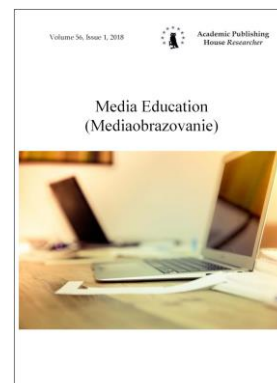


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Political segment of students' media literacy: an approach to measure it

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Abstract

In modern science, attempts to measure media literacy / media competence are made from time to time. However, those who try to do it usually employ different theoretical premises, interpret phenomenon under consideration in their own ways, and, as a result, use various criteria for evaluations. Based on the analysis of more than hundred most oft-quoted (both in foreign and Russian scholarship) definitions of media literacy, the author offers his own conception of the term and puts forward the way it can be measured. While doing so, he stresses the importance of a political segment of media literacy, i.e. the ability to critically analyze and check credibility of politics-related media texts.

Through anonymous questionnaire method, ninety-seven 17-26-aged students of Saratov National Research State University named after N.G. Chernyshevsky were surveyed. Among other things, the questionnaire implied the necessity to answer questions on the text respondents were asked to read, as well as to form their attitudes to fifteen statements listed (rather agree with each of them or not). Points got by every student were transformed into percent. The medium media literacy level of all respondents and medium figures for different genders, ages, and majors were calculated. In closing, possible directions of further research on the issue were outlined.

Keywords: media literacy, youth, students, measurement, questionnaire survey, media education, media competence, mass media, politics, political culture.

1. Introduction

Among a wide variety of issues considered in the realm of media education studies, attempts to measure certain media competences or media literacy in general take pride of place. Compared with many other aspects, research on this topic is few and far between. Following W.J. Potter and Ch. Thai, I believe that there is still a problem of validity of the results got by scholars, regardless of striking potential accumulated so far (Potter, Thai, 2016: 27). In other words, scholars tend to interpret media literacy-related notions (i.e. skills, knowledge, experience, etc.) in their own ways and consequently create their own methods to measure it. As a result, due to variations in approaches, it becomes quite difficult to compare and juxtapose inferences made by different scholars, as well as to estimate tendencies and dynamic of media literacy levels' alterations in the course of time.

Making no pretense to elaborating a kind of universal or integrative approach to measuring (we consider this goal a point of discussions and disputes within scholarly forums and conferences), one of the possible ways to measure students' media literacy is offered in this article.

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While working out the methodological part of this research, I drew on existing theoretical and practical studies of well-known scholars in the field (Arke, Primack, 2009: 53-65; Ashley et al., 2013: 7-21; Fedorov, 2012: 48-51; Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2016: 16-37; Levitskaya, 2015: 30-42) and tried to shift focus of measuring to political side of the phenomenon under consideration. In other words, I was primarily interested in detecting those skills and competencies that are politics-related and thus have direct effects on the development of political culture of the youth.

2. Materials and methods

Having analyzed more than hundred definitions of media literacy that are the most often quoted in both Russian and foreign studies, I articulated the one that includes components widely used in majority of already existing descriptions of media literacy (for more details, see Kazakov, 2017: 78-97). So, I define media literacy as an ability to find information amidst a deluge of media messages, to critically interpret and analyze it, to check its credibility and – if necessary – to create their own short media texts.

Drawing on this definition, I designed a questionnaire aimed at detecting respondents' media literacy levels (see Annex). The questionnaire itself consists of three parts. In the first of them, one should read a text and answer eight questions. The text is a page-long post in a blog of V. Afanasieva who is a professor of Saratov State University and a well-known (in Saratov) blogger under one roof. In that post, she explained her personal attitude to Russian liberals (Afanasieva, 2017). By answering the questions (both open and closed), respondents tried to identify target audience of the text they read, the author's purpose, points of view and omitted information, ways to check credibility of the facts and arguments used by the author. There was also a task to formulate the main idea of the post in one sentence – by asking respondents to do it, I assessed their productive skills.

The second part of the questionnaire is comprised of fifteen statements – respondents should agree or disagree with them. Each of the statements either is connected with the current state of media industry or deals with certain aspects of media literate person's behavior. At last, the third part of the questionnaire contains questions about respondents' gender, age, and level of education.

In March 2018, ninety-seven students of Law and International Relations Departments, Saratov State University, were surveyed. They all were at the ages from seventeen to twenty-six. There were sixty-five female and thirty-two male students among them. It is worth noting that such a sex ratio is quite typical for liberal arts and social departments of our University. Roughly in equal proportions, respondents' majors were political science, international relations, forensic analysis, and customs procedures. That being said, none of all students has taken courses somehow connected to media literacy.

3. Discussion

As already noted, attempts to measure media literacy are quite often made by both Russian and foreign scholars. However, at least in Russia, the term “media competence”, which in fact is one of the indicators of media literacy, is slightly more popular than “media literacy” (see, e.g., Zhizhina, 2016: 47).

I agree that media literacy is broader than media competence. Nevertheless, within this research, I would prefer to use the former. There are at least two reasons that make me choose this option. Firstly, as a rule, media competence implies a kind of dichotomy – one either has it or not (Potter, 2004: 21). In this sense, it would be more accurate to use the term “skill” which means an ability to do something that develops gradually – in the course of time and through purposeful activities: one may be able to do something fairly, well, or masterfully. The problem is that “media skills” are hardly used in scholarly discourse. Secondly, it seems to me that, compared with its equivalents, “media literacy” is a much more popular term within the realm of foreign communication studies. Taking all these into consideration, I will prefer “media literacy” to “media competence”.

Speaking about the ways of measuring media literacy skills, it should be noted that is quite a challenging task (Bergsma, 2008; Hobbs, Frost, 2003; Primack et al., 2006). According to Scharrer, “The results of participation in media literacy curricula are not often explicitly defined and measured, but there is a generalized notion about what these outcomes are” (Scharrer, 2002:

354). Potter and Thai go one step further and write: “While there is a large and growing literature that tests the effectiveness of media literacy interventions, there is reason to be skeptical about the value of the findings in that literature because of problems with the validity of the measures used in those studies” (Potter, Thai, 2016: 27).

Numerous attempts to measure media literacy have been made for the last few decades. In their experiment, Quin and McMahon examined the language, narrative, audience and other areas of analysis (Quin, McMahon, 1995). Similar methods to measure media literacy skills were applied by Hobbs and Frost (Hobbs, Frost, 2003). They tried to assess students’ ability to identify target audience, points of view, the purpose, and construction techniques used in media messages, and the ability to identify omitted information from a news media broadcast in written, audio, or visual formats. Other authors developed and validated a special scale to measure adolescents’ media literacy with regard to pro-smoking media messages (Primack et al., 2006).

In spite of the fact that there are many definitions of media literacy, the research field still has some considerable gaps. These gaps lead to a wide variety of ways to measure it. The result is a vicious cycle, as Potter states it:

Researchers who want to design a test of media literacy go to the literature for guidance, however that literature shows them an overwhelming choice of definitions with no single definition being regarded as the most useful one. Even more problematic is that none of the many definitions provides enough detail to guide researchers very far through the process of designing measures of media literacy. Until more fully explicated definitions of media literacy are offered to scholars, researchers will be left with little guidance, which will result in the continuation of inadequate conceptual foundations for their empirical studies and therefore a fuzzy and incomplete foundation to use as a standard for judging the validity of their measures (Potter, Thai, 2016: 37).

In Russian science, there is its own tradition of measuring media literacy and / or media competence. In most cases, scholars use questionnaires, tests (Fedorov, 2012: 48-51), and experiments (Ryzhikh, 2012: 50-63; Fedorov, 2014: 82-88) for this purpose. Far less frequently, a focus group method is employed (Frolova et al., 2017: 37-46).

What criteria are usually used for assessment? Generally speaking, they all can be divided into two groups: primarily technical skills along with intensity of using media (Zircon, 2013) and ability to critically analyze and interpret media messages (Fedorov, 2012: 48-51; Zircon, 2017). Interestingly enough, sometimes these two criteria may not correlate with each other: as A.V. Fedorov puts it, “as a rule, modern students’ media competence is quite high with regard to a range of technical skills of practical usage of media, but not with relation to media texts’ analysis” (Fedorov, 2014: 87-88).

Moreover, I believe that in terms of assessing media literacy the second group – so-called interpretive and evaluative skills – takes priority over the first one. A student may be well-versed on technical features and peculiarities of modern communicative devices, use several of them routinely, and actively interact within different social networks and messengers, but at the same time he or she may not know the first thing about the ways to find specific information (say, about politics), how to check its credibility, and where (at what news resources) an alternative view on exact issue can be found.

In this sense, I agree with A.A. Levitskaya who argues that in order to assess media literacy correctly, one should first and foremost consider the level of analytical evaluation of information, media texts, and a wide range of interactions between people and media sphere (Levitskaya, 2015: 37).

Bearing all this in mind, in my questionnaire, I used questions and statements oriented toward revealing substantive (and, partly, activity-related) segments of media literacy. Besides, I drew on the fact that the main goal of the research was to assess political part of respondents’ media literacy rather than media literacy in general. Such a perspective influenced the content and focus of the questions.

4. Results

The first part of the questionnaire contained eight questions about the text respondents were asked to read. Students were informed of the text (when and where it was published) and its author. Depending on its complexity, each question was evaluated from two to six points.

An example of an easy question (maximum two points for the right answer) is the following: Whose points of view were presented in the text? Since the author – V. Afanasieva – had articulated only her own arguments and not even mentioned opinions of those who thought differently, the answer was quite clear: only an author's view was presented there. However, regardless of outward simplicity of this question, sometimes respondents gave wrong answers or just were at a loss to answer.

An example of the most difficult questions (six points maximum) is the following: What methods did the author use to influence the audience? It should be noted that there was plenty of them in the text: comparisons, metaphors, hyperboles, epithets, stigmas – to name but a few. Six points were given if a respondent had named almost all of them, zero points – if nothing was mentioned. Taken together, one could get thirty-five points for answers within the first part of the questionnaire.

The second part contained fifteen statements – respondents were asked to form their attitude toward each of them (“rather agree” or “rather disagree”). I tried to formulate those assertions as clear as possible – so that chances to interpret them differently were slim to none. Examples of true statements are: “To some extent, all people are under media influence”; “TV-channel *Dozhd*, radio station *Echo of Moscow*, and Internet-edition *Meduza* are in opposition to the Kremlin”. Examples of false statements are: “As a rule, a media literate person does not pay attention to news outlets holding views that are at variance with his or her own”; “Today, majority of mainstream American mass media (e.g., *CNN*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, etc.) cover V. Putin's foreign policy in general and reunification of Russia and Crimea in particular positively and endorse it”. Each right choice (be it true or false answer) was worth one point. Therefore, in total one could get fifteen points for the second part of the questionnaire.

Then I summed points got by each respondent for the first and second parts (maximum was fifty) and – in order to transfer it in percentage terms – multiplied them by two. As a result, I got numerical expression of each respondent's media literacy level.

Of course, I am aware of the risk that the final results may well be quite relative, because aggregate percentage to a great extent depends on the list of questions, the way they were phrased, and even on the essence of the text respondents read. Be that as it may, I believe that such survey provides insight into average level of students' media literacy and, which is also very important, finds out those aspects of media texts' analysis that proved to be the most challenging for respondents.

What were the exact results I have got? A scatter of media literacy levels, as expected, turned to be wide – 62 % – ranging from 28 % to 90 %. An average level was 58.07 %. Conspicuous is the fact that the results are contingent upon respondents' gender, age, and major.

An average media literacy level of female students is 60.42 %, while male respondents obtained more modest result – 50.9 %. Why was it so? Arguably, it was due to the fact that young women are usually more attentive and diligent than men. In those cases where male respondents could have overlooked something or just got sloppy to elaborate on something (for instance, to mention methods the author used to influence the audience) female students were less dismissive of the tasks and consequently earned more points. Nonetheless, I would not make a conclusion that females are generally more interested in politics, more often get information about it from mass media and thus are more media literate than males.

Comparison of average media literacy levels according to age seems to be much more indicative. As can be seen at graph, from seventeen to twenty years, an average media literacy percentage constantly grows, then it declines, grows again and – what is most illustrative – plummets after the age of twenty-two. Needless to say, the sample is not big enough to confidently state that there are firm regular correlations. However, I believe that the main trend has the ring of truth. Having become students with social and liberal arts majors, people usually start showing more interest in politics, use mass media on a daily basis and, consequently, become more perceptive and experienced in this sphere.

The reason of the sharp decrease observed after twenty-two years may be explained by the fact that at this age people usually have their own families, combine work with study, and thus normally have fewer time to follow news, let alone pay attention to the way it is covered by journalists.

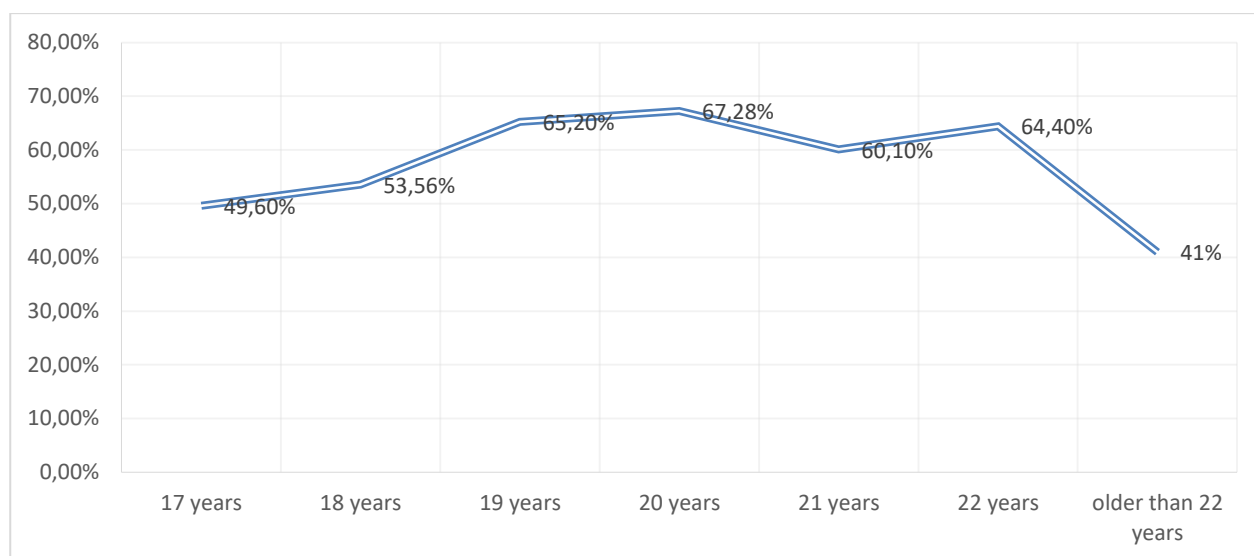


Fig. 1. Media Literacy Levels According to Age (percentage)

The last criterion to differentiate the results is respondent's major (i.e. political science, international relations, forensic analysis, and customs procedures). As none of them has previously taken courses somehow connected with media literacy (and there is no such a course at Saratov State University at all), I could not compare their results with those of control group.

However, I deemed it necessary to calculate an average level of those students whose major is political science. As an associate professor of Political Science Department, I know from my personal experience that occasionally, within different courses, they do discuss peculiarities of media coverage of politics. This means that they have at least faintest idea about methods used by the press to affect their audience. Numerical calculations have supported my hypothesis: an average level of media literacy of students focusing on political science was 67.04 %, while it was only 54.72 % for all the rest respondents (i.e. future specialists in international relations, forensic analysis, and customs procedures).

A few words about questions that appeared to be the most and least difficult for respondents. As far as the first part of the questionnaire is concerned, the most frequently students gave correct answers to the questions about the purpose of the text, gender and age of its potential audience, as well as about points of view presented in the post. Conversely, respondents struggled when asked to list rhetorical tools used by the author and media sources with alternative political agendas. In an attempt to answer the last question, most of the times they wrote that alternative views can be found just "online", "on social media", "on TV", "in blogs", etc. Only a handful of them managed to mention exact pro-liberal media outlets.

The last question of the first part of the questionnaire implied a task to encapsulate the text into one or two sentences. By doing so, I intended to measure students' creativity and their ability to produce short media messages. While evaluating their answers, I took two main factors into consideration, i.e. the content of what was written (to what extent it correlated with the essence of the text) and the way it was stated (in terms of style, spelling, and punctuation). Interestingly enough, maximum that one could get for this task was five points, but an average turned to be only 2.52 points.

Within the second part of the questionnaire, students often made mistakes while defining truthfulness of the statement about opposition-leaning mass media. For many of them (sixty out of ninety-seven respondents), *Dozhd*, *Echo of Moscow*, and *Meduza* appeared to be loyal to the Kremlin. Two more assertions also proved to be rather tricky: "While setting their news agendas, mass media, among other factors, take their audience's preferences into consideration" and "There is a tendency that usually events are presented more dramatically in media texts than in reality". Thirty respondents found these two statements false.

What does it all mean? At first, it may well be a kind of red flag that students have a shaky knowledge of modern media landscape (even in Russia); many of them do not have a clue what

media are loyal to the government and what are in opposition to it. At second, they do not know a “theory” of media industry either. To be honest, I could not even imagine that a third of respondents would brush off suggestion that, among other things, journalists take into account preferences of their audiences.

On the other hand, I find it quite indicative that in most cases students had no problems with statements like “Today, majority of mainstream American mass media (e.g., *CNN*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, etc.) cover V. Putin’s foreign policy in general and reunification of Russia and Crimea in particular positively and endorse it” (only three respondents out of ninety-seven deemed it true) and “Conflicts, wars, scandals, and blood attract the most attention (when it bleeds, it leads)” (only five false answers). In my opinion, the very fact that these assertions are so obvious for students may be considered to be an important feature of substantive content of the messages produced by Russian mass media.

5. Conclusion

Those were the main results of the research I have conducted. To reiterate, due to the number of respondents surveyed (ninety-seven students of Saratov State University) they are not fully representative. Besides, the lack of conventional definition of media literacy and commonly agreed criteria of its levels gravely complicates a search for “universal” measuring tools: some scholars emphasize the importance of creative aspects of media literacy, others – productive, still others – interpretive, and so on.

Within this research, I primarily focused on interpretive and productive components of media literacy. Moreover, I tried to stress a political side of this phenomenon. In this sense, the very attempt to come up with the way to measure it seems to be quite important. In today’s world, when media wars (for both home and foreign policies) have nearly become a commonplace, politics-related dimension of media literacy is arguably growing in stature and media literacy itself turns into one of the key factors of individual’s political culture. As a result, this part of media education assumes critical prominence.

A survey I carried out allowed me to suppose that in spite of the fact that young people are rather good at using up-to-date media technologies, most of them do not properly orient themselves in the maelstrom of media messages, have only a passing acquaintance with key subjects of the Russian media landscape and a sketchy notion what the interaction between the press and the audience should be like. In addition, there is a correlation between media literacy levels of students, on the one hand, and their age and major – on the other.

Possible ways of further exploration of this problem are the following. First, it is clear that in order to get more valid and representative results, the size of the sample should be significantly increased. Second, some improvements in research methods are also needed. For instance, wordings of questions asked may be improved and the number of questions may be increased (perhaps, by adding questions about media preferences of the audience and frequency of using mass media). Last but not least, it would be useful to compare political segments of media literacy levels of those who got elements of media education and those who did not.

I have no doubts, that development of media literacy skills will lead to improvement in students’ political culture, which, in its turn, in the long run, will facilitate democratization of political system of the whole state.

6. Annex

Questionnaire

Part 1.

1. *What do you think is the main purpose of this media text? Select no more than two options. (three points maximum for a right answer)*

- a) to inform the audience;
- b) the author’s self-expression;
- c) to entertain the audience;
- d) to advertise a commodity / service / project;
- e) to convince the audience;
- f) to educate the audience;

g) your own variant:

2. *What rhetorical tools did the author use in order to attract and keep the audience's attention? Please, list and briefly explain them. (six points maximum for a right answer)*

3. *Whose points of view and opinions were presented in this media text? (two points maximum for a right answer)*

4. *Do you think that some important information (e.g., facts, issues, aspects, points of view) was omitted in the text? If you think so, please, specify; if you do not think so, leave it blank. (five points maximum for a right answer)*

5. *Define the target audience of this text. (three points maximum for a right answer)*

In terms of gender:

a) males;

b) females;

c) both females and males.

In terms of age:

a) 5 – 15 years;

b) 16 – 25 years;

c) 26 – 40 years;

d) 41 – 60 years;

e) older than 60 years;

In terms of level of prosperity:

a) the poor;

b) the working class;

c) the middle class;

d) the rich;

e) all.

6. *In your opinion, is it necessary to check credibility of the facts contained in this media text? If yes, please, specify the exact ways to do it. (five points maximum for a right answer)*

7. *At what news sources can one find media stories on this issue? Can you name exact media outlets where a stance that is alternative to that set forth in the text you have just read is likely to be presented? (six points maximum for a right answer)*

8. *Please, try to encapsulate the main ideas of this text into one or two sentences.*

Part 2.

Fifteen statements are listed below. Please, define your personal position on each of them ("rather agree" or "rather disagree"). Circle the numbers of those statements you rather agree with.

1. An owner of media outlet, as a rule, does not exert any effect on editorial policy of his or her TV-channel, newspaper, radio station, etc.

2. Among others, mass media take into account their audiences' preferences while defining their news agendas.

3. Most people prefer to get information from news outlets political stance of which (i.e., liberal, conservative, communist, loyal or opposing to the government) is closer to their own.

4. As a rule, a media literate person does not pay much attention to those media whose positions on key political issues are at variance with his or her own.

5. On a personal level, different people may take the same piece of information differently.

6. To some extent, everyone is under media influence.

7. The way a politician is portrayed by mass media influences the level of his or her popularity with the general public.

8. To focus public attention on the issues they cover is a peripheral goal of most mass media.

9. Technical aspects of live TV-broadcasts (lighting, angle, background sound, etc.) do not affect the audience's attitude toward the exact participant of the program.

10. Conflicts, wars, scandals, and blood do not capture the audience's attention.

11. Events covered by mass media tend to seem more dramatic than they are in reality.

12. As a rule, breaking news contain well-balanced evaluations and the most reliable facts that usually prove to be true later.

13. Most media texts should be taken with a grain of salt.

14. “Dozhd”, “Echo of Moscow”, and “Meduza” are among those media outlets that are in opposition to the current government in Russia.

15. Today, majority of mainstream American mass media (e.g., CNN, “The New York Times”, “The Washington Post”, etc.) cover V. Putin’s foreign policy (and reunification of Russia and Crimea in particular) positively and endorse it”.

Part 3.

1. Your gender:
 - a) female;
 - b) male;
 - c) other.
2. How old are you?
3. What is the highest education level you have?
 - a) basic general (compulsory);
 - b) secondary;
 - c) secondary vocational;
 - d) incomplete higher;
 - e) higher;
 - f) postgraduate degree.

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