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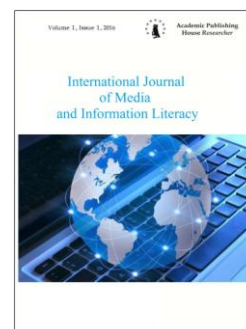
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## Media Culture and Digital Generation

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### Abstract

The problem of media culture and media literacy of the younger generation is becoming increasingly urgent nowadays in view of the growing and ambiguous effects of present-day digital technologies and their content on a personality and society development. Media educated citizens with a high level of information and media culture are one of the strategic European educational and sociocultural objectives. This is especially relevant for children and youth since a low level of media users' information and media culture may actualize the risk of younger audiences being manipulated by some destructive forces, which sometimes leads to asocial behavior among children and teenagers. The research objective is to analyze psychological and pedagogical strategies for maximizing the benefits (developing, educational, instructional, cultural, etc.) of information and communication technologies for children and young people, and strategies for minimizing online risks and potential harm. Hence, the main aim of contemporary media education is a media educated personality with a high level of digital literacy and media culture that is indispensable for safe and socially significant self-fulfillment, sociocultural and personal development in ICT mediated cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** media culture, information safety, digital literacy, media education, communication technologies (ICT).

### 1. Introduction

The article focuses on the problem of finding a balance between maximizing the ICT benefits for users (for instance, informational and educational opportunities, social inclusion and creative participation, cultural citizenship, cross-cultural communication, etc.) and minimizing potential media risks (media manipulation, screen violence and aggression, data leakage, identity theft, internet addiction disorder, etc.).

The issue of human-computer interaction has always been primarily societal. Speaking of the cultural and historic root-cause of the problem, one should keep in mind that the impact of mass media culture on audiences became a subject of debate since the emergence of the media. The effects of contemporary digital technologies and their content on individuals and the society are far from being clear and user-friendly due to the notorious human factor.

The latest researches in this field have proved that children are in the risk group that is vulnerable to various mass media effects. This refers mainly to the most accessible mass media

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such as television, internet, computer games, videos, smartphones, which are extremely popular with kids and teenagers.

At the same time, young audiences perceive mass media production in different ways. For example, junior school students are especially susceptible to negative media effects as their characters and personalities are just beginning to develop. Moreover, there is an opinion, though there is no direct scientific evidence for this, that many critical social woes of the modern age such as juvenile delinquency, mass shootings of classmates in schools, dissemination of xenophobia, and the like are somehow connected to mass media content. Still some researchers consider that low-rated media production in certain cases might act as a negative catalyst and an accelerator of children's deviant behavior if they have a tendency to some form of antisocial behavior (Livingstone, Hargrave, 2006).

In our opinion, one of the major reasons for this is a low level of users' information and media culture: uncritical attitude to social media reality may cause such risks threatening the younger generation as manipulation of racist or nationalist ideology, involving young people in extremist groups, including the negative effects of overcommercialization and premature sexualization of children and youth. In other words, the information safety of an individual and of the whole society is closely linked to the level of people's media culture.

In the context of the ongoing integration of Russia with the global community and harmonization of Russian and European educational systems, it seems to be vitally important to improve civic media culture with media education. Media education in Russia has been acknowledged by the government as a relevant movement in education and culture that should be taken into consideration when developing educational programs and courses. This allows to consider this fact as a step towards institutionalization of teaching media culture in the Russian educational environment at the governmental level.

The problem of raising a media literate citizen with a high level of information culture is one of the strategic pan-European educational and sociocultural tendencies: the aim of media education is "to enable people to use media and their content in skilled and creative ways, critically analyze media products, understand how the media industry works, and produce media content by their own efforts (European Parliament Resolution on Media Literacy in a Digital World, 2008, para. 13)."

This responds to the Russian understanding of the issue: Moscow Declaration on Media and Information Literacy defines the term "information literacy" as "a combination of knowledge, attitudes, skills, and practices required to access, analyze, evaluate, use, produce, and communicate information and knowledge in creative, legal and ethical ways that respect human rights. Media and information literate individuals can use diverse media, information sources and channels in their private, professional and public lives. Media and information literacy competencies thus extend beyond information and communication technologies to encompass learning, critical thinking and interpretive skills across and beyond professional, educational and societal boundaries. Media and information literacy addresses all types of media (oral, print, analogue and digital) and all forms and formats of resources (Moscow Declaration on Media and Information Literacy, 2012)."

Thus, media education concerns not only children's internet safety and protection (minimizing online risks and potential harm) but also their sociocultural, creative and communicative personal enhancement in the world of digital technologies (maximizing the benefits).

## **2. Materials and methods**

The main sources for writing this article became the materials of the journal publications and books. The study used the basic methods of cognition: systemic and the comparative method. The use of these methods allows to reproduce assessment approach to the problems. Comparative method defines the difference in views on actual international situation.

## **3. Discussion**

Rapid development of communication media in the 20<sup>th</sup> century entirely changed human world perception and led to transformation of culture: there began a theoretical analysis of mass communication phenomenon. The Frankfurt School was the first in the western philosophy that

turned to the analysis of mass media as a means of manipulating and oppressing individuals. Representatives of this philosophical school believed that the modern industrial society is a society of conformists consisting of the manipulating and the manipulated, whereas media technologies generate and impose false needs on people.

The society created a new industry of mass culture in order to manipulate and establish the required ideology in the society; the cultural industries leveled down the values of high culture by subjecting them to a common ideology. The philosophers of the school concluded that it was necessary to develop people's critical thinking as a certain recipe for survival in the society of total conformism and technological dominance. That is why teachers and parents were selective in choosing mass media content and made every effort to protect children and youth from negative effects of mass media culture. A comparatively strict censorship of that time greatly contributed to this.

Eventually, due to rapid and unrestrained growth of the scientific and technological progress it became more difficult and nearly impossible for teachers and parents to control and protect the emerging generation from modern technologies. Gradually, by the end of the previous century, the theories that absolutized the impact of mass media on human conscience began to yield their position and that led to the shift of emphasis in analyzing mass media production: there emerged a fundamentally new tendency to study and use the positive experience reflected in screen media for personal and aesthetic development of school students.

At the turn of 1960s – 1970s, the problem of mass media and society was intensively studied in university research centers. It was a period of ideological, sociological, culturological and semiotic researches of relationship between the media and the human society. For instance, M. McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher who studied media culture, emphasized the importance of education as an ideal means of civil protection against indirect consequences of media communication (McLuhan, 2003).

Hence, teachers explained to their students that mass media culture depends on political and economic support of powerful forces in the society. That is why the emphasis on protecting school students against mass media manipulation and developing students' critical thinking skills became dominant in the educational policy of that time.

At the end of the last century, the studies of the issue focused on a student's personality and their life experience in the field of mass media, i.e. developing students' media culture. According to this theory, mass media provide a potential opportunity for interaction between the media and the audiences since audiences are not just passive users: they actively perceive the information presented by mass media, independently analyze and assess it attaching personal meanings to media texts.

Thus, preferences and likings of audiences came to the forefront instead of the dominant interests of mass media. That contributed to the growth of fair competition between media companies striving to conquer the public mind and to broaden the circle of their regular and target audiences. Hence, scholars and teacher began to see the solution to the problem in developing people's 'critical autonomy' (term coined by L. Masterman), increasing children's sociocultural experience in mass media, promotion of creativity and civil responsibility of the younger generation in the medialandscape.

In the epoch of digital technologies researchers, teachers, parents and especially children faced new challenges of the information society. That is not a question of defence any longer but of self-protection, the question of becoming 'immune' to all kinds of mass media effects. In other words, the growing generation should be prepared to live and survive in the information society; should be aware of their rights and benefits in this society, including potential harms and risks, and ways of safe behavior and self-defence in the digital world.

Moreover, this is particularly relevant due to the growing expansion of the internet. According to recent studies of British Office of Communications: "Children's internet use has reached record highs, with youngsters aged 5-15 spending around 15 hours each week online – the equivalent of two whole school days – up an hour and 18 minutes since 2015. Even preschoolers, aged 3-4, are spending eight hours and 18 minutes a week online, up an hour and a half from six hours 28 minutes in the last year. Digital devices are more widespread among children than ever, including the very young. A third (34 %) of preschoolers (aged 3-4) own their own media device – such as a tablet or games console" (Children's Digital Day, Ofcom, 2016).

Since the internet is the most accessible and convenient means of communication, on the one hand, and the least regulated and practically anonymous means of virtual interaction, on the other hand, – teachers and parents raise the alarm and express well-grounded fears that the internet provides enhanced access to massive amounts of information that may contain certain risks for children and youth.

The latest research findings concerning children's media use state that “a third of 12-15s who use the internet say they have seen hate speech in the past year (34 %). Fewer than one in ten (7 %) say they ‘often’ see this, with the remaining 27 % saying they ‘sometimes’ see this. In 2016, a similar number of 8-11s (11 %) and 12-15s (13 %) said they had been bullied in the past 12 months. For 8-11s bullying in person (6 %) is more likely than via social media (2 %) or group chat or text messages (1 %), while for 12-15s levels of bullying are the same across all three of these at 6 % ([Children's and Parents' Media Use and Attitudes, Ofcom, 2016: 10](#)).”

The matter concerns the complete educational policy including media education of children and youth, fostering their media awareness, information culture and media competence, rather than imposing taboos and bans. First, parents should not leave their children to drift helplessly in the ocean of the internet but talk and explain to them the ABCs of online and offline safety. In the UK, for instance, “more than nine in ten children aged 8-15 who go online have had conversations with parents or teachers about being safe online, and would tell someone if they saw something they found worrying or nasty. Nearly all parents (96 %) of 5-15s manage their children's internet use in some way – through technical tools, talking to or supervising their child, or setting rules about access to the internet and online behavior. Two in five parents use all four approaches. And, parents of children aged 5-15s who go online are more likely to use network level filters in 2016 - up five percentage points to 31 % ([Children's and Parents' Media Use and Attitudes, Ofcom, 2016: 10](#)).”

Thus, media awareness, media competence and critical thinking are indispensable conditions that could ensure practical implementation of key democratic rights and freedoms of the individual and at the same time protect a person against various kinds of media manipulation.

Various aspects of the problem under study have been discussed in researches carried out by Russian scholars and media experts such as A. Sharikov, A. Fedorov, E. Bondarenko, I. Chelysheva, M. Zhabsky, L. Naidyonova, V. Sobkin, K. Tarasov, G. Soldatova, E. Zotova, A. Tchekalina, O. Gostimskaya, as well as foreign scientists such as S. Bok, J. Cantor, L. Masterman, S. Livingstone, D. Buckingham, J.A. Brown, J. Federman, K. Tyner, C. Bazalgette, and others.

The evolution of the term ‘information and media culture’ and its related concepts – media culture, screen culture, visual culture, audiovisual culture, multimedia culture, digital culture – have been studied by leading Russian scholars such as A. Fedorov, N. Kirillova, A. Kirilenko, N. Hilko, N. Gendina, O. Shlykova, Y. Usov, A. Levitskaya, N. Denisova, N. Zinovjeva, etc. Currently, the term ‘media culture’ is defined by Russian researchers as “a system of levels of development of human personality, the ability to perceive, analyze, evaluate media text, engage in media arts, learn new skills in the media” ([Fedorov, 2008: 6](#)).

G. Soldatova, E. Vartanova, L. Matveyeva, A. Sharikov, E. Zotova, A. Tchekalina, V. Tchudinova, I. Chelysheva analyze the issues concerning socio-psychological aspects of children's and adults' interaction with the internet and social media including the strategies, objectives and methods of information and media education of children and teenagers (family media education).

A. Fedorov, M. Zhabsky, V. Sobkin, K. Tarasov, A. Sharikov, I. Chelysheva and others look into the problem of media violence and media manipulation in Russian and world's media production, their impacts on the rising generation.

#### 4. Results

Speaking of the degree and character of these effects on audiences and the harm inflicted it is also necessary to define the concept ‘harm’. Generally, ‘harm’ is understood as a change in human behavior resulting in a growing inclination either to cause other people trouble (aggression, bullying, racism, misinformation, manipulation or exploitation, etc.) or to hurt oneself (committing suicide, anorexia, low self-esteem, etc.). Very often it is more than just a personal problem, it concerns both the local community and the whole society.

It should be noted that the concepts ‘harm’ and ‘risk’ are interconnected. However, some researchers distinguish “risk (defined as the occurrence of an event which is associated with a



probability of harm) from harm (defined as actual physical or mental damage as reported by the person concerned)” (Livingstone, Görzig, 2014: 9).

That raises the issue of controlling the computer-mediated communication of children and youth by parents, the problem of monitoring media content concerning the younger generation such as video games, internet sites frequented by children, etc.

The importance of the above-mentioned researches is beyond any doubt, as our future depends on the well-being of our children. The main objective of such studies is to protect and prepare children and youth to live in the digital age full of potential risks by teaching them a new literacy – digital literacy, that is to minimize the possible harms caused by ICT content or online criminals.

This tendency of raising citizens’ information and media literacy has been reflected in the Russian Declaration on Children and Youth Safety on the Internet (Moscow, 2010) and the Federal Law of Russian Federation on Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development (2010). The law prohibits the distribution of harmful material among minors including material that may elicit fear, horror, or panic in children, or depict violence, unlawful activities, and substance abuse or self-harm. It also declares that information and communication technologies, on the one hand, open up new opportunities for socio-economic development of countries, free distribution of information and, on the other hand, pose new ethical challenges in the context of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, human privacy right. Unlawful use of these technologies may be risky or harmful for children and youth as the most vulnerable social group.

Nevertheless, there is a different approach to raising children’s media literacy and culture developed by Russian media education schools and reflected in research findings by E. Bondarenko, A. Fedorov, I. Chelysheva, N. Ryzhyh and others. They described the opportunities for rehabilitation, development and education provided by digital technologies in the context of media education. They proposed the use of media for the sake of children’s sociocultural, intellectual, creative, moral, aesthetic, personal and civic development.

Some foreign media education schools focused on developing children’s critical thinking skills towards mass media content, creative involvement and participation in media production. For example, the famous British media expert L. Masterman formulated basic principles of critical analysis of media texts.

Though there are no commonly accepted definition of media culture and media literacy either in Russian or in world’s literature due to a diverse variety of theoretical and practical approaches to information and media education of children and youth, the leading researchers understand information and media literacy (critical media literacy, digital literacy) as a result of media education – a process of developing a person’s information and media culture via mass media. The level of their information and media culture depends on critical thinking skills, creative and communicative abilities, media perception, interpretation, analysis and estimation of media texts, self-expression in the digital world.

## 5. Conclusion

There is an urgent need for interdisciplinary and multifaceted studies of the problem of children’s interaction with digital technologies involving recent relevant findings in theory of education, psychology, cultural studies, sociology, information studies, media theory, journalism, etc. The matter is that a great number of researches have investigated hitherto either as a problem of information safety focused on developing children’s digital literacy with an emphasis on minimizing online and offline risks and harms, or as a problem of children’s socialization and cultural education with an emphasis on maximizing the use of information-communication opportunities in education.

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