Importance of Media Literacy for Political Communication in Russia: A Case of Student Community

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to develop and test a new model of political communication with the emphasis on media literacy as an important factor for political information dissemination in the society suggesting new perspectives for political public relations activities. The authors combine concepts from media literacy studies (Buckingham, 2003; Carlsson, 2019; Jones-Jang et al., 2021; Len-Ríos et al., 2016; Rasi et al., 2021), public relations research (Friedenberg, 1997; Holladay, Coombs, 2013; Moloney, 2006; Newman, 1999), and public opinion theory (Bykov, Kuzmin, 2017; Lilleker, 2014; McNair, 2007; Simons, 2019; Zaller, 1992) to derive a four-component model, conceptualizing the importance of media literacy for political communication in Russia, comprising specific factors into a four components: socio-demographic profile, media literacy, media effects, and political effects. Results show how socio-demographic profile, media literacy, media effects, and political effects vary in affecting the process of political communication in Russia. It is also demonstrated how digital literacy acts as a mediator in the political communication process. The study relies on the results of the available public opinion polls in Russia (Kazakov, 2017; Levada-Center, 2019) and online survey (N = 632) conducted by the authors in the beginning of 2021.

Keywords: media literacy, public relations, mass media, political communication, Russia, students.

1. Introduction

In times of digitalization and mediatization, political communication is increasingly influenced by the personal skills and abilities to consume political content from varieties of information sources: political communication has become highly dependent on media literacy (or media competence) of the public. Media literacy concept has been in the focus of scientists in pedagogy since 60-s (Carlsson, 2019), In 1990-s, media literacy as a concept and practice attracted worldwide recognition as a tool for sustainable development and as a part of human rights and democratic development (Singh et al., 2016).

In Russia, the problem of media literacy firstly has got attention and been recognized among pedagogics researchers for mass media are suggesting alternative ways of learning (Fedorov, Levitskaya 2017). A.V. Fedorov, being a leading researcher in the field, published a scientific journal *Media Education* since 2005. The journal focuses on the problems of media literacy education development in primary, secondary and high levels of the education system. Today, one can observe the rapid development of media literacy education research with application to different fields of knowledge including political science (Bykov et al., 2019; Kazakov, 2017; Vartanova, 2019; Voynilov, 2016). For example, last year A.A. Kazakov defended doctoral

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dissertation "The political role of media literacy in the context of the technological transformation of mass communication" in Moscow State University (Kazakov, 2020).

Obviously, media literacy education has great importance for mass media and public opinion. However, there is a lack of studies in the field of public relations and media literacy (Holladay, Coombs, 2013). The topic undoubtedly has great potential for practical implications since media literacy directly impacts on public relations. Effectiveness of PR-strategies, tactics, and tools directly depends on how the target groups filter and verify the content of mass media. The studies in the field media literacy and public relations have a certain potential to facilitate a public discussion about media literacy development and to raise the awareness among PR-practitioners on the topic of responsible campaigning. The social and practical implications of the study have a great importance for political communication. Public relations being fully adopted by political actors contribute to the mediatization of politics with supposedly negative overall results (Lau et al., 2007; Moloney, 2006; Newman, 1999; McNair, 2004). The paper seeks to explore the importance of media literacy for political communication and political public relations.

In the following, this task is approached in three steps: First, approaches to studying media literacy from different fields of research are introduced, leading to a synthesis of central research gaps with the emphasis on political communication. Second, the public relations perspective is applied to develop a new four-component model of political communication by combining concepts from public opinion, media literacy, media effects and public relations. Third, we demonstrate how this model can be operationalized and used for empirical evaluation of the state and effects of media literacy by drawing on a student sample and using the politics in Russia as an example.

2. Materials and methods

The following conceptual model is rooted inside the political processes in Russia, thus should be treated cautiously keeping in mind national circumstances. Political communication in today's Russia has a unique configuration with sharp polarization on two opposing parts of society: the bigger part of middle and elder generations with TV as a main source of information and the younger and smaller part with social media and the Internet as a main source of information (Levada-Center, 2020). Of course, this picture is far more complicated since 76.3 % of the population (12+) uses the Internet and 82.8 million people are going online every day in 2019 (Davydov, 2019). It means that media audiences are overlapping. However, studies show striking differences in political information consumption among generations in Russia: only 13 % of the 18-30s age group is watching social and political programs on TV or over channels, while 33 % of the over 60s age group enjoys such programs (Kazakov, 2017). There is another important issue in the political system of Russia: voter's turnout is much higher in senior generations and much lower in younger generations (Smyth, Soboleva, 2014). Political and social-information campaigns are broadcasted exclusively on television and are not intended for a younger audience. Young people are somehow excluded from political communication. Unfortunately, prolonged communication disruption and miscommunication tends to cause political crises like the 'Facebook revolution' in Moscow in 2011 or recent 'Tik-Tok protests' (White, McAllister, 2014).

Recent developments of political communication in Russia are influenced by two corresponding processes: media transformations with the emphasis on the digital mediums (Vartanova, 2019) and advances in public relations and advertising as a tool of political management (Samoilenko, Erzikova, 2017). Public relations as a set of technologies and principles of mass communication were introduced in Russia in the 1990-s. Since then 'some Western 'ways of doing PR' have infiltrated Russian PR field, simultaneously changing it and mutating under the field's influence' (Erzikova, 2013). There is a big industry of PR-education and PR-services including political and government communication (Bykov et al., 2016). The tool-box of PR-practitioners in Russia is astonishingly wide and strong, especially in the field of political PR where the proactive press-relations approach is used in the first place (Larsson, 2012). Activities in the field of media-relations and press-liaisons seem to be strongly linked to the presidential job approval (Kiousis, Strömbäck, 2010).

Advances in political image-making are clearly on the top if one bears in mind a figure of the President Putin (Kazun, 2016; Robertson, Greene, 2017; Simons, 2019). Russian communication consultants also show excellent skills with political mythmaking (Laruelle, 2016; Persson, Petersson, 2014). The study by Robertson and Greene finds that 'television propaganda did indeed matter' in Russia (Robertson, Greene, 2017). Possible explanation roots on the adaptations of agenda-setting and

framing theories by political consultants (Bodrunova, Nigmatullina, 2019; Bykov, Kuzmin, 2017; Kazun 2016). As a result, it is clear why Guriev and Treisman argue that the political regime in Russia belongs to the new category of informational authoritarianism that is characterized by massive investment in mass media control and political PR (Guriev, Treisman, 2020).

Despite firm control over political agenda and media, there is a strong feeling of political system instability in Russia. The problem seems to have several dimensions. One of them deals with the generation gap mentioned above. Second one is about the quality of PR on the peripheral branches of the regime (Dollbaum, 2020). The other problem is grounded on new developments in political marketing. Classic technologies of informational influence usually include segmenting the audience into target groups with highlighting specific socio-demographic characteristics, after that goes specification of media channels which helps to focus communication on the target groups (Burton, Shea, 2010; Farrell, Schmitt-Beck, 2002; McNair, 2007; Newman, 1999). In this model, media provides some media effects for socio-demographic groups. In this way, mass media influence the political process (Klapper, 1960).

Lilliker puts digital literacy on the periphery of the political communication system combining social uses of media, media literacy and political interest in one of the three context elements (media system and regulation of media use being two others) (Lilleker, 2014). This marketing-orienting model worked fine until recently helping to form public opinion all around the world (Zaller, 1992). Several miscalculations by opinion pollsters (Trump campaign being mostly remembered) and mass protests raise some questions about this model (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Today's media rich society depends on digital literacy for the users who are filtering information and navigating the media landscape according to digital skills and level of critical thinking (Singh et al., 2016). F. Toepfl indicates this problem like this: 'the study of audiences received astonishingly little attention' (Toepfl, 2014). So, it is reasonable to suggest that both socio-demographic profiling and media literacy profiling could work as basic parameters for political communication. In this regard media literacy should have a great importance, since it is it that determines how political information will be perceived by consumers.

This study suggests a new scheme of political communication in Russia comprising specific factors into four components: socio-demographic profile, media literacy, media effects, and political effects. The overwhelming majority of authors consider media literacy as an undoubtedly positive factor in political communication: the higher the media literacy, the better. However, in the context of Russian politics, a high level of media literacy is able to prevent young adults from participation in political life (Toepfl, 2014). The idea of media literacy levels is well presented in special literature (Catts, 2010; Literat, 2014; Voynilov et al., 2016). So, concerns about manipulation in the media (Bagdikian, 2004) and spin-doctoring in PR (McNair, 2004) may lead to the phenomenon of excessive media literacy, to boost conspiracy thinking, and discourage political participation. Authoritarian regimes learn how to use new social media to protect their activities by corrupting the public sphere (Gunitsky, 2015; Morozov, 2011). However, in all levels of media literacy it leaves an open door for practices of political propaganda and political PR.

Based on this conceptual model and the literature review it is reasonable to formulate four specific research questions:

RQ1. How can we integrate the concept of media literacy into the model of modern political communication?

RQ2. How can we specify and measure media literacy and its individual dimensions?

RQ3. How do different political communication dimensions interrelate and affect each other?

RQ4. Is it possible to prove that media literacy replaces socio-demographic profile as a basic parameter?

Empirical studies of digital literacy in Russia are very rare, digital literacy is considered to be in the medium level at best (Kazakov, 2020). Voynylov and colleagues conducted a study and came to surprising conclusions: only 60 % of the respondents are able to find necessary information with search engines, and 56 % said that they compare information from different sources in order to verify it (Voynilov et al., 2016). Bondarenko and colleagues reported that according to the data from Universities only 87 % of students with higher education have the skills of communication in the digital environment and working with digital information (Bondarenko et all., 2019). This study aims to study digital literacy, media effects and political effects in the student community in Russia. The study focuses on the students since the recent political events in Russia indicate that young

people could be mobilized by political campaigning in social media. All data is available at GitHub (https://github.com/prof-bykov/MediaLiteracyRu).

Tab. 1. Socio-demographic profile of student sample (N = 632)

Parameter	N	%
Age		
16-20	387	61.2
21-25	222	35.1
26-30	18	2.8
31-35	5	0.7
Gender		
Male	293	46.4
Female	339	53.6
Location		
Megacities	408	64.6
Cities	224	35,4
Education		
Humanitarian	339	53.6
Technological	293	46.4

This study uses the method of online-survey because of COVID-19 limitations. The data were collected in January-February of 2021. Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the sample. The sample tries to repeat proportions of the student population in Russia by the parameters of age, gender, education, and location. According to Bondarenko and colleagues, there were about 4.161.700 students in Russia in 2019: 54.6 % being female and 54.3 % with humanitarian specialization (Bondarenko et al., 2019). The sample is also diversified and quoted by location: 64.6 % of the respondents are students from Universities located in big cities like Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, and Kazan. The other respondents are from not so big cities located all around Russia: Vladivostok, Ufa, Perm, Saratov, Stavropol, Astrakhan', Vladimir, Tula, Yaroslavl, Syktyvkar, Irkutsk, etc. The sample is non-parametric data by the parameter of age (Mean=20.24, SD=2.348, Skewness=1.969, Kurtosis=6.722) due to the fact that high-level education in Russia starts at the age of 17 with life-long opportunities to have a new diploma. A survey questionnaire includes 20 questions. Within the framework of the questionnaire, we set four blocks of questions: socio-demographic profile, media literacy, media effects, and media competence.

The time required to complete the final survey was approximately 5 minutes.

To evaluate media literacy competencies of students the questionnaire contained six questions. First three were about media literacy awareness including simple questions like 'Have you heard something about media literacy?'. Next two were about skills of fact-checking and alternative sources practice including simple questions like 'Do you compare news in different mass media?' The last question was about the necessity of media education in secondary schools. These questions used Likert scale. To simplify this component the study uses a media literacy awareness index (MLAI) which summarizes maximum positive answers. According to this study, MLAI could fall in the range from 0 to 9 (first 3 questions have 1 point each, next 3 questions have 2 points each). So, respondents can get 9 maximum and 0 minimum.

To test media effects the questionnaire has, first of all, there was a question whether respondents trust the information distributed by the media. To understand the opinion about media manipulation there was a question on whether the respondents believe that the media is manipulating their opinion. Another question tested the respondents' opinion on news and media content to be aggressive. And one more question related to the orientation of political talk shows: are they entertaining or serious in nature. In addition, we raised the question of whether the media primarily act in the interests of the owner or in the interests of the target audience. All these questions helped to understand students' opinion about the main media effects: reliability, manipulations, politainment, public or private interest, etc.

To control political effects the questionnaire suggested four questions. The first one was about interest in political news. In the next, active reactions or online participation were examined with the question whether the students share political information on social networks, comment on them, post likes/dislikes, etc. Another question is directly related to the trust of politicians who run various online blogs: respondents were asked to choose whether they trust politicians more, as primary sources or the media. And one question related to the problem of trust in experts in the field of politics, the respondents were asked to choose and evaluate how much they trust experts on the Likert scale. These questions helped us to analyze the following political effects: interest in politics, trust in experts, trust in politicians, and online participation.

3. Discussion

Development of media literacy concept caused by rapid spread of electronic mass media and especially the Internet. Modern political communication is constantly changing: too many information sources with too many media channels (and counting). To be a modern person means to have digital skills to keep up with information flows. So, media literacy is supposed to be an important part of contemporary education. The simplest definition argues that media literacy is a result of media education, and in its turn "media education is the process of teaching and learning about media" (Buckingham, 2003). The idea of media education appeared in the 1970s, when UNESCO announced media education as a priority area for the next decade (Carlsson, 2019). Several UNESCO documents and reports emphasized that media literacy enables people to understand the communication media used in their society and acquire skills of using these media to communicate with other people (Singh et al., 2016). Media literacy usually is the outcome of media education which forms the ability of an individual to understand media flows and information due to a certain set of media competencies that a person acquires along with life.

Bulger and Davison sum the essentials of the definition: 'Media literacy is most commonly described as a skill set that promotes critical engagement with messages produced by the media. At its most basic, media literacy is the active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create' (Bulger, Davison, 2018). Hoobs argues that 'media literacy has been alternately framed in one of two ways: empowerment is a form of taste discrimination that enables people to make good decisions about evaluating the quality of media content, while protection is rooted in the idea that critical thinking about media reduces people's likelihood of negative influence to media content, including violence, sexuality, propaganda and misrepresentation' (Hobbs, 2017).

Carlsson connects media literacy with basic human rights: 'The complexities of modern society demand educated, skilled and critical citizens in many different areas if freedom of expression, democracy and social progress are to be maintained and developed. Some of the knowledge and skills required relate to media and communication culture. Media and information literacy takes its place alongside other things people need in order to be active citizens: knowledge of how political decisions are taken, the principles of the rule of law, the rights and obligations of citizens, the meaning of universal human rights, national and international security' (Carlsson, 2019).

Researchers of media literacy from Russia usually work in the same directions. A.V. Fedorov thinks that media literacy is a personal 'communication culture with the media, creativity, communication skills, critical thinking, perception, interpretation, analysis and evaluation of media texts, to teach different forms of self-expression by means of media technology, media literacy acquisition' (Fedorov, 2012). His definition tends to support the classical approach of media literacy as a result of media education. E.L. Vartanova, as a head of Journalism Department at the Moscow State University, emphasises the role of journalism and mass media. She argues that media literacy implies 'understanding the nature and fundamental principles of mass media, the development of information technology, improving skills of analysis and evaluation of information content and the ability to use this information consciously' (Vartanova, 2019). A.A. Kazakov defines media literacy as 'the ability of a person to find the information that interests him in the mass media materials, to critically comprehend it and verify its authenticity, as well as, if necessary, to create elementary media messages' (Kazakov, 2017).

Several definitions of digital literacy include critical thinking as a part of the concept. The non-government organization "National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking" defines critical thinking as "an intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.

In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness" (Critical…, 1987).

As an ideal type, critical thinking is purposeful, self-regulating judgment that results in interpretation, analysis, assessment and inference, as well as an explanation of the factual, conceptual, methodological, criteriological or contextual considerations on which this judgment is based. Critical thinking is essential as a research tool, but totally a human phenomenon. Yusupova with colleagues picture: 'The ideal critical thinker is usually curious, well-informed, trusts the correct thinking, broad and open-minded, flexible, impartial in assessments, honestly admits his own biases, prudent in making decisions and judging, ready to reconsider his point of view, clearly sets out the essence of the case, organized in complex cases, persistent in seeking relevant information, rational in choosing criteria, focused on research and persistent in finding results that are as accurate as the circumstances and the subject of research require' (Yusupova et al., 2020). However, it is really hard to expect that common audiences of mass media will fall into the category of scientists.

Some authors insist that media literacy should be developed to the concept of media competency. Martens and Hobbs propose one of the best definitions of the competencies of digital and media literacy which must 'include the ability to make responsible choices and access information by locating and sharing materials and comprehending information and ideas; analyze messages in a variety of forms by identifying the author, purpose, and point of view and evaluating the quality and credibility of the content; create content in a variety of forms, making use of language, images, sound and new digital tools and technologies; reflect on one's own conduct and communication behaviour by applying social responsibility and ethical principles; and take social action by working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, workplace, and nation and by participating as a member of a community' (Martens, Hobbs, 2015).

A.V. Fedorov follows this lead: 'The positive outcome of media education should be media competence of a personality – the set of his/her motives, knowledge, skills, abilities (indicators: motivational, contact, information, perceptual, interpretative, practical (hands-on), creative)' (Fedorov, 2012). It seems that, as basic literacy for education, media literacy is a basic level for media competency.

There are many ways then individuals, groups, and society are able to benefit from media literacy. It seems that media literacy helps to fight fake-news and to protect public discussion (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). According to Martens and Hobbs, Internet skills help to improve citizens' participation in politics and, in particular, in elections. (Martens, Hoobs, 2015). Another study shows that individuals with higher levels of education use the Internet for 'capital-enhancing' activities, which includes seeking political or government information (Van Deursen, Van Dijk, 2014). Deursen and Helsper have found that investments in digital skills and media literacy do affect 'outcomes in other domains and that this is independent of the characteristics of the person' (Van Deursen, Helser, 2018). Christensen and Bengtsson suggest that political activities in Finland today via the Internet are run by virtual citizens who are at least as politically competent as traditional activists which requires a certain level of digital literacy (Christensen, Bengtsson, 2011).

On the other hand, poor media literacy is able to provoke aggressive communication in social media (Bykov et al., 2018). Internet activity in social networks strengthens our aspirations for individualization and weakens our social ties (Scheerder et al., 2019). The question of how to resist this becomes much more relevant in this regard. How to maintain your individuality and uniqueness and not become a victim of external manipulators or even bots and mal-ware? (Murthy, 2016) Study shows that in Twitter more than 50 % of internet-traffic is generated by bots (Al-Rawi, 2018). Being a part of life-long education, media literacy needs to be developed constantly, however there are many problems in media education for generations like senior adults or children and teens (Hobbs, 2017; Len-Ríos et al., 2019; Rasi et al., 2021).

Summing up the literature review, one should conclude that media literacy is a complicated phenomenon with competing approaches and definitions. The authors argue that further development of the media literacy concept involves the idea of media competency as a combination of digital skills, media consumption experience and critical thinking. The important goal of media literacy studies today is to understand how these skills help the individuals to navigate the main information flows and not to become a victim of deception or manipulation.

4. Results

The results show that students in Russia generally are aware of media literacy: 64.24 % has heard about media literacy, 84.49 % - about fake-news, 55.38 % - about fact-checking, 81.49 % says that they compare news in different mass media (at least often), 60.44 % declares that they check out primary sources of the news in mass media, and 81.01 % supports the idea of media education in secondary schools. Calculated MLAI mean is 5.43 (SD = 2.145). These figures are rather high compared to the total population.

Table 2 contains statistics based on X-square testing of students' responses to the questionnaire. Calculated media literacy awareness index was applied. The data clearly indicates that only specialization in education matters in formation of media literacy among students: students with humanitarian specializations have higher media literacy awareness index than students with hard science specializations.

Table 2. The effects of media literacy in student community in Russia with media literacy awareness index (N = 632)

	X-square	df	Asymptotic significance (2-sided)
Socio-demographic profile			
Age	33.386	27	0.185
Gender	12.720	9	0.176
Education	34.828	9	0.000
Location	13.248	9	0.152
Media effects			
Trust in mass media	34.433	36	0.543
Politainment	66.157	36	0.002
Communicative aggression	62.410	36	0.004
Property	81.454	36	0.000
Media interest	53.330	36	0.031
Media manipulation	103.845	36	0.000
Political effects			
Interest in politics	143.212	36	0.000
Trust in politicians	50.002	36	0.060
Online participation	77.192	36	0.000
Trust in experts	59.788	36	0.008

Table 2 also indicates that MLAI has a great potential to influence both media effects and political effects. MLAI is especially important for boosting interest in politics and political news among students. It is absolutely clear that the more media literacy a student has, the more he/she is interested in politics.

The other striking result is that a high level of media literacy usually corresponds with a high level of opinion that mass media use manipulation techniques. Totally, 88.45 % says that mass media probably manipulate audiences (see Figure 1). A significant number of respondents indicated that the media owner most likely has influence on the published materials and it also corresponds with media literacy. However, there are two questions which do not correspond with the MLAI. One of them (Trust in politicians) is very close to being statistically significant. Probably, it was not a clear question formula. The question about trust in media sounds too generalized for there are different sorts of media with certain reputation to be or not to be trusted. Probably, it should be replaced.

To prove that media literacy can replace socio-demographic profile as a basic component of political communication model, the x-square tests were applied to all parameters (see Table 3). The results show that the most important linkage to all components is specialization of students. However, sometimes this linkage works in different directions and has unclear results. For example, students in humanities are more informed about media literacy and are more welcome for media education in secondary school. However, students in hard science practically do

more fact-checking and news-comparing. At the same time, it looks like education is the most important variable both in media literacy awareness index and over three components.
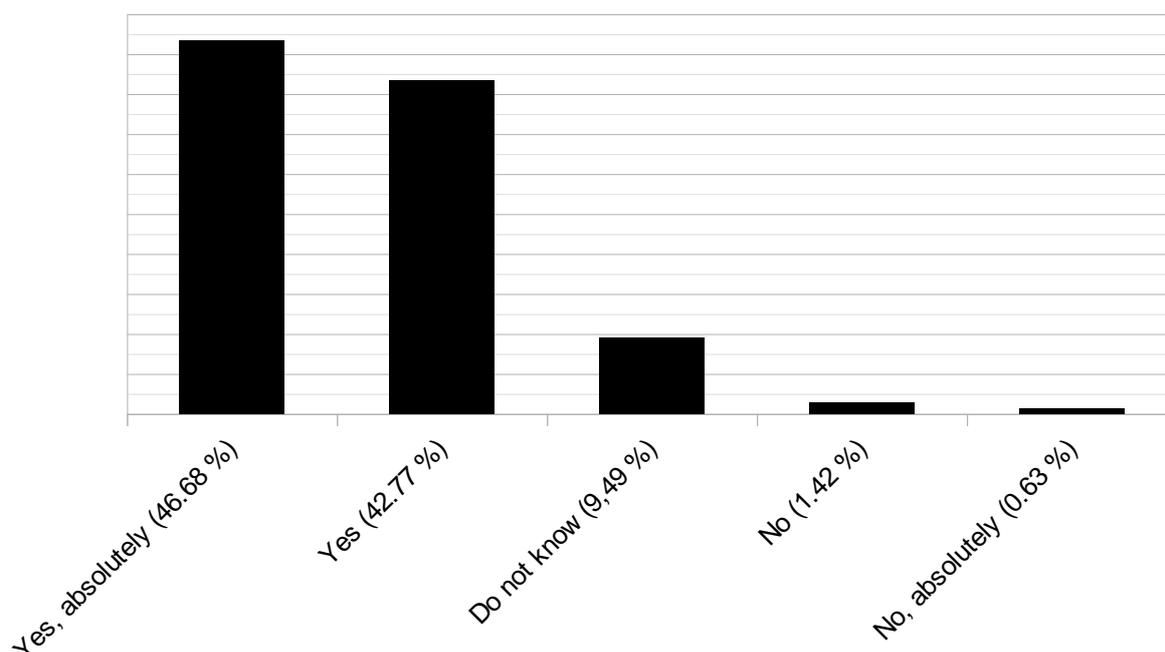

Fig. 1. Distribution of answers to question 'Do you agree that mass media use manipulation in news?' (N = 632)

Table 3. Socio-demographic profile as a component in political communication model (Value of X-square Tests, N = 632)

Parameters	Age	Gender	Education	Location
Media literacy				
Media literacy awareness	9.992 (df=6)	10.709* (df=2)	31.664* (df=2)	0.790 (df=2)
Fact-checking awareness	9.367 (df=6)	30.648*(df=2)	1.129 (df=2)	4.130 (df=2)
Fake-news awareness	4.343 (df=6)	17.285* (df=2)	3.651 (df=2)	5.331 (df=2)
Alternative sources practice	18.311 (df=12)	1.933 (df=4)	14.431* (df=4)	13.335* (df=4)
Fact-checking practice	10.133 (df=12)	1.621 (df=4)	5.077 (df=4)	1.024 (df=4)
Media education	10.732 (df=12)	20.267*(df=4)	40.637*(df=4)	16.143* (df=4)
Media effects				
Trust in mass media	11.631 (df=12)	15.515* (df=4)	27.979* (df=4)	7.235 (df=4)
Politainment	21.877* (df=12	5.609 (df=4)	9.770* (df=4)	4.287 (df=4)
Communicative aggression	16.167 (df=12)	10.313* (df=4)	16.882*(df=4)	5.845 (df=4)
Property	7.329 (df=12)	5.582 (df=4)	9.823* (df=4)	2.608 (df=4)
Media interest	15.274 (df=12)	24.460*(df=4)	41.475* (df=4)	19.026*(df=4)
Media manipulation	3.750 (df=12)	1.189 (df=4)	11.658* (df=4)	7.872 (df=4)
Political effects				
Interest in politics	12.012 (df=12)	11.557*(df=4)	15.003* (df=4)	10.872*(df=4)
Trust in politicians	27.397*(df=12	16.380*(df=4)	30.770*(df=4)	10.411* (df=4)
Online participation	13.309 (df=12)	1.428 (df=4)	30.754*(df=4)	18.422*(df=4)
Trust in experts	17.763 (df=12)	19.225*(df=4)	50.380*(df=4)	8.143 (df=4)

* - Asymptotic significance (2-sided) < 0.05

5. Conclusion

Media literacy became a central target construct in political public relations today. In this paper the authors applied an integrative perspective in order to combine a recent model from

media literacy research, public relations, political communication, and public opinion. The concept of media literacy is multifaceted and, as we can see from the review of the literature, it is still in the development stage. The authors argue that future progress of the concept is in the idea of media competency which differs by levels of digital skills, critical thinking, and experience. Critical thinking is an essential part of media competencies since it helps to evaluate information received from the mass media, as well as the ability to recognize political manipulation. Additionally critical thinking enables users' ability to generate their own message and respond to messages by others.

The empirical part of study suggests that media literacy among students in Russia is generally present. Compared to other age groups students have a high index of media literacy awareness proposed by the authors. According to the results, students are sure that the mass media uses methods of manipulating public opinion. This sense of being manipulated is partly the reason why young people don't trust the media. The study argues that there is a direct link between the level of media literacy and political communication among young people today in Russia. Being over (wrongly) media educated, students can not see reasons to participate in politics. The study participates in calculation of the potential political risks for government institutions, as well as in an objective assessment of the situation with the level of media literacy in Russia.

In continuation to this study, in April 2021, the first focus group was held in Irkutsk, a city in Siberia, with twelfth students participating. The focus group discussed the results of the sociological survey. The respondents showed interest in the topic. Many respondents noted the importance of media literacy for modern youth and their significant interest in politics. The respondents stated that in the modern world the media are constantly trying to manipulate the opinion of the audience, and also often act not in its interests, but in the interests of the owner or the advertisers. However, today's young people often have no desire or no time to check and verify the news, so they read the news only for informational purposes. One older respondent, aged closer to 30 years, reported that if he is interested in the news, they often try to find the very first information guide in search of information and consider it more informative and, possibly, more truthful, because, from his point of view, it is not yet biased. In general, respondents note that they perceive all news information quite septically. During the discussion, the topic of critical thinking was raised. Respondents ambiguously evaluate the term critical thinking itself. One of the respondents said that the term critical thinking is, in general, an adequate perception. And it is the criterion of adequacy that plays a key role in the analysis of information.

The authors argue that the media literacy component is a very important part of the modern political communication model. Media literacy awareness index is able to influence media and political effects. At least, it makes analysis more compact and understandable. The parameter of education (humanitarian or technical) once again raises a question of critical thinking and the quality of the modern educational system, at least, in Russia.

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