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Media Literacy as a Factor in the Development of Youth Professionalization

Olga V. Rogach [a, *]

[a] Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Russian Federation

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze the demand for media literacy skills among Russian students, assess their importance for the professional development of young professionals, and explore the specifics of media literacy development in young people during their university studies. The primary research method was a series of semi-structured interviews (N = 12) with students at Russian universities. The article presents a conceptual model of media literacy, incorporating knowledge and skills across three blocks: analytical (navigation and search, critical analysis of information, including situational conditions, assessing its reliability, countering the intentional distortion or selective presentation of data to create a false perception), group work of users on the development of media content (preparation of an information message, positioning of the author's ideas, unification of like-minded people in the digital space, reflection and providing feedback, social activity) and the ethical aspects of the behavior of young people in the media space (personal safety, self-control in the posting and consumption of content, a focus on continuous skill development and self-education, compliance with legal norms and ethical standards). The study results revealed that, despite students' high scores on the first set of competencies, they lacked creative content creation skills, demonstrated self-control in digital behavior, and struggled with ethical standards for information dissemination. Most interview participants believed that media literacy is an important factor in the successful professional development of young professionals. Furthermore, the study revealed a predominance of an external locus of control among students in the context of media literacy development, as evidenced by an expectation of ready-made educational solutions from the university, minimal personal initiative, and low motivation for self-education.

Keywords: media literacy, professionalization, safe media activities, self-regulation of behavior in the media environment, gamification, education.

1. Introduction

The rise of political and social activism among today's youth and the expansion of their participation in the media emphasize the role of media education among young people and their readiness for conscious action in the consumption and production of information. Increased interest in politics in the modern world is leading to a broader focus on issues related to a person's ability to navigate the global information space, emphasizing the relationship between political culture and media literacy (Kazakov, 2017).

According to A.V. Fedorov, new trends in media development in modern conditions include two opposing vectors: first, the use of the audience as an object of manipulation; second, the involvement of the audience as an accomplice and partner in information practices (Fedorov et al.,

* Corresponding author
E-mail addresses: rogach16@mail.ru (O.V. Rogach)

2022). Both trends highlight the importance of media literacy among young people in the context of increasing information flows and the popularization of social networks (Sutikna et al., 2024).

On the one hand, media literacy allows one to resist manipulative influences, assess the reliability of information, and understand the media's desire for sensationalism, attracting new audiences, and achieving commercial profitability. On the other hand, media literacy skills enable young people to be full partners in the production of information, the generation of new knowledge, and the development of effective communication within professional communities.

However, as international research shows, the current education system does not fully prepare young professionals for the challenges of the digital age. In particular, young Americans experience a lack of media literacy skills, due to inadequate educational standards and deficiencies in traditional university education. A national survey of educators in the US found that professional structures in higher education institutions are failing to address the challenges of developing media literacy in young professionals (Foster et al., 2024). A large-scale media literacy study conducted in Latvia indirectly confirms these findings. Specifically, the majority of respondents acknowledged their insufficient knowledge and skills in this area. The problem is compounded by the fact that, despite acknowledging media literacy deficits among adults, more than half of respondents are uninterested in ways to address them. A very low level of awareness of government-sponsored activities aimed at implementing media literacy educational programs was also recorded (Rožukalne et al., 2020).

The results of other studies highlight the particular vulnerability of young people, caused by both a lack of critical information perception skills and the extreme immersion of young people in information flows (De Leyn et al, 2022). An analysis of Russian practices also shows that young people's activity on social networks, dynamic integration into information flows, and basic digital literacy skills are not accompanied by fundamental competencies in working with media.

Insufficient media literacy skills also negatively impact the competitiveness of young professionals in the labor market. In particular, modern universities fail to emphasize such in-demand skills as self-presentation on social media, the ethics of public interactions in the media, and media content creation. Research findings indicate that there is a particular need for media literacy development in professions such as advertising and public relations, journalism, librarianship, sociology, politics and management, social work, and others. The role of media literacy in the professionalization of social workers is driven by the expansion of social support measures and advisory assistance to vulnerable socio-demographic groups, including in the digital environment (Chauke, Kakuru, 2025). Experts believe that the concept of civic media literacy plays a key role in improving the professional training of students studying in the humanities and socioeconomics. This concept involves reflecting on the socioeconomic context of contemporary transformations and critically interpreting political conditions and the determinants of modern life (Gálik et al., 2024; Mihailidis, 2018; Tinák, Gálik, 2026).

A review of the importance of media literacy for the professional development of young people, presented in modern scientific discourse, articulates the need for the academic community to pay closer attention to the content of the educational process, the tools of which should contribute to the development of relevant knowledge and competencies in young people when working with the media.

2. Materials and methods

The research problem is presented by the contradiction between, on the one hand, the increasing demands on the media literacy of an individual, allowing him/her to successfully realize himself/herself in social and professional activities, and, on the other hand, the functional weakness of the educational institution, which does not ensure the formation of knowledge and skills of young people when working with media.

The purpose of this study is to examine the demand for media literacy skills among students, assess their importance in the context of professionalization, and analyze subjective assessments of university performance in developing relevant media competencies.

Objectives:

1. To analyze self-assessments of contemporary students' media literacy level and their perceptions of the relationship between media literacy and professionalization.

2. To analyze students' interest in developing media literacy skills within the education system.

3. To evaluate the effectiveness of educational practices in developing contemporary students' media literacy.

The study utilized both general and specialized scientific methods. Specifically, an analytical approach was used to decompose the conceptual model of media literacy into individual components related to information consumption, critical perception, assessment of reliability, and skills in generating and disseminating information. A generalization approach was used to identify general trends in the development of students' media literacy, and a systematization approach was used to identify and group the most relevant educational practices for developing knowledge and skills in working with media.

Specialized research methods included a series of semi-structured interviews (N = 12) with third- and fourth-year undergraduate students enrolled in programs such as public and municipal administration, sociology, and political science. The selection of respondents studying in these programs was motivated by the importance of media literacy skills for their successful professional development. Specifically, students who chose this career path mostly associate their careers with data analytics, engaging with a broad media audience, and presenting themselves on social media.

3. Discussion

The role of media literacy in the development of youth professionalization encompasses the development of not only soft skills (critical analysis of information, its evaluation, analytical reflection), but also hard skills for a wide range of professions in modern mediatized societies. An analysis of scientific discourse suggests that the systematic acquisition of reliable, high-quality information is the foundation for the meaningful processing of professional content, the generation of new knowledge, and the development of positive behavioral models in work practices (Orlova, 2021). A study of media literacy models in Germany, the UK, and the USA showed that learning effectiveness can be achieved through the mutually complementary educational practices implemented in both formal and informal educational environments. Incorporating media literacy into the concept of lifelong learning is becoming an important task (Stix, Jolls, 2020). The complexity of this task indicates the need to consolidate the efforts of the state, educational institutions, and opinion leaders in developing youth media literacy (Nhat et al., 2025).

Given the significant transformation of the media landscape, scholars' conclusions about the need to modernize the educational paradigm of media literacy, seamlessly integrating the skills of information consumption and production (Ugurhan et al., 2022), are entirely logical. In today's environment, the successful professional development of young professionals is determined by the effective development of analytical skills, the transformation of data into various media formats, and the ability to use media monitoring tools and work with digital algorithms.

N. Cho, J. Cannon, R. Lopez, and W. Li substantiate an important conclusion about the causal relationships between the choice of messages/networks and users' self-awareness. The researchers conclude that a new concept of media literacy should take into account the influence of media platforms on the boundaries of reality construction in social media (Cho et al., 2024).

A similar conclusion is reached in the work of J. Swart, who draws attention to the formation of attitudes, motivations, and users' perception of their subjectivity under the influence of situational factors associated with the specifics of media platforms (Swart, 2023). Based on the above, it can be assumed that developing media literacy in young professionals requires special attention to digital algorithms and media platform design. These aspects of the modern digital reality shape the user's expected outcome and, if there are dysfunctions in their competencies, can lead to the use of distorted and unreliable information. The consequences of using information selected by algorithms can also include a narrowing of professional horizons and a distortion of the professional self-determination of future professionals (Valle et al., 2025). This is why the educational process must ensure that young people develop skills to understand the goals, strategies for use, and personal values when choosing media content.

A.A. Aljalabneh emphasizes the importance of educational practices that utilize visual content, which is often perceived as more credible and has the greatest potential to influence user memory and perception. Media literacy training in universities should be based on the use of reverse image search strategies and analysis of the content creator's biographies and motivations (Aljalabneh, 2024).

A comprehensive concept for developing media literacy is presented in the work of S. Yang, J. Lee, A. Kim, and K. Ga Byun. The researchers identify the following elements of the conceptual

model of media literacy: consumption, prosuming, and being. The consumption sphere integrates skills such as functional assimilation/perception of information, analysis, and evaluation. The prosuming sphere consists of skills in content generation, representation, and distribution/sharing. The being sphere in the media literacy framework includes skills for ensuring safety, striving for self-improvement, knowledge of legal and ethical norms of behavior in the media environment, and collaborative problem-solving skills (Yang et al., 2024).

Based on the findings of these researchers, it can be concluded that media literacy in the modern digital world is not limited to knowledge and skills for navigating the information field, critically analyzing information, assessing its reliability, and resisting manipulation. Much more significant than the analytical component is the component of user co-creation, which seamlessly combines collaboration and participation skills, media content production competencies, presenting one's own ideas, disseminating information, engaging like-minded individuals in the media, providing feedback, and promoting civic initiatives in the media. The third component (ethical and behavioral) in the media literacy framework ensures the internalization of acquired knowledge and values into the individual's internal structures, enabling the practical application of skills such as safe media practices, self-regulation of behavior, adherence to ethical and legal norms, risk forecasting in the media environment, and motivation to update knowledge (Table 1).

Table 1. Conceptual model of media literacy

Analytical block	User co-creation unit	Ethical and behavioral unit
Navigation (searching for information in various sources)	Media content production	Safe media activities
Critical analysis of information	Presentation of the author's position	Self-regulation of behavior in the media environment, information selectivity
Assessment of information reliability	Attracting like-minded people to the media	Independent identification of competency gaps when working in the media space
Resistance to the influence of distorted/false information	The use of media technologies to create and publicize socially significant initiatives	The desire for continuous self-education throughout life
Reflection of situational factors (tasks, interests of the media content creator, hidden preferences)	Feedback, interaction with comments	Compliance with ethical and legal standards

4. Results

During the interviews, students expressed their opinions unequivocally, confirming that the development of media literacy is an important substantive part of their professional development process.

Informant 1, female, "State and Municipal Administration": "For me, as a future civil servant, or municipal employee... it's very important to be able to build media interactions and showcase the results of my work on social media".

Informant 2, female, "Sociology": "Media literacy is, of course, important. Today, with so much lies... And for professional growth, of course, networking in professional communities and the ability to analyze information are all important for a sociologist".

Informant 3, male, "Political Science": "In my professional work, media literacy is essential; it requires an advanced level... (laughs). Well, I'll list the first things that come to mind: monitoring media activity, building a political brand on social media, assessing how information will influence the electorate, how to present it, and so on... ".

An analysis of student subjective assessments is supported by the findings of Russian scientists. According to I.N. Titarenko, developing a high level of media competence increases the demand for specialists in the labor market (Titarenko, 2019).

The interview results revealed relatively high self-assessments of media literacy among today's students. The respondents were most confident in assessing the first component of media literacy-analytical.

Informant 4, male, "State and Municipal Administration": "I approach information quite critically. If it's something unexpected, I double-check it. For example, when the media reported Maduro's capture, I double-checked it with several sources".

Informant 3, male, "Political Science": "When I read the news, I always look for the other side. Only by comparing the two sides can you find the truth. It'll be somewhere in the middle...".

The discussion of digital algorithms generated skepticism among most respondents. Young people are confident in their information search strategies and believe they are not subject to the limitations associated with the provision of algorithmically selected content. A lack of reflection on this issue indicates cognitive biases in assessing their own competencies and inflated self-assessments of their media literacy. Self-assessments of media literacy elements in the user co-creation block did not reveal such a clear picture. In particular, among the respondents were students who had experience managing their own digital media channels. These respondents are characterized by cautious optimism in assessing their prospects for creating media content and an understanding of the role of knowledge and experience in developing a high level of media literacy. They also noted certain difficulties in effectively presenting their own ideas to attract new users.

Informant 5, female, "Sociology": "I understand this is difficult for me. The screen time report shows that it can be 6 or 8 hours a day on social media. This time could have been spent more productively... I even practiced a digital detox, deleting all social media for 3 months... But then I got back into it... After the detox, I probably improved my self-control skills. Now I spend less time... ".

Self-restraint skills in media consumption are considered by contemporary scholars to be essential competencies in media literacy. K. Good and M. Ciccone, in their work, presented the concept of media quiteracy, which can be used in modern educational practices. According to the scholars, refusing to use new media or suspending media activity can be not only an act of individual learning but also a collective action, preventing the destruction of the large-scale development of a highly mediated and commercialized information environment (Good, Ciccone, 2025). It can be assumed that self-regulation skills in the media environment will become critically important in the medium and long term. As artificial intelligence algorithms improve to retain user attention, the ability to create information filters and limit information flows is the most significant resource for preserving one's identity and focusing efforts on the personal goals of one's media presence. The development of self-restraint and self-regulation skills in the media environment demonstrates a transformation in information processing models: a shift from recognizing the importance of accumulation and assimilation to emphasizing a selective approach and selectively ignoring incoming content.

It is alarming that informants have a rather superficial attitude toward observing ethical standards in social media. It can be assumed that the drive for commercialization, anonymity in social media, and the blurring of social boundaries are leading to a decline in ethical responsibility.

Informant 6, male, "Political Science": "I run my own channel, and yes, sometimes I post unverified information...if it, let's say, has a response... ".

The findings resonate with the analysis of the media arts curriculum implementation in Australian schools. The curriculum was aimed at developing the skills necessary for creative and productive participation in media culture. However, an analysis of educational experience 10 years later indicates the need for curriculum modernization. The upgrading of creative content creation skills determines increased attention to strategies for promoting and consuming media content, reflecting on the social consequences and risks of its impact on individuals and society as a whole (Dezuanni, 2021).

Despite confidence in their skills in safe media practices and in predicting risks in the media environment, most respondents noted that they rarely thought about predicting the social consequences of digital behavior.

Informant 5, female, "Sociology": "I think this problem is greatly exaggerated. Perhaps, of course, if someone is planning to become a major politician, then, yes, they need to monitor everything they say... But otherwise, no, it's not that important".

In this context, it can be noted that one of the most important aspects of media education in the professional training of future specialists is anticipating the social consequences of the

dissemination of personal opinions on career development. The study results revealed significant information gaps among students on this issue, as well as insufficient reflection and understanding of the possible negative consequences of destructive activity on social media. Educational practices for developing media literacy should be aimed at reflecting on the risks associated with the destruction of students' personal professional image.

The interview results illustrate a dichotomy in student attitudes: despite a pronounced interest in educational technologies for developing media literacy, they report inflated subjective assessments of their own knowledge and skills. Most respondents present themselves as experienced participants in the media environment. It can be assumed that young people equate their operational skills with analytical competencies. A false sense of total competence is illustrated by statements such as: *"I filter information very well, I can easily spot fakes", "I multitask well, I can listen to an online lecture and simultaneously read the news", "I'm an experienced user, I understand media safety and the rules I need to follow".*

Students' cognitive optimism regarding media literacy becomes a limiting factor in the development of their motivational attitudes in media education. While recognizing its importance, students demonstrate a low level of initiative in this area and a lack of readiness for self-education. A pressing pedagogical issue is the prevalence of students' external locus of control in the context of developing media literacy knowledge and skills. This externalized position is characterized by an expectation of ready-made educational solutions from the university and teachers, while minimizing personal initiative.

Informant 7, female, "State and Municipal Administration": "If the university had such programs, that would be great. I'd like to hone my skills in creating high-quality media content. Or, as we discussed, professional branding — that would also be interesting".

At the same time, students believe that universities pay insufficient attention to developing young people's media literacy. Analytical competencies are an exception; respondents believe that during the study of professional disciplines, instructors focus on developing critical thinking skills. The main deficiencies in university training relate to the development of creative competencies aimed at creating exclusive content capable of attracting a mass audience. It is worth noting that when assessing the effectiveness of educational practices for developing media literacy, students favored game-based methods. Similar conclusions have been reached in the works of international scholars. In particular, the use of gamification methods, which are successfully applied to the assimilation of topics such as fake news, digital privacy, and personal media habits, is considered an additional factor in the successful development of media literacy (Glas et al., 2023). It can be assumed that game-based methods of developing media literacy integrate such advantages as a practice-oriented approach, adaptability, and increased involvement and interest.

5. Conclusion

In the context of total digitalization, media literacy is no longer just an applied skill for navigating social media, but rather a core professional competency. Selectivity and consistency in the acquisition and analysis of professional information, as well as the skills to create and distribute media content, enable young professionals to improve their competitiveness in the labor market. A theoretical analysis has allowed us to formulate a conceptual model of media literacy, comprising three components: analytical, user co-creation, and ethical-behavioral. The analytical component encompasses knowledge and skills in navigating media, critically analyzing information and the context of its creation, assessing the reliability of data, and countering manipulative influences in the media. The user co-creation component encompasses competencies in media content production, presenting an author's position, scaling it, engaging like-minded individuals in the media, fostering sustainable feedback, and civic engagement. The third block (ethical and behavioral) in the media literacy framework includes skills for safe media activities, self-regulation of behavior in the media environment, risk forecasting, motivation for self-education, and adherence to ethical and legal norms in the information space.

The study results revealed a clear consensus among participants regarding the role of media literacy as a factor in the successful professionalization of young people. The interviews revealed the following challenges in developing media literacy, especially with inflated self-assessments of one's own competencies: low motivation for self-education, insufficient skills for self-regulation of behavior in the media environment, and insufficient skills for presenting content effectively to attract new users. The study also revealed a distorted locus of control among young people in the

context of media literacy development: high expectations for ready-made educational solutions from the university, while personal initiative is diminished. Students were highly critical of the universities' efforts to develop media literacy, with the exception, according to the respondents, of skills for critical analysis of information, which are emphasized in specialized courses. Students noted limited opportunities to develop creative competencies that would enable them to create exclusive, in-demand content. They considered the use of game-based methods to be the most appropriate way to acquire media literacy skills.

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