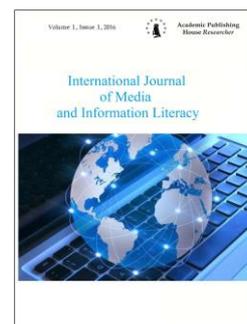


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Published in the Russian Federation
International Journal of Media and Information Literacy
Has been issued since 2016.
E-ISSN: 2500-1051
Vol. 1, Is. 1, pp. 18-26, 2016

DOI: 10.13187/ijmil.2016.1.18
www.ejournal46.com



Age as a Factor in Evaluation of Media Literacy Levels in Slovakia

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Abstract

Evaluating media literacy levels in Europe involves a full range of socio-demographic indicators. These include age, gender, highest attained level of education, place of residence where the respondent lives, income level and others. Each of these indicators has a specific influence on the level of media literacy. The objective is to investigate the age of respondents as we consider it one of the most important indicators applied in media literacy research. This article is based data from Slovakia generated in a study named Media Literacy of the Adult Population in Slovakia conducted from 2014 to 2015. This representative study was conducted on a sample of 2815 respondents ranging in age from 16 to 83. The article focuses on selected segments of the research data involving statistical age testing as an important socio-demographic indicator of the level of media literacy in the adult population in Slovakia.

The results of the study focused on the level of media literacy of the adult population in Slovakia showed the most significant differences involve age differences. Differences were found across the individual age groups involving traditional and new media, as well as user skills and critical thinking. This is more than a simple generational divide related to digital media as it also involves individual aspects of traditional media, where the level of media competencies and critical thinking appears to decline with age.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Media Education, Slovakia, Research, Media and Information Literacy.

1. Introduction and State of the Art

Media literacy levels in individuals are affected by a host of socio-demographic factors. The most commonly encountered include age, gender, highest attained level of education, income level and place of residence (rural or urban area). Discourse involving the level of media literacy in the context of these socio-demographic indicators is often distilled down in professional sources into studies involving the ability to use information and communication technology, including the usage of online media. The term digital divide is often referenced within this context and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines this term as “the gap or division between individuals, households economic and geographic areas with different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technology, and the use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities.” (OECD, 2011: 5).

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature devoted to the specifics of individuals who use the Internet and those who do not (Rice & Katz, 2003; Park, 2012). Vicente &

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Lopez [2006] investigated determinants of individual internet use and its intensity of use in 14 European countries; Ono & Zavodny [2007] studied the patterns and determinants of using information and communication technologies in the United States, Sweden and three Asian countries (Japan, South Korea and Singapore). Much of the current literature on the digital divide pays particular attention to qualitative data involving the use of personal computers in the respondents' households (Daly et al. 2008; Tanton et al., 2009). Other research projects of a similar orientation have focused on indicators involving Internet connectivity (Todman et al. 2009; Harding et al., 2009).

What we know about the relationship between digital divide and socio-demographic factors is largely based on empirical studies involving the scope and intensity of Internet usage by individuals at the local, national or international level. A recent study by Abad [2014] differentiates between three levels of development of digital literacy: digital competence, digital use and digital transformation. "Digital competence involves finding information on the Web, document preparation and processing, electronic communication, creation and manipulation of digital images, using spreadsheets, creating presentations, web publishing, creating and using databases, digital and interactive games, production of multimedia objects and the dominion of digital learning environments. Digital use involves the successful use of digital skills in life situations, the proper application of digital competence in the specific profession or in specific contexts, giving rise to a corpus of specific digital uses for an individual, group or organization. Digital transformation is to be able to make those digital applications that have been developed permit and enable innovation and creativity and encourage significant changes within the professional or knowledge areas, or in the personal or social context." (Abad, 2014: 177).

The digital divide is often referenced in this context in connection with inter-generational differences. Members of the individual generation groups have different internal motivations for using new technologies; they are also exposed to different forms and intensities of pressure from their external social environments related to the need for more or less intensive adaptation to new technological and media trends. The elimination of inter-generational inequalities in the usage of digital media is one of the objectives of the Digital Europe Vision 2020 document from the European Union, which is to "allow our societies to meet the new challenges of an ageing population." (Digital Europe, 2009: 44). Age, as an important factor affecting the potential social exclusion of an individual, cannot be simply restricted to questions concerning digital technologies and the digital economy. Media and information literacy are an important context in which these inter-generational differences should be examined. A person who is media and information literate is not just a person who has attained a specific level of knowledge about the contents of such information or media or someone who is able to apply critical thinking to the contents of such information and media statements. "These elements are an important component of a broader understanding of these literacy skills but are not an important outcome in and of themselves; education in the area of media and information literacy should include soft skills that improve our ability to make the right decisions in a broad spectrum of situations, in particular those that are directly or indirectly related to the use of individual information sources or media." (Vrabec, 2013: 162).

However, approaches of this kind are riddled with various limitations. One such limitation is how to classify concepts such as media and information literacy within traditional media. Mareš & Woodart [2006] analysed the data from numerous studies that investigated individual generations during various stages of life. An example connected to traditional media was the determination that the quantity of daily television consumption had an impact on individual development processes related to health, changes in social status, changes in career prospects and other differences between individual generations. In terms of content preferences, the authors decided that there was a relationship between social role and psychological development correlated to age differences between the individual members of the population.

"At the beginning of the 21st century, media education in advanced countries is now conducted on a mass scale, supported by the serious theoretical and methodological research." (Fedorov, 2014: 185). An empirical study as to how media competencies develop among the individual age groups would be particular apt within this context. Such competencies may be considered a more or less comprehensive set of knowledge and skills that represent the highest level of media literacy. "A media-competent individual is able to actively select relevant content

from a range of media options, differentiate their interests from the interests of the media owners and are able to critically examine media contents and the information they provide. In addition, a media-competent individual is able to create media content and messages, has an increased level of awareness of the effects media has on culture, tastes and consumer behaviour, perception and the way that free time is used. Media competencies help people orient themselves in a flood of information that they receive through media and information channels, help them in form their own opinions about this information, form and opinion about such information and expose and resolve problems that arise from their contact with media.” (Petranová, 2013: 16). From this perspective, media competencies can be studied across the individual generations, while various methods and concepts have been used to evaluate media literacy levels in individuals.

2. Materials and methods

Numerous international organisation (the European Commission, UNESCO, OECD, Council of Europe and others) have progressively adopted a series of recommendations and guidelines that emphasise the importance of media literacy as an important competency for life in modern society. Some of these recommendations have been transposed into Slovak law. One of them is Directive 2007/65/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2007 (Directive, 2007). This Directive defines the notification duty that all EU Member States share with respect to the level of media literacy. On the basis of this Directive, Slovakia (as well as other EU countries) is obliged to file an evaluation report with the European Commission on a regular basis on the current condition and level of media literacy.

There is a relatively broad level of diversity in approaches to measuring and evaluating media literacy among individuals, which results in a lack of unified terminology and the relatively vague nature of the tools that are used, which ultimately manifests in difficulty in making decisions regarding their application and usage. The Testing and Refining Criteria to Assess Media Literacy Levels study (Celot & Pedersen et al., 2011), which represents a relatively targeted overview of the contexts and skills associated with media literacy, is one of the most consistent approaches in a European context. The document builds and expounds on the theses and concepts formulated in the Study on Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy Levels (Celot & Pérez-Tornero, 2009). The primary objective of this study was to propose potential criteria and indicators for evaluating the level of media literacy in Europe. The result of this endeavour is a reference framework that includes individual competencies and environmental factors in the area of media.

Pilot verification of this survey concept was conducted in six EU countries (Denmark, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania and Poland). A questionnaire was developed on the basis of the three proposed individual competency criteria (i.e. user skills, critical understanding and communication skills) with 38 subordinate indicators of individual competencies (e.g. computer and Internet skills). Given that Slovakia was not among the countries participating in 2010, the decision was made in 2014 to adapt and implement this reference strategy in Slovakia. A translation of the original questionnaire was used in conducting this study along with 9 uniquely formulated questions added to the original questionnaire. The final questionnaire contained 91 questions divided into 16 topical blocks.

A representative study was conducted on a sample of 2815 respondents aged 16 to 83, with data collection occurring in all of Slovakia’s individual regions. The following socio-demographic characteristics of respondents: age, gender, education, region, size of place of residence and household income, were considered in constructing the study sample. Paper and pencil interviewing (PAPI) was conducted to collect study data with more than 200 trained surveyors used to physically record the answers of respondents onto the record sheets. Study data was collected from March until June 2014. Statistical evaluation of the results was then completed in IBM SPSS, with data analysis and statistical testing of the defined hypotheses conducted using contingency tables and Pearson’s chi-squared test.

The goal of the study was to obtain an analytical overview of the current level and trends in media literacy of the adult population in Slovakia, and in particular to answer study questions involving content, context and competency aspects of media use among the adult population in Slovakia. Detailed study results are published in a separate study report (Petranová & Vrabec, 2015). The article only focuses on selected segments of the research data involving age as an

important socio-demographic indicator and its relation to the level of media literacy in the adult population in Slovakia.

3. Discussion

One of the goals of the study was to determine frequency formulas for the usage of media by adult users. Their levels of popularity were then abstracted from these findings. Study results confirmed the dominant position of television, which remains the most popular channel for media content among the target audience in Slovakia. Up to 68.8% of the adult Slovak population watches television every day or nearly every day. The share of respondents who reported never watching television was only 2.5 %. Those with the highest levels in the television audience include seniors (85.4 %), i.e. those over the age of 64, and those aged 55 to 63 (79.4 %). The lowest frequency of daily viewership was on the other side of the spectrum, among respondents aged 16 to 24. A similar trend was confirmed in the study of media literacy in 6 EU countries (Celot & Pedersen et al., 2011), where seniors had the highest audience levels (95 %) with the lowest level among young people up to 24 (75 %). The findings with respect to radio are also interesting, with major differences noted across the individual age groups. The least regular listeners (49.2 %) were in the youngest age category (16–24). This medium is most popular among middle-aged adults (45–54).

The study demonstrated a direct relation between declining age among respondents and the share of regular readers of magazines and newspapers. The highest levels of respondents reporting daily or near-daily readership of print media was among seniors, i.e. those over the age of 65 (43.7 % of respondents). The share of respondents interested in information from newspapers and magazines is directly proportional to the age of respondents. The least regular readers (19.5 %) were in the youngest age category (16 – 24). Similar trends involving the readership structures of periodicals were noted in the data from the European study of media literacy levels of the adult population, where the share of regular readers was slightly higher than that in Slovakia (reaching an average of 33 %), while containing similar patterns when evaluating the data in terms of socio-demographic indicators, including the age of the respondents.

The percentage of those using the Internet is inversely proportional to the age of respondents. Those respondents online the most were in the youngest age category (81.5 %) and young adults aged 25–34 (71.6%). Seniors, on the other side of the age spectrum, who were daily users of hardwired Internet service were few and far between (9.1 %). Another trend noted in the data was that the number of mobile Internet users also decreased as the respondents got older. Only 5.5 % of the senior population reported using mobile Internet service. Findings related to the use of digital games were not surprising, with the highest share among the youngest respondents aged 16 to 24 (28.3 % reported regularly playing digital games). The share of gamers in this age category was up to 39 % in the study conducted in EU countries and referenced above. The age of digital game players drops proportionally with an increase in age according to the study participants in Slovakia, with the lowest level recorded among the senior population (3.4 % of respondents).

The study also produced data that was subsequently evaluated in terms of the use of a mobile phone for personal communication. The study showed that seniors used mobile technology the least (45.1 %), followed by those aged 55 to 64 (74 %). The youngest residents of Slovakia are just with opposite, with 91.3 % of those aged 16 to 24 and 87 % of those 25 to 34 reporting daily usage of their mobile phones.

Age differences exist in the perceived reliability or unreliability of specific media across the age spectrum. The highest level of confidence in traditional media was expressed by the oldest generation, with nearly half of those surveyed expressing confidence in television, radio and newspapers. Seniors had the least confidence in information from the Internet (11.2 %) among all the age groups. Adults in Slovakia aged 35 to 44 had the greatest doubts as to the reliability of television news. Respondents were posed a series of questions to map their opinions and reactions to different forms of presentation of the same events by different media. The answers were then evaluated and divided into several thematic categories. The first item includes those respondents who noted that there were no differences in the media presentations of identical events. Complete disregard and indifference as a reaction to different perspectives or ways of presenting the facts were noted in 43.2 % of respondents. A most interesting finding is that disregard and indifference were most widespread among the youngest (42.4 %) and the oldest categories of respondents

(53 %). The same occurs least among young adults aged 25 to 34, with 37.2 % of respondents reporting this opinion. The evaluation of this portion of the questionnaire indicates that a relatively large number of public is at least implicitly aware that media organisations work with specific interpretative frameworks influenced by a number of factors. These factors may be external in nature (political, economic, cultural and other influences on the work of media) or internal influences related to the interests, opinions, routines, stereotypes and other factors inside the media organisation.

There is no direct connection or relation among the popularity of a specific media and its perception as a reliable and authentic source of information among a relatively large share of the adult population in Slovakia. A most interesting finding is that disregard and indifference with regard to the different ways in such identical events were handled by various media were most widespread among the youngest (42.4 %) and the oldest categories of respondents (53 %). The same occurs among young adults aged 25 to 34, with 37.2 % of those asked reporting this same opinion.

Focus within the study was also devoted to determining if the respondents applied a strategy to compare information that seemed disputable or misleading to them with other sources of information. 45.9 % of all respondents applied such a procedure. Such a procedure was most common among young people, including those aged 16 to 24 (50.5 %) and aged 25 to 34 (50.1 %). The level of initiative to compare different sources of information was much lower among seniors (31.4 %) and working adults aged 45 to 54 (31.2 %).

Efforts were made to determine if adults in Slovakia were able to identify media texts as a specific type of social construct of reality created and presented for a specific purpose. The related question in the questionnaire sought to determine if this connection would be clear in the study sample. A surprising finding was noted in terms of the age structure of respondents in Slovakia who answered this question. For instance, the youngest segment of Slovakia's adult population was most sensitive to the presence of violent elements in media content, specifically respondents 16 – 24 (70.8 %) and respondents 25–34 (71.2 %). Seniors (64+) came out on the other side of the spectrum, with only 50.9% of those asked cognisant of the differences between the media's representation of reality and objective reality.

One of the questions involved the awareness of the presence of marketing elements in media content. The finding that the fewest respondents aware of the presence of marketing elements in media content occurred in the oldest age group (34.1 %) is important. This is extraordinarily low in comparison with the average in the other monitored EU countries, where this indicator was up to 72 % among seniors. This means that Slovak seniors have a very low level of awareness of what constitutes a marketing element in media content. This fact highlights the need for educational activities focused on increasing the awareness among the senior population to various types of persuasive actions, including advertising, tele-shopping, direct mailings and other marketing activities that are found across the individual types of media.

The finding that up to 72.3 % of respondents demonstrated the ability to recognise basic content and formal aspects of advertising and ad messages is also interesting. Another finding within the evaluation of answers in terms of the age composition of respondents was that seniors have the greatest problem in differentiating between commercial and non-commercial information, with only 56.4 % of them stating that they have this ability. The average number of positive answers was 76 % in the case of seniors from other countries. Analysis of the responses from Slovak respondents showed that all age categories are aware of the existence of rules regarding the placement of advertising (positive response levels ranging from 71.5 % to 79.9 %). The sole exception, once again, is older members of the population, with only 44.5 % of those aged 65 to 83 answering in the affirmative, followed by 66.9 % of respondents aged 55 to 64. Compared to the study conducted in the EU, this is an important finding as local seniors demonstrated the highest level of awareness of the existence of advertising placement rules (77 % responded affirmatively) among all respondents.

The most experience involving the creation of information and media content is possessed by young people aged 16 to 24 (30.4 %) and young adults aged 25 to 34 (25.3 %). This finding is not as surprising as young adults often use social networks through which they can easily create and immediately publish their opinions and commentary along with other types of information content.

The number of individuals with experience involving the creation of information content intended for sharing with others decreases as the age of respondents increases.

Respondents were asked in the questionnaire to try and evaluate their user skills in relation to information technologies and the Internet. Up to 76.9 % of the study respondents stated that they had the computer and Internet skills needed to communicate with loved ones, friends, colleagues and other circles of acquaintances. Only 11.2 % evaluated their own skills as lacking. The youngest group involved in the study had the highest level of self-evaluated ICT skills (approximately 92 % of respondents). Conversely, the senior population expressed the least confidence in their own ability to communicate using the Internet (18.7 %).

The forms of information and communication activities the respondents preferred and the extent to which they are used were of interest in the study. The data documents that the three most preferred approaches in this area are: searching for information on goods and services (72.8 %); email communication (77.2 %); the use of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. (59.7 %). Age is an important factor affecting the engagement of adults in information and communication activities. The level of engagement decreases in a direct relationship with an increase in age. For instance, 88.8 % of the youngest respondents and 87.4 % of young adults use the Internet to search for information about goods and services. This level is only 60.5 % of those aged 55 to 64 and drops to 24.8 % among the oldest respondents.

Verifying information from various sources is critical in terms of media literacy. Study respondents were asked about their standard habits and practices when visiting websites. The most common strategy involves the site visitors themselves considering if the information presented on the site or other information sources correspond to their previous experiences. Such a process is employed by 61.2 % of adults in Slovakia. Other strategies used to verify the trustworthiness of websites or other sources accessible online were in the minority. Only 38.4 % of the total number of respondents verified questionable information on other websites. It is interesting that the verification of questionable information from other sources is most widespread (49.3 %) among young adults (25 to 34) and respondents aged 16 to 24 (46.4 %). The share of people who verify information from other sources dramatically decreases with an increase in age, falling to 26 % among those aged 55 to 64 and only 8.2 % among seniors. This is a very low level and may explain why older people can so easily become victims of persuasive media activities, manipulation and propaganda, as well as various types of fraudulent activities that seek enrichment at the expense of seniors.

4. Results

The principles of inductive statistics were used for the purposes of ensuring a systematic, transparent and logical configuration, analysis and generalisation of the obtained data. Pearson's chi-squared test of goodness of fit was selected for statistical testing of the selected hypotheses; the test is based on frequency tables and tests against the null statistical hypothesis. This assumes that the frequencies in the individual categories are equal to the expected (theoretical) frequencies. Two contradictory hypotheses are placed against one another during testing. The hypothesis to be verified is called the null hypothesis. The alternative hypothesis is positioned against the null hypothesis. The null hypothesis typically states that the variables in the population that are subject to testing are independent of one another and there are no statistically significant differences between the different socio-demographic groups in the population. The alternative hypothesis, conversely, assumes the presence of statistically significant differences and therefore that the investigated variables in the basic data set are dependent.

Statistical hypothesis testing is conducted for all of the monitored socio-demographic indicators included in the study. Details are provided in the study report. This article focuses on the results of statistical testing of hypotheses related to the age of respondents. A total of 58 statistical hypotheses were tested with respect to this parameter. The alternative hypothesis was confirmed in 54 cases, with the null hypothesis confirmed in only 4 cases. These findings may be illustrated for the first question that was used to determine if there is a significant relationship between the age of respondents and the frequency of their consumption of different types of media. Statistical testing showed that such a relationship clearly exists, which means that different age groups consume individual media with different frequencies, and these differences are statistically significant. At a

level of significance of 0.05, the alternative hypothesis was also accepted, which stated that the share of respondents considering individual media completely or nearly reliable sources of information differs in the individual age categories.

The null hypothesis was accepted in four cases. The first involved the questionnaire item that determined how respondents react when they observe identical information presented differently in different media. The respondents were told to select one of six potential reactions. The fifth option confirmed that the given potential reactions differed in a significant statistical manner across different age groups. The analysed data was not statistically significant in the case of the "I ask my friends, family members or other people their opinions" item. This result indicates that there is no statistically significant connection in the adult Slovak population between the age of respondents and the sharing of doubts concerning media content in social groups.

The second confirmed null hypothesis involved the items that were used to determine if there were differences in opinion with respect to the media's presentation of the human body among people of different ages. An attempt was made to determine the extent to which the adult Slovak population is aware of the ability of the media to depict the body in an intentionally modified manner (e.g. photos in magazines that have been modified using Adobe Photoshop, faces and bodies of that have undergone plastic surgery, etc.). At the same time, an effort was made to determine if respondents were aware that media are able to create exaggerated expectations and aspirations among the public with respect to physical appearance. 60.9 % of respondents identified with the "Having such a body is not natural" statement when consuming some media content, but no statistically significant differences in the opinions of respondents on this specific topic were identified in terms of age.

A portion of the study asked study sample if they ever responded to a civil or social problem using any form of media (e.g. the Internet). The following forms of expressing their opinion were prompted: (a) using a blog, making a comment or leaving a status on a social network; (b) signing a petition; (c) participating in a public gathering; (d) contacting a politician or political party. The alternative statistical hypothesis was confirmed in the case of the first three options, indicating that these forms of expression regarding a civil or social problem are represented differently across the different age groups. No significant connection was found between age and expression an opinion by contacting a politician or a political party.

The final confirmed null statistical hypothesis involved a question within which the respondents were asked about the way they typically become aware of the websites they visit. For instance, if they find the sites themselves, if they come recommended or a combination of the two. The analysed data was determined to not be statistically significant, whereby the null hypothesis was accepted at a level of significance of 0.05, indicating that there is no significant connection between age and the way in which respondents choose websites.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study focused on the level of media literacy of the adult population in Slovakia showed the most significant differences involve age differences. Differences were found across the individual age groups involving traditional and new media, as well as user skills and critical thinking. This is more than a simple generational divide related to digital media as it also involves individual aspects of traditional media, where the level of media competencies and critical thinking appears to decline with age. For this reason, increased attention and efforts must be devoted to a broad spectrum of informal educational activities focused on seniors and people during their post-working years. "Media education for seniors should primarily concern preventing this generation from lagging behind, social exclusion and the protection of vulnerable groups. Its objective should be refreshing the abilities and skills of individuals in connection with the development of media, new communication technologies and communication systems." (Petranová, 2013: 17). A suitable solution might include expanding the range of television and radio programs focused on increasing the media literacy of these target groups. This is a challenge, in particular for public media, which should provide properly conceived programs focused on the development of media competencies to their audiences and listeners.

"Media education represents an educational process in our understanding, within which individuals acquire media literacy or their media literacy is developed. Media literacy is the result

of media education and composes a set of learned (acquired) basic skills that permit conscious and responsible treatment of the media and their products” (Kačínová, 2012: 35). An important recommendation in the field of improving media literacy is the gradual expansion of the range of informal educational activities for all ages and social groups in the population. Media education is absolutely not reserved exclusively for children and youth. It has an irreplaceable position in the education of parents, people who work with youths, representatives of the NGO sector, disadvantaged groups and others. These educational activities must be attractive enough and respect the uniqueness and the needs of the individual target groups. By no means do these activities have to be conducted in the form of traditional seminars and training activities. Modern online solutions may be used to eliminate the need for travel, to provide time flexibility and to gain access to a much broader spectrum of potential interested parties.

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