From 'media literacy' to 'active citizenship': media competence in American higher education

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У сучасній науці медіа грамотність розглядають як відповідну реакцію на все більшу роль медіа у повсякденному житті протягом останніх десяти років. Медіа грамотність розглядають як інструмент інформування громадян про подвійну природу медіа власності та політичного впливу з метою створення умов для усвідомленого вибору під час виборчої компанії. Означений аспект медіа компетентності може бути потужним інструментом формування громадянської позиції. Однак інші сторони медіа обізнаності все ще недооцінюють в американській вищій освіті. У статті йдеться про необхідність виділення медіа грамотності в окрему дисципліну у вищій школі.

Ключові слова: медіа грамотність, медіа компетентність, медіа обізнаність, американська вища школа, активна громадянська позиція.

What is Media Literacy.

In today's information society, media literacy entails the concepts of access to the media, understanding and critical evaluation of media contents, as well as creating various contexts for effective communication (Norman, 2006; Hobbs and Jensen, 2009). The key point is that media users not only consume the information flow from the Internet, TV, radio, print papers, film, and other sources, yet while doing so approach the media products critically and competently. Thus, media literacy promotes skills, knowledge and understanding to make full and effective use of the opportunities presented by both traditional and new communications services. In addition, media literacy also helps to manage content and communications and protect people and their families from the potential risks affiliated with using these services.

The notion of media literacy emerged as the response to the increasing influence of media in the every-day life. Modern young people and adults watch literally thousands of hours of television, which is incomparably more time than they spend with their relatives and friends. Moreover, 'live' communication is often substituted with the online correspondence via social media, like Facebook or Twitter. If to add hours given to playing video games, watching videos and DVDs, listening to the radio, and attending movies, the media's effect becomes even clearer (Tisdell, 2008; Al-Sharekh, 2011). On the one hand, such an exposure to the information flow means the variety of sources of information. Yet on the other the same exposure also complicates distinguishing between the reflective and opinionated journalism, as well as between socially important and soft news (Altschul, 1996; Curran, 2000).

For instance, one will have to spend a long time to find the well-researched story on Yahoo!, America Online, or even Huffington Post. Most probably, s/he will find a little or nothing, since investigation does not seem to be compatible with the Internet journalism. We need to recognize: What we often read on the website, is not always a news. When on February 27, 2010, America Online (www.aol.com) posted the story featuring how the US figure skaters used the latest beauty products during Olympics

(http://www.stylelist.com/2010/02/25/olympic-figure-skating-teams-beauty-secrets), this text certainly could not qualify as a news, if we mean an impact of the information in the society. Along with the mentioned story that opened the website, its visitor could also read about the earthquake in Chile and Barack Obama's health-care plans written in tiny letters somewhere in the bottom of the page. Clearly, the huge mosaic of diverse information together with provided links to other sources of information is an advantage of dotcom media; diversity allows users a better choice. Yet one also has to admit that only educated user is capable of making this choice and still be interested in Barack Obama's health-care reform rather than in women-skaters' lip-sticks, given that the information about the beauty-products is prioritized by the web-site over the socially important news. Eventually, the educated choice in this case could mean not only distinguishing between less and more important pieces of information but also comprehending that the opening text at America Online should be perceived as a hidden advertisement of some cosmetic products rather than an the journalism product.

Aspects of Media Literacy.

Protecting information consumers from pressures of advertising is just one among the numerous tasks of media-literacy (Norman, 2006). Among its other goals are fair evaluations of media and media ownerships, distinguishing between the mainstream and alternative outlets, considering multiple interpretations of media messages, improving media use habits (for instance, changing ritualistic viewing behaviors), building communication skills, and, finally, promoting active citizenship through the knowledgeable voter's choice, as well as political activism. Scholarship views the listed tasks as a counter-balance to media-manipulations and keeping a perspective on the images and messages that are a part of the modern media culture (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001; Hobbs and Jensen, 2009). Not surprisingly, Kahne et al found that 'digital media education is associated with increased online political engagement and increase exposure to diverse perspectives' (2012, 48).

The U.S. higher education has an established tradition of media literacy discourse. In 2007, the Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the United States was created by a team of scholars and practitioners (Hobbs and Jensen, 2009). However, unlike it is in Australia, Great Britain, New Zealand and Canada, media education does not form a part of schools' curricula in the USA (Kellner and Share, 2005). Media literacy is not taught as an independent discipline; instead, it is related to some courses in social sciences, like those exploring media's political, social, or cultural impacts (Political Science, Sociology, Communication Studies, Education). According to Hobbs and Jensen, media literacy education in the United States is concentrated 'on the instructional methods and pedagogy of media literacy, integrating theoretical and critical frameworks rising from constructivist learning theory, media studies and cultural studies scholarship' (2009, 1). Nevertheless, the mentioned instructional methods are mainly focused on the issues of media ownership and thus answering questions about whose interests are served by print- and Internet papers, as well as TV. Such a focus is explained first of all with a diversity of the information outlets in the U.S., the increased concentration of ownership in the media industries, and that 'most people now have no idea what a broadcast station is and how it is different from a cable network' (Potter, 2004, p. 22).

Justification of the Need of Media Literacy as a Separate Discipline in American

Higher Education

The existing phenomenon of the actual ignorance of the most of American public about media is also rooted in the concentrated ownership of news and entertainment producing companies in the hands of the single owner. The Walt Disney Studios is one of the most prominent examples of the concentrated ownership: Besides motion pictures, The Walt Disney also controls ABC television, ESPN, Inc, a bunch of the Internet resources, as well as a list of consumer products and other assets.

Eventually, media literacy at American institutions of higher education considers explaining who owns and/or influences what in media industry as a core of educating audiences (Norman, 2006), since the concentrated media ownership leads to the decrease of informational plurality. However, media literacy scholarship rarely elaborates on its other facets, such as the dominance of infotainment and soft news, as well as promoting consumerism in the information outlets. In this respect the example of Fox News political coverage is often used as a classic instance in American college classroom. In particular, the Fox channel's support for political right and the Republican Party at the expense of neutrality is highlighted, yet the declining standard of both print and broadcast U.S. journalism in favor of celebrities' lives coverage is not given an adequate scholarly consideration.

Consequently, the dominant interest of media literacy studies in the U.S. is mainly in the exploration of an interface between the interpretative activities of ordinary people and the powerful institutions, texts and technologies they engage with (DiMaggio and Hargitai, 2001). From this prospective, media literacy scholars not only theorize knowledge on emancipation and democratization but also view this knowledge as a tool of empowering people with political decision-making (Kellner and Share, 2005).

Despite the significant advancement of the U.S. in the field of media literacy, particularly, if compared with countries that are less developed economically, media education in the USA is still reaching only a small percentage of educational institutions. Most teachers and students in the USA are not aware of issues involved in media literacy education (Kellner and Share, 2005), which leads to narrowing the scope of students' and instructors' competence in societal and political issues (Jensen and Hobbs, 2009). Therefore, based on the principles of critical analysis media literacy should be recommended as a separate subject in the U.S. higher schooling.

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