularity of various online sites. This skill includes understanding the consequences of publishing content (reputational, legal), as well as responsibility for published content, including ethical and judicial (Ciurel, 2016).

The criteria for achieving digital literacy are, on the one hand, the criteria for media literacy (critical thinking, knowledge of semio-systems, the ability to work with them). On the other hand - the skills to find the necessary information and tools to work with it, the ability to quickly manage these tools, the ability to communicate with other users, produce information in its various forms and formats (Sharikov, 2016). Comparing the level of media education among older and younger age groups, modern schoolchildren show higher orientation abilities in the media space than their parents, due to their earlier immersion in the media environment and an intuitive understanding of the functionality of new media. On the other hand, the younger generation shows to be weaker in that aspect that affects the ability to critical thinking and the ability to correctly evaluate and interpret media content. This also manifests itself in their relatively weak ability to correctly correlate the value and reliability of one or another information received from the media, as well as the ability to predict and recognize the risks associated with online activity (publishing posts on social networks, participating in online forums, etc.) (Livingstone, 2016). Thus, their functional skills far

exceed critical ones, which creates a situation that is dangerous from the point of view of information security.

It is important to understand that one of the most important areas of media education is the protection of younger generations from unwanted and harmful information. Following the Federal Law of the Russian Federation of December 29, 2010 № 436 "On the protection of children from information harmful to their health and development" (The Federal Law, 2010), providing children with the necessary knowledge in the media should become a mandatory part of the Russian educational system. However, the problem is that in modern realities there is an acute shortage of professional personnel in this area. Among teachers, an extremely small percentage has a sufficient level of knowledge in the field of media education in order to be able to teach students these skills.

According to one of the latest opinion polls, 32% of Russian teachers admitted that they lacked the professional qualifications to use media technologies in the educational process, and another 21% said they were uncomfortable with the fact that their students are more competent than they are in the issue of new media. This is largely due to the age composition of teachers in Russian schools: according to 2019, 23% of the teaching staff crossed the pension line and another 19% are close to it. At the same time, young teachers (under 29 years of age) in the Russian Federation are less than 6% (The Ministry of Education told how many teachers in Russia have retirement age, 2019). Obviously, in such a situation, the introduction of media education in the school curriculum is a rather difficult task, requiring an integrated and strategic approach. The introduction of media literacy lessons should be accompanied by planned work to improve the qualifications of the teaching staff and the training of new specialists in this field.

To summarize, the young and older generation of Russian citizens need different aspects of media education: while schoolchildren and students primarily need the development of critical skills, the adult (and especially the elderly) generation lacks functional skills for interacting with the media. It follows that the modernization of the educational system should be carried out comprehensively and taking into account the characteristics of age groups, with particular attention to be paid to the training of teachers.

6.3. Media education as a tool to protect the state and population in the era of fake news

Today, the perception of media information is considered as a semantic task and requires special training: media literacy is possible when the subject makes meaningful and creative use of material related to media images, not only in their functional and contextual meaning, but also within their own worldview (Simbirtseva, 2018).

The problem of spreading fake news, which has long been on the national agenda, poses a real threat to state security. Inaccurate information that, thanks to new communication channels, is transmitted over great distances and distributed among a large number of people in a matter of minutes, can not only distort the people's perceptions of reality, but also lead to socially dangerous consequences, such as panic and riots. It is known that a number of states, organizations and individual attackers resort to fake news to destabilize public order and influence public opinion. Information attacks and psychological manipulations have become a real force capable of delivering a significant blow to the country, primarily, its moral component.

Journalists begin to perceive social networks as sources of information, and they start to interpret what is published in them as reliable data or public statements (Belenko & Zyryanov, 2018). This problem

was actualized in the context of the fight against coronavirus: it is known that massive «stuffing» and false messages accompanied the epidemic. A large number of inaccurate information messages were recorded that provoked panic among the population, as well as inaccurate information regarding methods of prevention and methods of treating coronavirus. Moreover artificial intelligence in journalism is already a mass phenomenon, actively accepted by the armed media of different countries (Chertovskikh & Chertovskikh, 2019).

One of the important directions of the state policy of the Russian Federation in recent years has been strengthening information security, resolving Internet security issues and building a system of protection against cyber-attacks (The fight against fake news proposed to bring to the international level, 2019). The systematic fight against fake news was enshrined in the legislative system of the Russian Federation in 2019: according to the new law, the dissemination of knowingly false information in the media and the Internet provides for administrative liability with a maximum fine of one million rubles (The Federal Law, 2019). At the same time, according to officials, this document is only the first step to build a system of measures aimed at protecting Russian citizens from intentional provocations and intentional manipulation of public opinion. Realization of the national interests of the Russian Federation in the information space is directed at creating a secure information space where one can find authentic information, however, there are no finalized theses on protecting this authentic information from fake information (Sukhodolov & Bychkova, 2017).

In the framework of this policy, the inclusion of media education in the national educational agenda is a logical and consistent step in protecting the population from false news. The presence of a sufficient level of media literacy promotes not only a critical understanding of the information received, but also prevents the uncontrolled dissemination of false information: in most cases, fake news is not disseminated by attackers, but by people who panicked or believed in some fictitious shocking fact. At the same time, it is necessary to state the fact that at the moment the Russian population is not sufficiently protected from information attacks: according to the results of a public opinion poll, every second resident of the Russian Federation is not able to distinguish truthful news from fake ones. Moreover, more than 60% of respondents were sure that they never came across fake messages, which indicates not only a lack of critical thinking in relation to media information, but also an inadequate assessment of their own level of media literacy.

In order to prevent the negative impact of false information on Russian society, it is proposed the formation and development of the following skills in the context of media literacy:

- the ability to independently analyze and verify the information received for reliability, as well as the formation of habits and needs for checking the reliability of the information message;
- a critical approach to evaluating media information, which implies a lack of automatic consent with the author and the understanding that the information received may be biased, erroneous, or knowingly false;
- ability to find hidden subtext, political, propaganda or other meaning, as well as determine the purpose of publication of a particular information message;
- a versatile approach to addressing the problem, awareness of the presence of different points of view and arguments on a particular issue.

It is necessary to emphasize again the importance of media education among a young audience, which is the most vulnerable in terms of the impact of fake news. The impulsiveness and lack of critical thinking inherent in the younger generation make this segment of the population most vulnerable to false information and, therefore, most in need of basic media literacy.

Thus, the incorporation of media education into the Russian general education program is strategically important for state security. Protection from psychological manipulation by the method of increasing media literacy provides an increase in the level of protection against media attacks and is an effective way to strengthen the information security of the Russian Federation, which corresponds to the current political agenda. Investing in the media literacy of the population, especially the younger generation, should be a priority for the state.

7.   Conclusion

The inclusiveness of media education, that is, the inclusion of broad social strata in the process of media education, does not imply its uniformity: it is important to take into account the specifics of each category and modify the educational program, taking into account their strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, for the young classes of society, the development of the critical side of media literacy is a priority, that is, the ability to objectively evaluate the information received, check it for reliability and correctly evaluate the consequences of their own Internet activity. For older groups, functional media literacy comes first, in other words, the ability to use the functionality and interface of modern gadgets, apply search systems and methods of automating information processing.

As for the Russian education system, a gradual process of integrating media education into the program of higher education institutions and continuing education programs is observed within its framework. At the same time, these innovations come haphazardly; at the state level, a clear system or national curriculum in this area has not yet been developed. Media education is a relatively new professional idea; therefore media educators still cannot come to a common opinion on the goals and objectives in the field of media education. There is an acute shortage of qualified and professional personnel.

The most obvious gap in terms of media education is observed in the school program. Although its individual elements are gradually being integrated into educational programs, they focus more on data processing (systematization, compilation of materials), rather than on the development of critical thinking, which is of primary importance for the younger generation.

In the era of fake news and the dangers of information attacks, media literacy is of strategic importance to the Russian Federation. The development of the ability of the population to analyze and evaluate information sources, apply a critical attitude to any information material and form value judgments in relation to certain media materials is becoming a priority in strengthening information security. In the modern world, the formation of the ability to constructively evaluate and apply the knowledge gained from the media is a necessary protection of citizens from domestic and international information wars.

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