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Analysis of Media Literacy Among Students of the Journalism Training Program

Natalia Avdonina ^{a, *}, Lidiya Zaitseva ^a, Nikita Kuprikov ^{b, c}, Mikhail Kuprikov ^b

^a Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov, Russian Federation

^b Moscow Aviation Institute (National Research University), Russian Federation

^c Peter the Great Saint Petersburg Polytechnic University, Russian Federation

Abstract

In modern society, the issues of media literacy seem to be especially relevant due to the spread of fake information and unverified news. Analysis of the level of media literacy as a competence of future journalists seems to be a promising area of scientific and practical research. This is especially true, since journalists are both authors and consumers of information. Based on the analysis of scientific and pedagogical literature, the concept of media literacy is analyzed. As the main methods, a pedagogical experiment and a mass questionnaire are used. To achieve the goal of the study, the authors conducted a mass questionnaire survey to determine the level of media literacy of the first and fourth year students of the Journalism Training Program at Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov (Arkhangelsk, Russian Federation). The survey included three parts: media consumption habits, behavior as an author, and media trust. The survey was supplemented by a pedagogical experiment: students were asked to identify fake and real news. Only four of the seven proposed texts and two of the fake news were identified correctly by the students. As a result, the authors came to the conclusion that a special education in the field of journalism and initial experience in the media sphere does not guarantee a high level of media literacy.

Keywords: media literacy, media education, media competence, information literacy, education.

1. Introduction

The formation of digital literacy among the population is a long-standing problem facing society. The vulnerability of the individual to the World Wide Web is growing along with the Internet development, and the emergence of new Internet media and communication channels. Statistics show the growing number of Internet fraud (Lindel et al., 2020), fake information in the network (Interfax.ru, 2021), deliberate leaks of confidential data via the Internet (Barabanova, 2021).

UNESCO claims that media literacy is the most important competence in the modern world and calls for its integration into curricula and the educational process (UNESCO). A lot of modern research is devoted to teaching digital literacy in schools and universities (Shesterkina et al., 2021). For several decades there has been an opportunity to get a higher education in the field of journalism in Russia, which implies the formation of media literacy among students.

The research questions are as follows: does getting a higher education in journalism always mean the development of media literacy and what is the quality of its formation. The goal of this

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: n.avdonina@narfu.ru (N.S. Avdonina)

study is to identify how a higher education in the field of journalism contributes to the formation of media literacy among students.

Research tasks are: to review the literature on the topic; to conduct a survey and a pedagogical experiment among students of the journalism training program and identify their ability to verify information.

2. Materials and methods

As the main methods, a pedagogical experiment and a mass questionnaire were used.

A mass questionnaire survey was conducted to achieve the goal of the study. Its purpose was to determine the level of media literacy of the first and fourth year students of the Journalism Training Program (42.03.02) at Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov. The authors used a quantitative method of data collection – the Media Literacy online survey, which was presented on the Google Forms service. We distributed the link to the survey on the social networks *Vkontakte*, *Telegram*, *Instagram*, as well as through the postal service. 30 students aged 18 to 21 became the respondents.

The authors conducted a typical pedagogical experiment, which consisted in comparing the results of the survey in the experimental and control groups. The experimental group was the fourth year students, who almost completed his studies; the control group was the first year students, who began to master the profession. The experiment consisted in solving a professional task – to identify fake news from a group of proposed media texts and indicate the criteria the students were guided when determining.

3. Discussion

We live in a mediatized society (Gálik, 2020; Gálik, Oprala, 2021). If even ten years ago the concept of "mediatization" caused scientific discussions, today it is a given. John Corner believed that mediatization gives an idea of the process when the media accumulate and broadcast various knowledge, values and meanings, which entails a change in political and public life (Corner, 2018).

As James Miller suggests, "mediatization is an historical process by which social practices and institutional arrangements change through the introduction of new media technologies. It may often be the case that new media industries and occupations gain power by augmenting or supplanting existing media" (Miller, 2019).

Jean-Christophe Platin and Aswin Punathambekar note that media organize content in space and time, which indicates their pervasive impact (Plantin, Punathambekar, 2019).

We also note the impact of mediatization on the field of creativity, as H.-K. Lee writes (Lee, 2022).

We see the penetration of mass media into culture, politics, economics, religion and other aspects of public life. We list a number of features of modern media culture:

- interactivity, which means accessing and receiving information at any time, instant feedback, participation of people not related to the media in the production and dissemination of information;

- openness, transparency, which implies the ability to find any information on any topic, both in the accessible and invisible web;

- "explosion of authorship", that is, every person who has the appropriate equipment and access to the Internet can become an author, producing any content: audio, video, text, gaming, etc.;

- personalization, that is, any information today is focused not on a mass audience, but on a segmented one. The audience is no longer impersonal, its portrait takes into account specific socio-demographic and psychological characteristics, interests, behavior in social networks, media consumption habits. The modern audience is niche, in other words, preferring specific topics; it forms a request for a media text;

- mosaic thinking. Compared to linear thinking, which is illustrated by a simple book page, mosaic thinking is dynamic, objective and figurative;

- dissemination of fake, inaccurate information. With such an abundance of media texts of different volumes and formats, with constant clarifications and corrections, it can be difficult for an unprepared person to determine the exact factually reliable information;

- multimedia and convergence. We are accustomed to consuming content of different formats on the same device and on the same web page or in the same media text.

Magnus Frostenson and Maria Grefström, analyzing the role of media in representing business in the mass consciousness, came to the conclusion that "the media play an active role in paving the way for changing the predicament of being a company in an environmentally sensitive field of business. The actors – the media but also all others that are taking active part of creating the story over time – are involved through an ongoing and complex interplay. The conditions for how this interaction plays out are shaped by the media logic and the techniques of storytelling" (Frostenson, 2021).

Media culture, as Shakirova (Shakirova, 2020) notes, forms media consciousness. A person with such consciousness lives and acts on the basis of the experience received from the media. We can say that such a person lives by faith; everything that happens around him is seen as the media report about it. Media consciousness is an attribute of the modern post-truth society, in which the media sets the agenda that is trusted. Under such conditions, the issues of media literacy and the skill of critical thinking acquire undeniable relevance.

Media consciousness is supplemented by mosaic thinking, fragmentary knowledge (Kolychev, Simbirtseva, 2016). The semantic links between the streams of different information formats are weak or not established at all.

Media literacy is one of the tasks of media education. Thanks to media education, people understand how mass media and information are arranged, how media can be used, how to check published information. A.V. Fedorov considers media education as a process of personality development with the help and on the material of mass communication (media) in order to form a culture of communication with the media, creative, communicative abilities, critical thinking, skills of full perception, interpretation, analysis and evaluation of media texts, teaching various forms of self-expression using media technology (Fedorov, 2015).

Media education can be part of both professional journalism education and any other. In the classroom, you can explain the basics of journalism, the principles of media functioning, the genre system, format features and other issues. Based on the E.L. Vartanova's definition, media education in the professional field can be understood as the process of teaching future journalists in order to study the organization of the media, their essence, function and typology; as well as the development of media creativity skills (creation, editing of texts and programs for the media) for active participation in media culture (Vartanova, Zasursky, 2003).

Media education contributes to the development of critical thinking, understanding of the social, cultural, political and economic context, the development of communication skills and creative thinking. Critical thinking allows the individual to ask meaningful questions, make sound arguments, and make independent decisions. A person with developed critical thinking is able to evaluate judgments, both his own and those proposed by other people, put forward reasoned judgments and hypotheses, and formulate conclusions.

Media education is closely connected not only with pedagogy, but also with cultural studies, psychology, and history. Media education expands the range of methods for conducting classes with students. This also includes the study of different types of media, online media, fiction, and cinema. As a result of media education, individual perception and independence of thinking are formed. A person is immersed in the media sphere not as a professional, but as a reader, viewer, listener, and author.

There are currently several models of media education in Russia:

- the educational and information model: the study of theory and history, as well as the language of media culture;
- the practical-utilitarian model: the study of various media;
- the aesthetic model that is focused on the development of artistic taste and the analysis of materials;
- the model of developmental education that deals with the sociocultural, culturological development of a creative personality, with the development of perception, analysis and critical thinking (Tuominen, 2012).

Media education includes several stages:

- the level of development and perception of media culture materials;
- development of creative skills and formation of a full-fledged perception of media materials;
- analysis of media materials;
- acquaintance with the history of media culture.

The level of development and perception of media texts helps the teacher to determine a clear idea of the level of development of students in the field of media. The development of creative skills helps to identify new creative opportunities that include not only modern possibilities, but also traditional creative tasks, for example, writing media texts. After the second stage, you can proceed to the development of media analysis skills. Teachers analyze the logic of the author's thinking, and also reveal the author's concept. Media education is based on various creative tasks, that is, practice. Performing creative tasks, the audience masters the language of media, which includes an idea, theme, plot, etc.

One of the outcomes of media education is the development of media literacy as the ability to identify different types of media and understand the message. The basis of media literacy is understanding the reason why a particular text is published. In this way, the audience will be able to identify fake news (Allcott, 2017; Bronstein et al., 2019; Linden et al., 2020). As I. Celik and S. Dogan point out, "interactional use of social media contributes to justifying information, in turn, increasing new media literacy skills. This can serve as a strategy to combat misinformation on social media" (Celik, Dogan, 2021).

According to the Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation, as of January 28, 2016, the level of media literacy in the country was 74 %, which was almost three times higher than the target for 2015 of 25 % (Digital.gov.ru, 2016).

Kazakov sees several levels of comprehension of the concept in media literacy: a benchmark in the information flow; protection from harmful content and its impact; educational opportunities of media texts; competencies of the author of media texts (Kazakov, 2017).

Kozyreva understands media literacy as competence or "the ability of a person who has the skill to adequately perceive the flows of media information in the modern information space, that is, to be able to search, analyze, create media texts and critically evaluate them" (Kozyreva, 2020).

The key figure in media education and the formation of media literacy is the media teacher (Ming, 2020). Its task is to monitor the role of the media in the socialization of children and teenagers, to prevent its negative impact on the minds of young people.

In general, media literacy is defined as the ability of the audience to recognize the meaning of the media text and the media as a source of information according to certain criteria. Media literacy is expressed in the ability to work with media as an audience and as an author. It includes:

- the ability to search for the necessary information in reliable sources;
- the ability to determine the reliability of the source;
- the ability to verify information;
- the ability to work with different formats;
- the ability to apply information and communication technologies in the creation and dissemination of information;
- the ability to work in accordance with the law, ethical and value orientations.

These competencies are chosen as criteria for determining the level of media literacy among students.

4. Results

The media literacy survey includes three parts: media consumption habits, behavior as an author, and media trust. Most students consume information from online media (80 % of respondents) and Instagram (76.7 % of respondents). The answers for the question "What content in social networks is interesting to students?" are presented in the figure (Figure 1).

Respondents prefer short news, informational and entertaining videos, and memes. The most read media include *Meduza* (recognized as a foreign agent), *Novaya Gazeta*, *Lentach*, *Mash*, and *RIA Novosti*. It should be noted that these media offer information in the format of infotainment (*Medusa* (recognized as a foreign agent), *Lentach*, *Mash*), analytical journalism (*Novaya Gazeta*) and news reports (*RIA Novosti*).

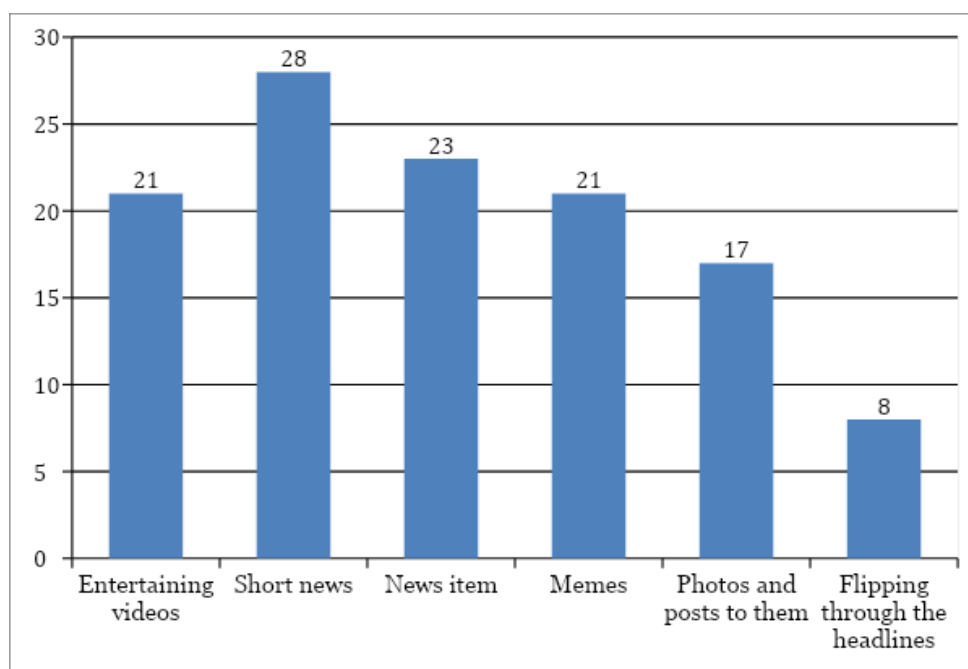


Fig. 1. Types of content that students consume in social networks

Respondents answered the question about malicious content in the following way (Figure 2):

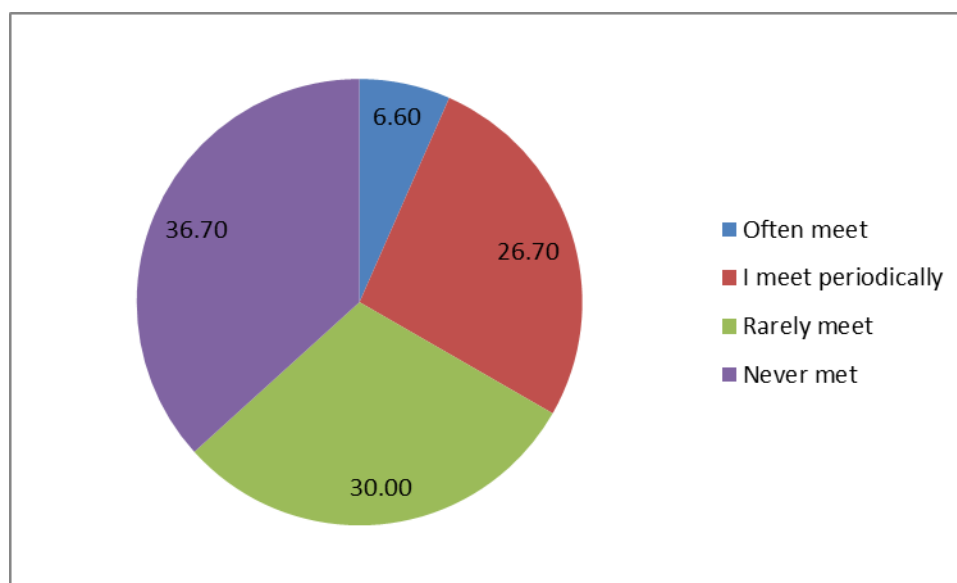


Fig. 2. Respondents' answers to questions about the Internet malicious content (%)

By malicious content, we meant, for example, extremist, suicidal or encouraging illegal behavior information.

Most students do not read foreign media, seven people read in English: *Bellingcat*, *BBC*, *Vogue*, *Euronews*, *The New York Times*. The answers to the question about foreign media allow us to conclude that students do not have access to alternative positions on current topics.

Thus, we see that students mainly receive information from Russian-language Internet media and social networks, preferring the formats of infotainment, news and analytical journalism, while periodically encountering deliberately malicious content.

The next part of questions was devoted to the behavior of respondents as authors. We found out that students quite often publish information (Figure 3): mainly photos, text posts and stories.

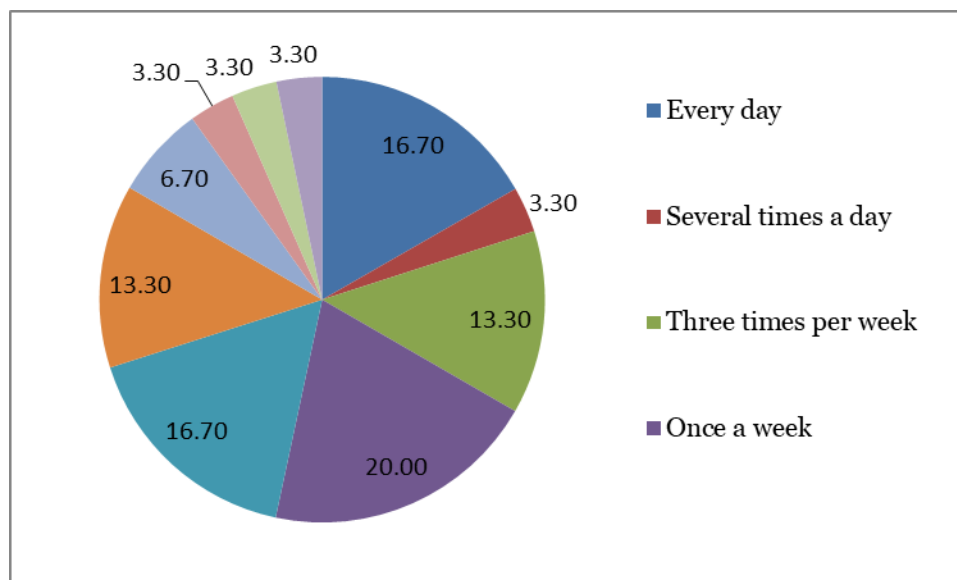


Fig. 3. Frequency of respondents' publication (%)

The answers in the third part of the survey give an idea of the attitude towards the information published in the media. 76.7 % of respondents rated the degree of trust in the media as "satisfactory". As for the mistrust, the students mainly pointed to the abundance of fake information, the lack of expert opinions, the publication of clickbait headlines, and unverified information. Students prefer to double-check information in other media (83.3 %) and in browsers (70 %). 90 % of respondents admit that the offered information may be deliberately false or unverified.

Respondents suggest the following steps to protect themselves from harmful content:

- do not respond to the media bubble;
- to filter information;
- to prevent such content from being shown;
- to check what you have read, heard, seen.

Separately, we asked the question of how to identify fake news. Respondents pointed to the following markers:

- media bubble;
- abundance of introductory structures;
- unknown source, lack of experts;
- a call for distribution;
- emotional style;
- double-check in other sources.

Students identified the yellow press, state media, individuals, and bloggers among those interested in spreading fakes.

Students named such fakes: the story of James Rogers, who was executed for the Massachusetts experiment; canned cat food; cattle burial ground near the village; news about the move of educational institutions to remote learning.

21 of the respondents cooperate with the media.

Next, we conducted a pedagogical experiment: we offered the respondents seven news and the task to determine fake ones. We selected three fake and four true news from the Internet media, which were still available in the sources; among non-fake news we deliberately choose those in which the facts looked like lies or absurdity.

Only four of the seven texts and two of the fake news were correctly identified by students. That is, in reality, the audience considers about 40 % of texts as fake or not-fake. First-year students did better than fourth-year students in identifying fake news (33 % of correct answers vs. 25 %). The real news was identified by students of different courses in the same percentage – 50 % of the respondents found them.

Identifying fake news is a difficult task for both first-year and graduate students, despite the fact that the latter have more journalistic experience and a deeper knowledge of journalism theory.

Additionally, the students were asked to name the criteria they paid attention to when determining the reliability of the news. The results are presented in the figure (Figure 4).

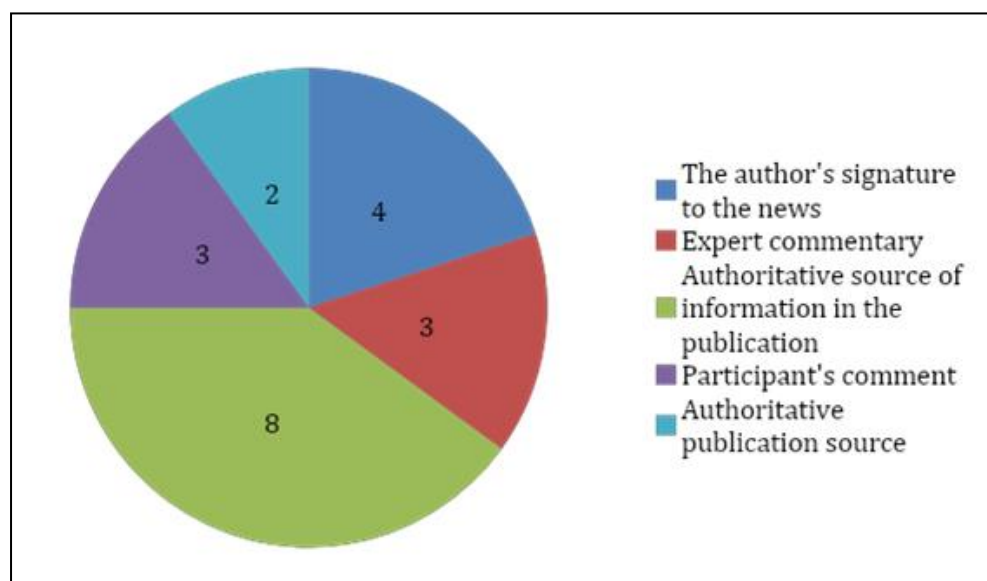


Fig. 4. Rating of news credibility criteria. Evaluation of reliability criteria on a five-point scale

Most of all, according to respondents, one should pay attention to the media that published the news and a commentary by a witness to the news situation. Additionally, the students named the nature of the news headline as the criterion they paid attention to.

At the end of the experiment, respondents were asked to rate the reliability criteria on a five-point scale, where a score of "1" meant that the criterion was not reliable, and a score of "5" meant that the criterion was reliable. The survey results are presented in the figure (Figure 5).

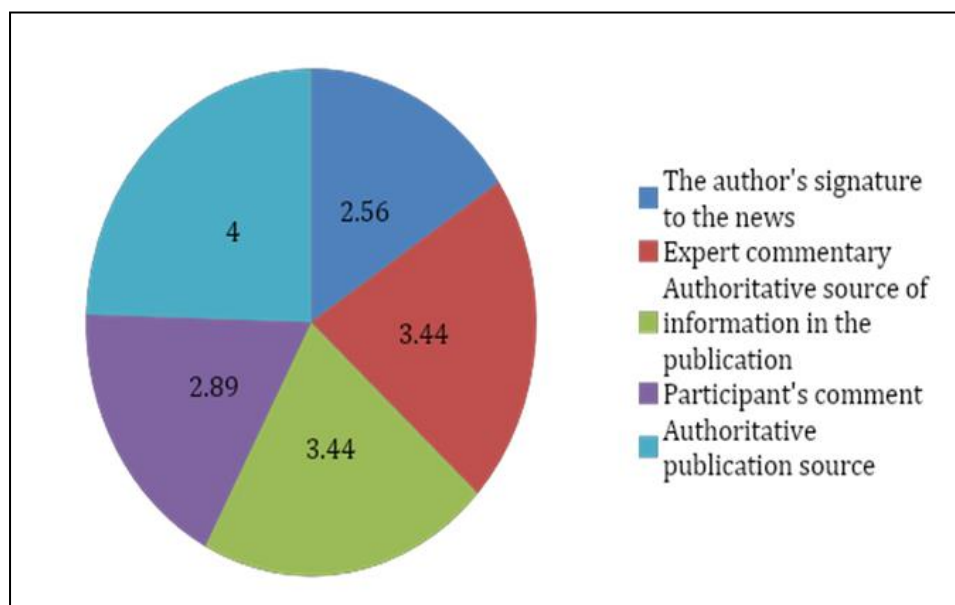


Fig. 5. Evaluation of reliability criteria by respondents on a five-point scale

None of the proposed criteria scored five points; respectively, according to the respondents, there was no reliable marker of fake or not fake news. Students believed that the most unreliable criterion was the presence of the author's signature in the news, and the most reliable was the authoritative source of the publication; and they paid more attention to it when determining the truthful news. However, the experiment showed that the benchmark for this criterion failed the respondents: the sources of fake news were such media as Channel One, the popular newspapers

Komsomolskaya Pravda and *Moskovsky Komsomolets*. At the same time, absolutely all respondents considered the publication of the online publication *7days.ru* about the illness of a famous actor to be fake, but the information was true. Probably, the scandalous nature of the fact, call and tabloid press caused doubt.

Respondents rated the criteria “Having an expert commentary” and “Authoritative source of information in the publication” at 3.44 points each, above average, but only 15 % were guided by them when determining the reliability of the news. 20 % of the students were guided by “The presence of a commentary by a participant in the events”, while on a five-point scale they rated it only 2.89 points. At the same time, both first and fourth year students gave approximately the same points, i.e. the experimental group was almost equal to the control group.

5. Conclusion

The conducted pedagogical experiment clearly showed that the presence of a special education in the field of journalism and initial experience in the media sphere does not guarantee a high level of media literacy. The reasons for this result can be both the personal characteristics of the respondents, their limited lived human and professional experience, and the shortcomings of the educational program. In general, the media literacy level of the respondents can be defined as average. Students know about fakes, the technology of their creation and distribution, but recklessly rely on their own knowledge. When developing the content of education, this aspect should be taken into account, and students should be aimed at mastering the technologies and resources of content verification.

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