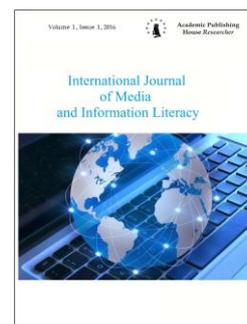


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Current Trends in Media and Information Literacy in Research and Scientific Publications of the early 21st century

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Abstract

This review article presents the current trends in media and information literacy in scientific publications of the early 21st century based on the content analysis of Russian and foreign researches:

- major function of media and information literacy is to provide access to information and knowledge and promote free, independent and pluralistic mediated social environments (UNESCO);
- media literacy as a vital, survival skill for an individual;
- minimizing online risks and expanding online opportunities in media literacy education;
- information or digital literacy in the educational and professional contexts;
- focus on studying human behaviour in social computer-mediated interactions and challenges of global cross-cultural communication;
- promoting people's media and information literacy for active social change;
- media literacy and digital literacy as critical instruments against various online risks and manipulations;
- media and information literacy integrated into the school curriculum and university syllabus;
- media literacy education aimed at students' applying their critical thinking skills to media messages and creating media texts;
- focus on media language and representation analysis in media and film studies;
- national peculiarities of promoting media and information literacy in different countries;
- international media literacy based on the effective strategies used in different cultures.

Besides, the authors emphasize the following problem zones in media literacy education for further research and development: training and education programs for media studies for all levels of education; teacher training courses in media education; increasing media awareness of all stakeholders and organizations in the social sphere; international collaboration and research in media education and a wide exchange of research findings; practical application of media literacy education for various social groups.

Keywords: media and information literacy, media message, media text, media culture, mediation, critical thinking skills, media literacy education, media studies.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary understanding of media and information literacy in the global context is based on the presupposition that its basic and major function is to provide access to information and knowledge and promote free, independent and pluralistic mediated social environments: “Media and information literacy recognizes the primary role of information and media in our everyday lives. It lies at the core of freedom of expression and information – since it empowers citizens to understand the functions of media and other information providers, to critically evaluate their content, and to make informed decisions as users and producer of information and media content” (UNESCO, 2020).

Traditionally, media literacy and information literacy have been treated as separate fields of research, but at the present stage, sometimes for convenience of reference, they tend to be combined into a broad field with some common objectives and competences that are vital for people’s everyday life, work or study. Thus, the range of challenges emerging within this field is rather wide and concerns our everyday access to information, our ability to critically assess, productively contribute and use information both in the online and offline communication types. This set of issues is accompanied by a much wider range of relevant problems such as ethical, sociocultural, political, commercial, intercultural, moral, interethnic, interreligious and other essential aspects surrounding the access and use of information in modern society.

On the other hand, some leading media experts, though identifying points of convergence between media literacy and information literacy, emphasise the idea that they actually remain distinct areas of study: “UNESCO, the education wing of the United Nations, has advocated combining Information Literacy with another discipline: Media Literacy. The most obvious point of convergence between these two disciplines is the application of critical thinking skills to their particular areas of focus. But although these disciplines are clearly related and, in some instances, overlap, they remain distinct areas of study: Information Literacy applies critical thinking skills to the assessment of Information. Media Literacy is a critical thinking skill that is applied to the source of most of our information – the channels of mass communication” (Silverblatt, 2016: 55). Such approach, in our opinion, is certainly scientifically justified and logically proven.

In light of this, we would like to dwell upon some current trends in promoting media literacy and information literacy as separate research lines in scientific publications of the early 21st century.

2. Materials and methods

Materials of our research are academic books and articles on media and information literacy. Methodology is based on theoretical framework on the relationship, interdependence and integrity of the phenomena of reality, the unity of the historical and the logical aspects in cognition. The research is based on the content analysis and comparative approaches. The following methods are used: data collection (monographs, articles, reports) related to the theme under study, analysis of academic literature, theoretical analysis and synthesis; generalization and classification.

3. Discussion and results

In recent years, UNESCO (Grizzle, 2018; Perez Tornero, Varis, 2010; UNESCO, 2011; 2013; 2015; 2020) has made serious efforts to bring together scientists, often working separately earlier in the fields of information literacy and media education. *Nordicom* is moving in the same direction (Carlsson et al., 2008; Carlsson, 2019; Feilitzen, Carlsson, 2004). The problems of similarities and differences and of combining the tasks of media and information literacy in the 21st century have become increasingly important in the research of American scientists (De Abreau et al., 2017; Hobbs, 2010; 2016; Hobbs, Jensen, 2009; Jolls, Wilson, 2014; Kubey, 2001; Mihailidis, 2014; Potter, 2016; Rosenbaum et al., 2008; Share, 2009; Silverblatt, 2014).

Research by European scientists is also increasingly addressing similar issues (Bordac, 2014; Buckingham, 2014; Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; Frau-Meigs, Torrent, 2009; Gálik, 2019; 2020; Gálik, Gáliková Tolnaiová, 2020; Kačínová, 2018; Livingstone, 2018; Petranová et al., 2017; Ranieri, 2016; Reineck, Lublinski, 2015; Šupšáková, 2016).

Several European and Asian countries have active media and information literacy promotion programs supported by *Deutsche Welle* (Braesel, Karg, 2018).

Speaking of media literacy, it has become a vital skill for an individual to survive in modern digital environment: “media literacy education is the key to understanding the modern information society: today, a person is simply obliged to be media-competent, otherwise he or she will not only become an easy victim of numerous media manipulations, but will not be able to fully enter the differentiated world of media culture” (Tselykh, Fedorov, 2020: 104). Here, media literacy is seen as a protection tool against various kinds of media risks, thus lessening the harm which a person can suffer in the global media environment. An additional point to emphasize is that media literacy opens up great prospects for a person to get acquainted with media culture and media creation, particularly through media literacy education. In other words, media literacy education fulfils at least two major functions – protection through minimizing the media harm and development through maximizing sociocultural media opportunities for media users.

The problem of minimizing online risks and expanding online opportunities is widely recognized nowadays, especially in the context of educating children and adolescents. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the well-known European project called “EU Kids Online 2020” aimed at fostering media and information literacy of the younger generation. In particular, this report analyzes such issues as online aggression and cyberbullying, harmful digital content, sexting, data misuse, sharenting, digital ecology, online opportunities and others. As a result, the authors offer a holistic approach to children’s well-being in a digital world – the goal that, unfortunately, still remains hardly achievable: “It is still the case that most researchers and policy-makers concentrate either on the opportunities of a digital world – concerned with education or civic participation or creative expression, for example – or on the risks of harm to children – concerned with e-safety, parental mediation or internet regulation. Achieving a holistic approach – whether at the level of a country or culture, or for an individual child – remains difficult. Those excited by digital opportunities still tend to neglect or postpone thinking about the ways in which increasing opportunities tend to go hand in hand with increasing the risks of the digital world for children. Those who prioritise child protection and safety may struggle to realise that their interventions could also serve to limit children’s civil rights and freedoms” (Smahel, et al., 2020: 135).

Besides, the report actualizes another challenge of current media literacy education – teachers’ and parental mediation, or social mediation in the broad meaning. Its educational target is enabling children’s positive use of the Internet: “Enabling mediation is associated with increased online opportunities but also risks. This strategy incorporates safety efforts, responds to child agency, and is employed when the parent or child is relatively digitally skilled, so may not support harm. Restrictive mediation is associated with fewer online risks but at the cost of opportunities, reflecting policy advice that regards media use as primarily problematic. It is favored when parent or child digital skills are lower, potentially keeping vulnerable children safe yet undermining their digital inclusion” (Livingstone et al., 2017: 82).

That is why, it is no coincidence that information or digital literacy is usually analysed in the educational and professional contexts, as part of research work (Bulger, Davison, 2018; Tselykh, 2019), part of traditional skills such as reading competence (Čábyová et al., 2020), part of general learning skills (Ko-Wai Tang, 2018), or part of basic and professional competencies (Lebid, Shevchenko, 2020). In this meaning a media-competent student or employee has better chances for getting a prosperous job, career promotion or professional growth than a media-illiterate person. On the one hand, media literacy is based on the person’s ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create media texts of various forms and genres. And, on the other hand, it enables a person to comprehend the role of media and communication in society: “Media literacy is one of the key competencies nowadays. The rapid development of information and communications technology has brought about a number of issues regarding the way people become aware of, perceive, and reconceptualize information, which very often takes on the form of a manifestly manipulative narrative that can produce misleading discourses. When people misunderstand or have a distorted idea of reality and are unable to assess objectively what is going on in society and certain forces are artificially creating conflict and stressful situations, this may give rise to the threat of reality getting dehumanized. Accordingly, in today’s climate of information overload, there appears to be a need to cultivate and develop the cognitive skills of analytical, critical, and systems thinking and foster the skills of media hygiene” (Lebid, Shevchenko, 2020: 61). To crown it all, it gives a citizen a certain feeling of freedom in a democratic society through participation in media creation where media users can express themselves and contribute to national or global media production.

Since media literacy is inevitably connected to social, political and cultural life in the modern media environment, a great number of present-day scholars and researchers focus on studying human behaviour in social computer-mediated interactions and challenges of global cross-cultural communication (Buckingham, 2014; Chelysheva, Mikhaleva, 2019, 2020; Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; Frau-Meigs, Torrent, 2009; Gálik, 2019; 2020; Kačínová, 2018; Kazakov, 2017; Khuhro, Shoukat, 2020; Livingstone, 2018; Mikhaleva, 2016; Petranová et al., 2017; Ranieri, 2016; Reineck, Lublinski, 2015).

Moreover, there is an increasing tendency to promote media and information literacy for social change: “Life story is a really useful skill in the design of programs to training the use of technology and media literacy, which is based on psycho-educational settings that encourage young people to use it in a positive way, and among other aspects, there is the personal contribution of those who will want to develop their interactive projects, yet as an opportunity to make the world a better place” (Camarero, Varona, 2016: 10). A similar experience is described by S. Goodman, the founding director of the educational video centre in New York. For 35 years now, he has been holding documentary seminars on social justice for students from low-income communities and for teachers. S. Goodman writes a lot about youth media, critical literacy, civic activism and educational reform in his publications (Goodman, 2018).

Media literacy education of citizens in the social context is aimed at protecting people from negative media effects and at creating a tolerant mood in society: “Working with media texts of different types and genres contributes to the development of students’ analytical skills in dealing with media information, activates creative skills of all the participants, improves their argumentation skills. Moreover, it improves the ability of the audience to take collective decisions by analysing the problem from different points of view which, no doubt, acts as an important means of promoting interethnic tolerance of the student audience” (Chelysheva, Mikhaleva, 2019: 388). Another, no less important trend is practical media work which in the present format stands for active participation and media production by citizens, especially young people. The content of such videos or films is based on real stories of people who suffered from social injustice, fought against discrimination, defended their rights, helped other people in trouble, gained success in professional life, etc.

Very often media and digital literacy are considered to be a critical instrument against various present-day online risks and manipulations (Cortoni, 2017; Karuchit, 2016; Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2020). In order to resist the negative media effects, it is necessary to develop people’s media literacy and digital competence. But it “is highly complex to analyze and apply as a sociocultural intervention in a socialization setting, for a number of reasons: first of all, this concept is still too generic, and has to be broken down into dimensions and subdimensions, so as to make it observable and analyzable in terms of type and intensity of manifestation; secondly, indicators observable in the behaviours of individuals within specific contexts must certainly be identified; and lastly, digital competence proficiency levels capable of categorizing the type of digital behaviour on an assessment scale must be constructed” (Cortoni, 2017: 69). And this is not only the question of digital access, risks and opportunities, but it seems to be a bigger challenge concerning the media user’s digital culture and ecology that should be developed from an early age.

And this may be one of the reasons why media and information literacy is increasingly integrated into the school curriculum and university syllabus (Braesel, Karg, 2018; Cheung, Chau, 2017; De Abreau et al., 2017; Frau-Meigs, Torrent, 2009; Grizzle, 2018; Hattani, 2016; Hobbs, 2010; Hobbs, Jensen, 2009; Khlyzova, 2019; Kubey, 2001; Livingstone, 2018; Mikhaleva, 2019; Petranová et al., 2017; Potter, 2016; Share, 2009; Silverblatt, 2014; Šupšáková, 2016; UNESCO, 2011; 2013). It goes without saying, that this trend is positive in itself, but some leading media experts urgently warn us against the substitution of concepts and approaches that used to occur in the past decades when authentic media literacy education was replaced by mere computer or information studies in schools and universities: “media education itself needs to adopt a stronger and more critical stance towards the celebration of technology in education, and the kind of market-driven techno-fetishism that is mistakenly seen by some as the cutting edge of educational change. There is a risk here that media education might be seen as just another way of importing computer technology into schools – or indeed as a sexy alternative to the wasteland of spreadsheets, file management and instrumental training that constitutes most “information technology” courses in schools. There is an opportunity here, but it should not involve abandoning

the traditional critical imperatives of media education – which are about much more than practical skills, or the sentimental appeal to “creativity” (Buckingham, 2015: 12-13). Nowadays this danger is becoming more and more impending in this country and abroad.

Hence media literacy education should be associated with students’ applying their critical thinking skills to media messages and creating their own media texts: “Media education provides the knowledge and skills necessary for students to use media products like weblogs for personal reflection and critical thinking which they share with others. Blogs can thus provide students with challenging alternatives to the traditional teaching and learning environment. They create excellent opportunities for students to discuss, reflect, analyse and evaluate different perspectives and construct their own meanings through the feedback of their peers in the blog. Feedback can even be extended to participants in other schools or learning institution and even on a globalized level” (Wright et al., 2015: 70).

Media studies and media practice are based on contemporary theoretical and methodological researches that analyse and suggest various approaches, principles, strategies and methods applied in cotemporaneous media literacy education (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2017; Silverblatt, 2016). In this regard, it would be reasonable to refer to the theoretical background of modern understanding of information literacy, its principles and characteristics: “Information literacy focuses on the following Lines of Inquiry:

1. Identifying patterns of data in ways that previously have been impossible to detect.
2. Information literacy examines the association between a body of information and its intended audience(s).
3. Information literacy can furnish insight into the function of information.
4. Historical context.
5. Cultural context.
6. Information literacy provides ways to ascertain the legitimacy of information.
7. Understanding the capacity of a medium to convey particular kinds of information” (Silverblatt, 2016: 55-67).

The description of current approaches to promoting information and media literacy would be incomplete and one-sided without mentioning critical media and film studies that found reflection in some researches devoted to film critics (Fedorov, 2016, 2017; Kayal, Seena, 2019; Naeem et al., 2020; Nedelcheva, 2018; Salny, 2019; Szíjártó, 2017). The issues of critical film comprehension and film analysis practice are increasingly discussed in the context of changing interpretation strategies of both school and university students: “Since it is palpable that the language use of blogs affect movie analysis of the so called serious news, and also film analysis practice of secondary and university students, it is worth dealing with the topic in media-language and art pedagogical context as on the one hand we are witnesses of the transformation of the language of film critics, on the other hand schools have to adapt pre-knowledge and the interpretation strategies of students formed by blogs. In my opinion, blogs influence the audience but they have not renewed the language about motion picture and have not increased the standard of film comprehension of the recipients” (Szíjártó, 2017: 103).

Focus on media language and media representation analysis is still dominant in media and film studies, and it mainly concerns present-day social contradictions and ills (i.e. gender stereotyping, racial discrimination, intolerance, culture or religion conflicts, consumerism, etc.): “Gender inequalities are the social embarrassment and it has its profound derivation in our social organization. In the Golden Era of technology advancement, people come in contact with media constantly throughout their daily lives. Being continuously bombarded with messages, the media has a powerful and tremendous influence on their thought processes as individuals and as a worldwide society. Gender stereotyping always has and still exists in our society. However, this issue is getting evidently solemn as gender stereotyping has now reached the young masses, which are much more habituated to the effortless, apparently easy influence of the mass media in today’s society; media is a foremost persuader in shaping stereotypes and attitudes” (Kayal, Seena, 2019: 6).

Our analysis of scientific publications of the early 21st century dedicated to media literacy education has shown that a significant number of articles and reviews focus on researching national peculiarities of promoting media and information literacy in different countries (Buckingham, 2014; Chelysheva, 2019; Chelysheva, Mikhaleva, 2017; Cheung, Wu, 2018; De Abreau et al., 2017; Frau-Meigs et al., 2017; Frau-Meigs, Torrent, 2009; Hobbs, 2010; 2016;

Hobbs, Jensen, 2009; Kačínová, 2018; Kubey, 2001; Levitskaya, Seliverstova, 2020; Livingstone, 2018; Mihailidis, 2014; Petranová et al., 2017; Petranova, Vrabc, 2016; Potter, 2016; Ranieri, 2016; Reineck, Lublinski, 2015; Rosenbaum et al., 2008; Share, 2009; Silverblatt, 2014; Wilson, 2014). For instance, in Russia the following modern trends in media and information literacy can be identified: “Contemporaneous researches focus on studying media culture, various media effects and forms of media addiction, Internet safety and digital competences. Media culture as a vast layer of human culture is also in the focus of media researches. The solution to these problems depends both on teaching the younger generation basic computer skills for digital safety and on elaborating strategies for developing children’s media competence, spiritual and moral values, critical thinking and analytical skills, social skills in the world of media culture” (Chelysheva, Mikhaleva, 2017: 3).

The issues of international media literacy actually concern cultures rather than merely certain countries, since representatives of different cultures tend to construct, comprehend, interpret and evaluate media tests differently. That is why it is necessary to take into consideration the following lines of inquiry to be applied to promoting media literacy across cultures:

- “Applying a country’s preferred media literacy principles, concepts, and approaches to interpret media presentations produced in that country.

- Considering other media literacy approaches that might offer a fresh perspective into that country’s media and media presentations.

- Analyzing the “habits of thought” in media presentations can provide insight into cultures in transition from one stage of cultural sensibility to another.

- Considering whether the approaches commonly employed in one country could be applied to the analysis of media presentations of another culture in order to provide perspective into that culture.

- Considering whether media literacy approaches employed in other countries might provide fresh insight into the media presentations of one’s own country of origin” (Silverblatt, 2018: 7).

Despite some national peculiarities or cultural differences there are still some common global problem zones in the current media literacy education: “In accordance with UNESCO recommendations, it is necessary: to develop comprehensive programs for media education at all educational levels; training teachers in the field of media education and increasing awareness of media literacy of all stakeholders and organizations in the social sphere; conducting research in the field of media education and the wide dissemination of their results; international cooperation in the field of media education; and most importantly – the wide practical implementation of media education of the population at various levels” (Fedorov, 2018: 6).

4. Conclusion

Our analysis of contemporary research papers concerning the issues of media and information literacy, media literacy education, film and media studies has enabled us to identify the following current trends in media and information literacy in scientific publications of the early 21st century:

- modern understanding of media and information literacy in the global context is based on the presupposition that its basic and major function is to provide access to information and knowledge and promote free, independent and pluralistic mediated social environments (UNESCO);

- media literacy has become a vital skill for an individual to survive in modern digital environment;

- the challenge of minimizing online risks and expanding online opportunities is widely recognized nowadays, especially in the context of educating children and adolescents;

- information or digital literacy is usually analysed in the educational and professional contexts, as part of research work, part of traditional skills such as reading competence, part of general learning skills, or part of basic and professional competencies;

- a significant number of present-day scholars focus on studying human behaviour in social computer-mediated interactions and challenges of global cross-cultural communication;

- there is an increasing tendency to promote media and information literacy for active social change;

- sometimes media literacy and digital literacy are considered to be critical instruments against various present-day online risks and manipulations;
- media and information literacy should be increasingly integrated into the school curriculum and university syllabus worldwide;
- media literacy education is supposed to be associated with students' applying their critical thinking skills to media messages and creating their own media texts;
- focus on media language and representation analysis is still dominant in media and film studies, and it often concerns present-day social contradictions and woes;
- researching national peculiarities of promoting media and information literacy in different countries;
- international media literacy actually concerns cultures and should be based on analysing effective strategies used in different cultures, since representatives of different cultures tend to construct, comprehend, interpret and evaluate media texts differently.

In addition to the above-mentioned trends of inquiry we would like to emphasize the following current problem zones in media literacy education for further research and development: training and education programs for media studies for all levels of education; teacher training courses in media literacy education; promoting media awareness of all stakeholders and organizations in the social sphere; international collaboration and research in media literacy education and a wide exchange of research findings; practical application of media literacy education for various social groups.

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