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Published in the USA  
Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)  
Has been issued since 2005  
E-ISSN 1994-4195  
2022. 18(3): 471-480

DOI: 10.13187/me.2022.3.471

<https://me.cherkasgu.press>



## School Communities on VKontakte as Part of the Media Learning Environment: Teachers' Media Competences

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### Abstract

The article addresses the issue of media competences of school teachers responsible for managing their schools' social media accounts, communities, etc.

The new types of communication, instant messengers, social networking websites and online learning platforms place modern education in a very special and sensitive environment with a shortened distance between the communicators, danger of personal or classroom information exposure and risks of damaging the reputation of the educational institution. Consequently, school principals and teachers face a problem of acquiring necessary competences in order to advantageously use their school online communities.

We surveyed school employees responsible for managing their schools' virtual accounts and revealed that school teachers do not professionalize their management of social media networks: they neither include it in the sphere of pedagogical competence nor correlate it with journalism. Besides, they feel lack of motivation due to little support from the school administration.

We claim that the duty to manage schools' social media pages should be perceived in the context of the media competence theory and include the ability to collect and process information, produce multimedia content, manage creative teams and form social media communities. This activity should be monitored by school principals and duly rewarded.

**Keywords:** social media, networking sites, school virtual community, media learning.

### 1. Introduction

Against the background of public and academic discussions of their feasibility, schools continue using social networks both for communication and education. They develop school media environment by creating accounts, groups, and pages on social networks.

Education consultants advise schools to use social media to raise their school profile. They claim that "sharing informative and educational social content positions your school as a forward-thinking, modern institution" (Hepburn, 2017).

In Russia, this development is stimulated by state programs. Virtual school communities (groups) are being created on VKontakte and other social networking sites under the auspices of the All-Russian Public and State Children's and Youth Organization "Russian Movement of Schoolchildren" (RDS) as well as initiated by school administrations and teachers. In 2020, we monitored representation of 355 schools (including their branches) in the Tyumen Region on the VKontakte social networking site. The findings included 134 online RDS communities, in total 521 groups registered with an indication of their school number. Among them, there are communities of schools, parents, and alumni. It should be noted that school accounts, unlike

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school websites, do not have an official status and are created in accordance with the rules of a particular networking site and their own vision of this media resource.

In January 2022, the media discussed guidelines for the registration on three social networking websites, which were received by the educational institutions in Chelyabinsk and Kopeysk, Russia. In this situation, school principals expressed concerns about schoolchildren's and their parents' readiness for public communication. User comments on such messages in the media and in teachers' online communities (*Overheard from teachers*, etc.) reveal another problem: lack of understanding of the required teachers' digital competencies. Absence of clear directions from school principals results in the absence of schools' social media strategies. Besides, there are complaints about failure on the school administration's part to "monitor or analyze activities undertaken by school employees, appreciate teachers' activity and involvement in publishing valuable content, they do not analyze the opinions and comments posted by stakeholders in social media" (Jedrzejczyk, 2021:1909).

Summing up the findings of a large-scale international project "Media and Information Literacy in the Digital World: How to Teach Teachers" (Mediyno..., 2021), researchers and practitioners of media education state the current demand for an integrated approach to media and information technology education, additional media literacy training for teachers, and inclusion of media studies into teacher training programs. According to American and German academics J. Tiede, S. Grafe and R. Hobbs, "the field of modelling and measuring pedagogical media competencies deserves further research, development and innovation in an international perspective to further enhance a global movement of media literacy education" (Tiede et al., 2015).

The problem is not in the absence of the competences necessary for teachers' activity in the digital learning environment, but in the determination of the object of this activity and, accordingly, its methods and goals. Virtual school communities are neither formally nor meaningfully described. In the recommendations for teachers, they are considered in the context of creating and promoting a school image. On the one hand, it is obvious since corporate accounts also function this way. On the other hand, a school community on social networking websites functions as an information-sharing and communication platform. Special features of schools as educational institutions and professional qualities of teachers responsible for designing school social networking accounts should not be ignored.

Pedagogical media competences have become the subject of special research. Theoretical frameworks for the definition and analysis of adult teachers' media pedagogical competence are provided in other sources (Tiede et al., 2015; Rohs et al., 2019). It includes media-related field competence; subject-specific media-related competence; personal competence of self-regulation and media-related attitudes; media didactic competence (Rohs et al., 2019: 313).

## 2. Materials and methods

Our approach to media education and development of media competence in teachers is based on the theoretical framework built by A.V. Fedorov's scientific school (Fedorov, 2007) and the concept of media and information literacy proposed by UNESCO in 2007. We also take into account the idea of media education environment as convergence of the media space and educational environment, which was developed by I.A. Fateeva, I.V. Zhilavskaya (Fateeva, 2007; Zhilavskaya, 2014).

School communities on social networking sites are part of the media education environment of modern school. Therefore, they should be considered in the context of the teacher's media competences and be differentiated from the media system in general. We assume that such school communities (groups) possess qualities of social media. Consequently, their analysis should take into account typological features and principles of this type of media. Then we will be able to describe the nature of the competencies required for the operation of social networking in schools.

Communities on the VKontakte social networking website affiliated with schools and the Russian Movement of Schoolchildren were selected as research materials. This social networking service is still one of the most popular, according to the results of a recent survey; it publishes "the largest amount of content" (Sotsial'nyye..., 2021). We apply the content analysis method to 134 online school communities in the Tyumen region. The typological and functional methods were used to single out and characterize ten groups of schools.

The results of the empirical study were obtained by interviewing teachers and analyzing texts describing their work with school communities on social media platforms. Two types of sources

were considered: publications in specialized and thematic media (4 articles); discussions on social networking websites and blogs (2 posts and 123 comments, respectively). The survey was conducted in 2021 in the Tyumen region among the 133 schoolteachers, heads of school media.

### 3. Discussion

The question of the status of social networking websites within the media system has been raised since their advent. In the context of our research, it also matters because it influences the definition of the nature of the competences of professional social media users.

Summarizing the discussion among media experts, L.A. Braslavets notes that social media have certain properties, technical and content-generating capabilities which let them develop as a new type of media. The activity of social media users, according to the researcher, is non-professional, but generally falls under the definition of journalistic (Braslavets, 2009; 2010). The concept of 'social media' becomes part of scholarly discourse. M.S. Budolak argues that social media have all the characteristics of mass media and defines them as "a new type of online media" where any Internet user "can participate in the process of creating, storing and disseminating socially significant information that is of a periodic nature and addressed to the general public" (Budolak, 2009: 18). Apart from the search for similarities with conventional mass media and journalism, another important social media research direction is identification of their specifics as a new type of media. L.A. Braslavets highlights the following journalistic features of social networks: "amateur, mass effect, the fastest publication, connectedness among the users of the same network, and public feedback" (Braslavets, 2010: 20). Most researchers agree that social media let users publish and repost personal, commercial and socially significant information and receive feedback (Druker, Yanovskaya, 2021). Users in social networks act as authors; the online service performs a regulatory function (banning of content) and offers digital technologies for creative activity.

Social media experience is vital for learners to expand their horizons. It teaches them to make observations; seek explanations; pursue interrelationships; and formulate extrapolations (Freestone, Mason, 2019).

Social media researchers analyze how social networking sites are involved in the advertising and PR practices of companies, including educational institutions (Bykov, Filatova, 2011; Jedrzejczyk, 2021).

Analyzing barriers in the use of social media in Polish schools, W. Jedrzejczyk identifies the main reasons for their low efficiency in the process of positive image building in educational institutions. Taking into account their two dimensions – technological and social, he found the latter the most problematic as Polish schools generally lack a social media strategy, systematic activities, promotion skills, incentives for the teachers responsible for the preparation and monitoring of content and as a result lack of employees willing to be responsible for managing their school's social media accounts (Jedrzejczyk, 2021: 1910)

The use of social networks for leadership in the field of education has been studied in (Prasojo et al., 2021). Indonesian researchers revealed positive perception of social media by Indonesian educational leadership: they find them useful and easy to use.

Thus, social networks are considered in the system of corporate or brand media where users act on behalf of the institution and pursue commercial or reputational goals. In this aspect, such media communication forms as groups (communities), publics, and accounts on social networking sites are actively studied. Their regular practices and certain cases of managing social media communities (groups, publics) as online platforms for organizing and sharing information about school-related projects, activities, etc. have become a major focus of research.

A study of G. Baxter and D. Toe explored the social media practices of seven Australian schools and interviewed their leaders to "highlight the significant role that school leaders have in facilitating classroom teachers' use of social media for family engagement". The ongoing development of innovative social media platforms offers schools new opportunities to enhance communication with families, which is very important for schoolchildren's academic success. School-based social media offers scope for empowering families to partner in their children's learning, through uploading photos, video and audio footage etc., sharing insights, opinions and experiences. They found that school principals monitored teachers' posts and then taught them "a strategic intent" for their online communication with parents and how to "adapt posts to become

more accessible and interactive for families” on three levels: cultural-discursive, material economic and social-political (Baxter, Toe, 2021: 18-19).

Researchers address the issue of media competences of non-professional authors and media editors – school teachers – in connection with the transition to the digital educational paradigm and their activities on social networking websites (Borau et al., 2009; Troyan, Kravchenko, 2021; Uglova et al., 2020; Yefimov et al., 2019).

In spite of the fact that the usage of social media entails both risks (excessive media use, low credibility of online news media) (Gálik, 2020; Gáliková Tolnaiová, 2019; Tkacová et al., 2022; Vilella et al., 2022) and benefits for students, B. Hayes et al. highlight their “bonding social capital” (Hayes et al., 2022). Social media sites are often used as a medium for discussing and organizing plans, making and updating friends who live further away, etc. According to L. Ciboci and D. Labaš, to mitigate the risks of online communication, e.g. overdisclosure or cyberbullying, adults should act as mediators in children’s use of social networking sites (Ciboci, Labaš, 2019). To do this, school teachers need special training aimed at developing relevant competences (De Gagne et al., 2018).

The content of competences and how to form them has been described in detail by V. Fernández et al. They claim that the media competence embraces the four key competences, each with its own indicators: “linguistic competence (indicators: fluency in oral expression; participation in debates and colloquiums; prosodic elements of language; information processing; school library), digital competence (indicators: use of radio media; management of programs related to school radio), social and civic competence (indicators: communication standards; opinions and points of view of others; teamwork and cooperative work; relationship between students and the educational community) and competence of the sense of initiative and entrepreneurial spirit (indicators: autonomy and confidence in students; development of creativity and innovation in the treatment of topics; inquiry and curiosity; entrepreneurship and problem solving; critical thinking)” (Fernández et al., 2022: 185).

These competencies and skills can be conveniently trained on social media. Indonesian teachers determined the competence of Indonesian language secondary school teachers to understand and apply state policies in using digital media by schools. According to them, more than half of respondents know the terms of User Agreements for the websites where they post content, know school rules and policies on downloading digital files, can evaluate information and news found online for credibility, can intelligently discuss ethical considerations using social media in an academic environment, always write the source of information when posting online and believe that using images from the Internet for learning media is appropriate if not for profit (Ramadhan et al., 2019: 4).

Chinese scholars “call for more attention to developing the trans-semiotic competence of teachers to differentiate and deploy multisemiotic resources embedded in the social media space” (Chen et al., 2022). They examined trans-semiotizing with texts, emojis, pictures, and audio in teacher-learner interactions on social media before, during, and after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic within one online course. According to their findings, “the use of various semiotic resources in social media interactions (words, pictures, animations, emojis, and audio) was effective, functioning to liven up the atmosphere and increase learners’ motivation” (Chen et al., 2022).

Summing up, the competences of professional social media users are of heterogeneous nature. Diversity and dynamism of the existing social media formats requires from teachers the acquisition of special skills, knowledge of the rules of their management; setting of specific goals and strategies for their achievement. School teachers responsible for managing their schools’ social media accounts and online communities need support and motivation from their leadership.

#### 4. Results

To understand the media competences a teacher needs to work with school social media communities we turned to the representation of practical experience. Two types of sources were taken into account: publications in the pedagogical media and teachers’ statements on social media and blogs.

We utilized the approach of mapping professional skills and knowledge (Silantieva, 2016) in correlation with the theory of competences and media competence of teachers.

The idea of the competencies that are necessary to work with digital school communities (groups) on social media is formed in the pedagogical media discourse and in discussions on

teacher forums. The authors of articles, posts and comments share their own experience, which allows us to regard this material as empirical. Content analysis of the selected texts reveals the following repetitive semantic blocks: what virtual school communities are for (their goal); who is engaged in such communities (responsible persons and executors); their recommended themes and content; responsibilities and guidelines for the responsible person.

Our research materials included articles from these periodicals: *Handbook of the Head of the Educational Institution*, *Uchitel'skaya Gazeta*, *Mel*, and *Bulletin of Education*; as well as posts and comments in the VKontakte community *Overheard from teachers* (195,000 subscribers) and posts and comments in the YandexZen community *Life of an Ordinary School* (15,000 subscribers).

We keep in mind that the articles on the social media sites, unlike comments on the social media networks, have passed through the filters of a professional editorial office and pursue specific goals. The articles and comments under study differently interpret some issues. This will be noted further.

Lexical analysis of the main semantic blocks in the comments and articles reveals the following *main goals* of the virtual school communities in question: sharing with the audience school success stories; showing school life to parents (the presence effect); and building trust through communication (“to become closer and more frank with students and parents”). In the articles, the goal of the virtual communities is often formulated in the terminology of product promotion: “attract attention”, “show value,” etc. In a number of comments in the “Overheard from teachers” community, there is a new value-forming meaning: the school as a community for all city or village residents (“to please children and parents with the success of their school; graduates and fellow countrymen always look through our posts”; “we want our children, parents, colleagues, and residents to know about our successes and activities”).

Teachers' answers to the question about who is responsible for managing the virtual school community (in the comments to “Overheard from teachers” and “Life in an ordinary school”) confirm our survey findings: 43 % teachers of specific subjects, 37 % educators, and in some cases it is a teacher of creative arts, deputy principal, librarian, or principal. In the texts under study, this topic is contextualized in the category of motivational framing. Teachers create virtual school communities on social networks either on their own initiative or carrying out instructions given by the school administration, “Several years ago, at school, I took the initiative to manage our school page on Instagram”, “This work is not paid. Just my initiative and personal interest”, “As part of my job duties, I created a page with news about our school activities. At first, I just liked doing it”.

Mandatory reporting and “coercion” reduces interest and desire to look for creative solutions. Teachers acknowledge that in some schools this work is paid and in others it is not. In both cases, interest and pleasure (“for fun”), combined with official duties, remain the dominant motive. The survey of school media managers revealed that in 70.7 % of cases, school media are created and exist as a public initiative of teachers and schoolchildren, in 14.3 % as an association or an extracurricular activity, in 3.8 % as part of an elective, as a circle, and other forms. It should be noted that teachers do not identify their role with professional media communication or journalistic activities and very rarely use the well-established term “group administrator”. Only one respondent defined his/her role, “I am an admin in three groups and a moderator in one. But, in fact, I manage only one, purely for fun”. Another comment included a reference to the traditional media – “editor”. The most common definition of this activity is “to manage a page”.

In the block about “the subject and content” of virtual school communities the authors of articles and comments write about news about school activities, events, and achievements; useful tips for children and parents; “something interesting about school life”. In the “Overheard from Teachers” comments refer to posts with photographs as the main content, “Set the rules of posting for everyone: at least two photos from one event and no more than 10 sentences of text.” The recommendations in the *Uchitel'skaya Gazeta* and journal *Mel* include a greater variety of multimedia formats: videos, drawings, diagrams, long reads, and memes. The comments and articles name the following interactive formats: polls and games. They regard them as an opportunity to ensure trusted communications with their audiences.

Analysis of the answers to the questions “What should the person responsible for the work of the virtual school community do?” and “How should it be done?” lets identify the skills and abilities necessary for this type of activity.

They are posting (uploading) information, making reposts or copying information from official websites. This must be done promptly and daily, or almost daily. At the request of the management, the responsible person should be able to connect or disconnect the bot.

Generation of content, namely, taking pictures, writing texts, and putting hashtags, is also required. In comments and articles, authors emphasize the need to simplify genre requirements and abandon traditional journalistic texts, “It is not necessary to write articles. Write a word with a hashtag – that’s all”, “You don’t need to write articles. A couple of phrases, like, ‘today our guys from 4a came first in here and there. Congratulations! We are proud of you!’ and that’s enough”, “Don’t make texts too large. Alternate medium-length and short posts”.

The next skill is promoting the virtual community and winning followers. Teachers sharing their experience on social networking sites perceive this activity as part of the professional media communication competence and therefore unavailable and optional for them: “Most likely, the person who takes on this job is engaged not only in content generation, but also in promotion. I mean professionals”; “For example, I also have a problem: I can somehow fill my pages, but I don’t have enough skills to gain subscribers and promote the team. If I had money for this, I would gladly pay. Schools aren’t interested in this, of course.” The authors of the articles in the journals *The Handbook of the Head of an Educational Institution* and *Mel* pay much attention to promotion and give practical advice: conduct surveys, create conditions for dialogue with the audience, make posts about teachers. We noted above that they formulate the purpose of school social media networks in marketing terminology.

As for organizing and leading the team, the comments quite clearly separate the areas of competence for teachers and schoolchildren on the social media. Teachers, head teachers, and the administration should provide information about school activities and events; schoolchildren can ‘format’ this information by taking pictures and shooting videos, “For example, photography and filming of special events can be entrusted to a responsible high school student (they can send them by mail)”. This view is supported by authors of *The Handbook of the Head of an Educational Institution*: “Pupils can make photo and video materials”. Such organization of work is based on the stereotyped idea of the media competencies of the participants in the educational process: teachers are better informed about what is happening at school, and students have good practical and operational skills.

The information agenda in this situation is set by the teachers and school administration. The subjective, author’s, position of schoolchildren in this case is limited to operational functions. Another approach, described in the comments (“Overheard from teachers”) and articles (*Uhitel’skaya Gazeta*), involves organization of a school media center or editorial office. This approach lets involve schoolchildren in the work of school social media using the model of school media. Researchers and educators evaluate school media as a resource allowing children and adolescents to develop creative skills, form media competence, assist in professional self-determination, and develop civic qualities (Fateeva, 2007). Young journalists possess professional skills of working with information and ways of presenting it. They are aware of journalism genres and focus on socially significant issues. Teachers who have experience working in this format answered the question “What kind of help do you need?” in the following way: 57 % “help in acquisition of journalistic skills”, 60 % “help in acquisition of digital skills”. Their idea of the necessary competencies is formulated in the context of professional media communication activities.

In order to identify characteristic features of virtual school communities (groups) on VKontakte as media formats, we analyzed the topics, genres and communication activity in the 134 virtual school communities of the RDS in the Tyumen region.

The main topics of posts are news about past school events and special sport etc. event announcements. The information agenda is determined primarily by the general direction of the educational work conducted by the school. For example, photos and videos recording children’s participation in challenges, flash mobs, marathons dedicated to Victory Day, Youth Day, road safety, volunteer movement, etc. are often posted. Messages about these and other events are close to the genres of a current local news report or running commentary.

The main content consists of photos and text messages in two formats: a headline or caption + photos, a short message + photos. There are always several photographs; they are usually photographs of a reportage nature. A.V. Kolesnichenko notes that this form of presenting information is most popular in the blogosphere (Kolesnichenko, 2021).

In 126 groups, the feed or a special section includes videos in various genres: reportage videos, recordings from flash mobs (reading poems during special events, holidays, etc.), and congratulations. There are audio recordings in 28 groups: music, school anthems, and screensavers. Infographics or layouts appear in 35 groups, polls are placed in 12 groups. There are multimedia articles in 25 groups.

The number of subscribers in the social media groups under study depends on the number of students in schools. In small rural schools there are 100-150 people, in large urban schools more than a thousand. At the same time, subscribers demonstrate low activity: comments appear rarely, likes and reposts are single.

To analyze successful practices for attracting audiences, we selected *ten school communities* which participated in the interregional competition Medianavigator (Tyumen, 2021). The applications confirm the format of the schoolchildren's creative teamwork under the guidance of a teacher: a press center or school media. In these virtual communities, we studied the posts that most resonate with the audience. The research material includes virtual communities of rural and urban schools, the number of subscribers in the groups under study ranges from 194 to 2062. The number of views in the first case is up to 900, in the second 5,600; the average number of likes in the most viewed materials is 50-80.

The biggest user response is caused by posts about a hero overcoming difficulties: schoolchildren, teachers, and graduates become winners of sports or creative competitions and intellectual Olympiads. The hero is necessarily personified and placed in the context of a mini narrative. Such posts attract many comments expressing admiration, joy, and pride. Videos in which children congratulate their parents and teachers on different holidays are very popular, as well as challenges where schoolchildren demonstrate their everyday skills and abilities. They cook breakfast for their mother, do the cleaning, or help seniors. In the comments they write, "Well done", "Clever", "Real man," etc. Another block of popular posts and stories is related to schoolchildren's past time activities: field trips to movie theaters and art studios, creative competitions, and sports activities. The heroes of these publications are initiative, energetic, and inquisitive. Topics centering around schoolchildren's creative activities are covered in various formats: drawings, photographs of students, series of memes. Thus, schools include parents in their virtual communities and, through the image of the student, demonstrate their teaching and childcare strategies.

Virtual school communities offer topics and formats for presenting information appealing to all members of the school community. They are stories in which the image of a hero or a generalized image of a schoolchild is created. Their creation demands journalism skills of working with information using multimedia storytelling techniques and various digital formats. This is confirmed by the results of a survey of teachers responsible for school social media.

## 5. Conclusion

Teachers perceive virtual school communities on social media as a tool for sharing information about school events and building a community of people associated with the school. They also serve as a channel of communication with parents. Teachers do not professionalize their management of social media networks: they do not include it in the sphere of pedagogical competence and do not correlate it with journalism. At the same time, our analysis of teachers' responses to the questions about responsibilities of the school virtual community manager on the social media shows that this activity is perceived in the context of the media competences (Map of media competencies), media competence theories and recommendations of American and European education experts (Taibi et al., 2021; West, 2021).

Firstly, this is media production: text creation, content generation and publication. Secondly, communication with the audience is promotion of the project and formation of a networking community. The teacher's work on social networking sites is interpreted in the context of pedagogical competencies: organization of the process and leading the team. In this case, the teacher acts as a media educator and demonstrates their level of media competence: methodological, active, and creative.

Analysis of school virtual communities showed that they have stable typological features. The thematic space and the information agenda are constant and determined by the teaching and childcare strategies of the school. The genre features and ways of presenting information correspond to the trends of social networking sites and are typically messages in the format of text

+ photo or audio. These results correlate with teachers' perceptions of the subject matter, genre characteristics, and quality of content in virtual school communities. The goals declared by teachers correspond to the goals and functions of social media platforms. Achieving these goals is hampered by low user engagement.

Analysis of successful user engagement practices reveals that, along with the existing teachers' competences, it is relevant to develop media competences in teachers: ability to work with information, produce multimedia content, manage creative teams and form a social media community.

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