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The World of Media Literacy Education in the Focus of Alexander Fedorov's Scientific School

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Abstract

The empirical basis for this article is comprised of five monographs by A.V. Fedorov and his colleagues published in 2013-2015. All of them are devoted in one way or another to the history and contemporary features of media literacy education development in Russia, near and far abroad countries. The author draws attention to some, in his opinion, the most relevant and important subjects touched upon in the works under consideration. Among other things, we are talking about models and trends in media education, about the prospects for the recent synthesis of media criticism and media education, and about the possibilities and obstacles of integrating the media education component into school and university curricula. The thesis that in modern conditions the necessity of developing a sociopolitical direction of media education becomes more and more evident is substantiated. The author concludes that, given the relatively slow introduction of media education components in the process of schoolchildren and students' education, wide public outreach efforts to spread the principles of media literacy among the population become almost the main way to improve the overall media culture of people.

Keywords: media education, media literacy, media competence, mass media, media studies, Fedorov scientific school.

1. Introduction

The intensive development of technology and the dynamic penetration of the Internet in people's everyday lives have become key factors in the transformation of mass communication. For example, according to the We are social agency and the Hootsuite service, eleven people access the Internet for the first time every second ([All Internet..., 2019](#)). In this way, there are almost a million more Web users per day. From 2012, when there were 2 billion people, the number has doubled to the current 4.9 billion (data as of September 30, 2020 ([World Internet..., 2020](#))). It means that if the current growth rate is maintained, already in 10-12 years the coverage of mankind by the World Wide Web will be close to 100 %.

A similar picture to the global one is observed in our country. According to research by Mediascope, in 2020, 95.6 million people older than 12 used the Internet at least once a month on average in Russia, which amounts to about 78.1 % of the country's population. Meanwhile, Internet penetration exceeded 90 % among the younger population (under 44) in Russia in 2020, and came close to 100 % among the youngest Russians (12-24 year olds) ([Internet Audience..., 2020](#)).

It is quite natural that the more Internet users become, the more information they produce. According to IDC's "Data Age 2025" report, by 2025 the amount of all data in the world will reach

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163 zettabytes, ten times more than in 2016, and more than a thousand times more than in 2006! (Data Age..., 2020). It turns out that the amount of information on Earth is increasing exponentially. However, it is obvious that the human brain's ability to process it is not developing at the same rate (if it is not deteriorating at all due to the current information overload).

In this regard, the already important role of media literacy education increases significantly. How not to drown in this constantly replenished ocean of data and information? How can we find in it what is necessary and weed out the unnecessary, unreliable, and harmful? How do you correctly understand and interpret what you find? Finally, how do we protect ourselves and those around us from fakes and manipulation? In our opinion, it is quality media education that can offer qualified answers to these (and many other!) questions.

A clear leader in the development of media literacy education in Russia is the academic school headed by A.V. Fedorov. It is important to note that the primacy of this research center is recognized internationally: in 2019, Alexander Fedorov was the first Russian educator to receive the honorary international *Global Media and Information Literacy Award*, awarded annually with the participation of UNESCO for outstanding achievements and leadership in the field of information and media culture.

Over the past thirty years, A.V. Fedorov and his team have published dozens of monographs and hundreds of articles in scientific journals, included in the prestigious databases Scopus and Web of Science. Various aspects of media literacy education have been thoroughly researched and practical recommendations have been formulated for its development at schools, universities, and institutions of further education. In many respects, it was through the efforts of A.V. Fedorov that the "Media Education" specialization was introduced into the Russian Federal State Educational Standards of Higher Education for the first time in Russian history.

The experience, accumulated by this scientific school, undoubtedly requires some reflection. In this regard, it is difficult not to agree with A.V. Fedorov and his colleagues, who believe that "one cannot successfully and effectively develop media education without systematization and generalization of its existing trends and processes in the European and global context" (Fedorov et al., 2014: 7). We can only add that the Russian context is at least as important. It is encouraging to see that separate attempts to creatively generalize the ideas, models, and concepts formulated by the representatives of this school have already been made (Hazanov, 2020). However, the body of research works and works prepared by the representatives of the Fedorov's school of media literacy education is so extensive that it allows (and in a sense – even obliges) to analyze various aspects of their creative arsenal separately.

2. Materials and methods

The empirical basis for our analysis is five monographs by A.V. Fedorov and his colleagues published in 2013-2020 (Fedorov, 2014; 2015; Fedorov et al., 2013; Fedorov et al., 2014; Fedorov, 2015; Fedorov, Novikova, 2014; Fedorov et al., 2018; Fedorov et al., 2020; Fedorov, Mikhaleva, 2020). All of them are devoted in one way or another to the history and contemporary features and models of media literacy education development in Russia, neighboring and far-abroad countries. In addition to their thematic orientation, what unites these publications is the fact that they contain not only a thorough theoretical analysis of the subjects under consideration, but also a very substantial practical component: dictionaries of terms related to media literacy education, curricula, collections of publications, addresses of specialized websites, questionnaires, variants of tests and assignments that can be used in media education classes.

Of course, the purpose of this article is not to present the main content of these works. All of them are publicly available at the corresponding Internet resources (and this, incidentally, can also be considered an unqualified achievement of A.V. Fedorov's school), so anyone interested in media literacy education will certainly find in them something that is of interest to him (<https://www.mediagram.ru/library/>). Rather, we will draw attention to some important points that we believe to be especially relevant or controversial at the moment.

3. Discussion

In the last few years, there have been more and more attempts in science to comprehensively understand the current state of the communication sphere in terms of the influence of the media on the audience. The analysis of the related subjects often leads scientists, in one way or another,

to the problems of media education. After all, in the final analysis, it is media education that can become, in a sense, a panacea for most of the vices of the media sphere that are widespread today.

The phenomenon of post-truth is most often referred to as one of the negative manifestations of modern media reality. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as an adjective for circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion or personal beliefs ([Word of the Year, 2016](#)). M. Temmerman and his co-authors point to such an inherent attribute of post-truth as semantic distortions within political communication: "a shorthand for strategic constructions and distortions by all parties in political communication" ([Temmerman et al., 2019: 1](#)). R. Garland notes that "facts are deemed as malleable and subservient to beliefs, and indeed, can be strategically deployed to serve beliefs" ([Garland, 2018: 347](#)). One could even say that, in a sense, the proliferation of post-truths has marked a crisis of political communication, manifesting itself in a growing public distrust of government and democratic procedures in general.

Attempts have also been made to place post-truth in a broader context. K. Sengul examines it through the prism of populism, democracy and political style ([Sengul, 2019: 88-101](#)). D. Buckingham emphasizes the importance of teaching media literacy in the context of post-truth dominance ([Buckingham, 2019: 213-231](#)). We would only like to add that it is not only learning in itself that is fundamentally important, but also the adjustment of media education programs to the new, very much changed realities of the modern world compared to the recent past.

Quite often the focus of research is on the impact that post-truth has on public life. In the vast majority of cases, this impact is considered detrimental ([Deligiaouri, 2018: 313-315](#)). As for the reasons for this situation, the scholarly community is almost unanimous that the fault lies with those who are actually passing off false or fabricated facts as true ([McDermott, 2019: 220-222](#)).

In addition to the authors of fake news, the general political atmosphere in the world (especially ideological and financial polarization), technological platforms, and social networks (e.g., Google and Facebook) are also involved in the perpetuation of post-truths ([Tandoc et al., 2019: 680-684](#)).

At the same time, it should be recognized that, in addition to the factors noted above, universal psychological characteristics of the audience also play a role. Thus, according to R. McDermott, people often weigh emotional feelings more heavily than abstract facts in their decision making ([McDermott, 2019: 218](#)). In other words, not only those who disseminate false information, but also those who, for various reasons, become susceptible to it, directly or indirectly contribute to the assertion of post-truth.

In our view, it is here – where the fields of inaccurate media messages and audiences intersect – that the role of media education is especially significant. It is not surprising, therefore, that contemporary scholarship is quite active in studying various aspects of media consumer behavior. Among other things, the role that people under the influence of unreliable facts play in society has been analyzed ([Nelson, Taneja, 2018: 3720-3721](#)), what effects the discourse of elites regarding fake news has on society's attitude toward the media institution ([Van Duyn, Collier, 2019: 29-31](#)), and how viewers, readers or listeners try to level out the negative consequences of false information ([Wenzel, 2019: 1987-1990](#)). In the context of media education issues, the latter seems particularly important. How people balance verification of information and alienation from it in order to deal with the consequences of the cognitive dissonance inevitable in such cases is perhaps one of the most pressing and relevant questions of the entire segment of research devoted to it.

One of the simplest (but unlikely to be very effective) options for solving existing problems is to rely on government intervention in terms of holding the producers and distributors of fakes accountable. However, there is an opinion that the public support and effectiveness of such measures would be much more tangible if it were not for the so-called "third-person effect" – when people believe that others are much more vulnerable to media manipulation than they are ([Baek et al., 2019: 301-302](#)).

In this sense, it seems to us much more effective in the fight against post-truth effects to spread fact-checking as much as possible, including, incidentally, a more active incorporation of this procedure into the media-educational practices in use today. It should be noted that fact-checking has recently been increasingly attracting the attention of researchers. In some cases, it is considered in the context of media literacy and fake news as one of the most serious challenges of the current Internet era ([Loterio-Echeverri et al., 2018: 295-316](#)). The perception of fact-checking

by journalists themselves (Mena, 2019: 657-672) and exactly how fact-checkers verify the credibility of information broadcast in the media (Lim, 2018) have also been studied.

According to our observations, one of the least scientifically developed problems in this field is the ability to quantify media effects. For example, A. Manoliou and F. Bastien made an attempt to measure the impact of popular TV serials in the West (*House of Cards*, *The West Wing*, and *The Big Bang Theory*) on the political cynicism of their viewers. According to their results, "series recognized for their intense negativity increase people's level of cynicism, while those portraying politics in a positive way do not have any impact" (Manoliu, Bastien, 2018: 547).

The very attempt to compare the nature of the impact of various works of mass culture on public sentiment is certainly worthy of respect. However, in this case, only the terms "more" or "less" apply to the assessment of manipulative potential; no specific measuring units have been proposed.

However, we believe that all of this is of direct relevance to media literacy education as well: if scholars have tools for objectively recording the manipulative potential of media texts, this would greatly facilitate the development of the audience's counter-manipulative arsenal.

In addition to the lack of adequate means of comparing and evaluating media effects, there are also separate methodological difficulties. In this case, J. Potter is probably right to say that "authors of these studies commonly select weaker design options over stronger ones" (Potter, 2018: 5-6;) and that "designers of most tests of media effects ignore the many theories already available when designing their studies" (Potter, Riddle, 2007: 96). M. Scharkow and M. Bachl (Scharkow, Bachl, 2017) also point out similar methodological difficulties. Most likely, such problems are typical not only for this rather narrow field, but also for the entire field of communication and media studies.

From time to time, attempts are made to measure people's exposure to media materials (Bartels, 1993; Liu, Hornik, 2016; Prior, 2009) or the various effects of advertising (Freedman, Goldstein, 1999; Taylor et al., 2013). It is absolutely clear that research into the level of audience receptivity to media content is extremely important (albeit extremely difficult!) for all communicativism. The main obstacle to this is probably the unprecedented complexity of media space itself. As De Vries and P. Nijens, "today's media landscape, in which individuals are exposed to a diversity of messages anytime, anywhere, and from a great variety of sources on an increasing number of different media platforms, has complicated the measurement of media exposure even more" (De Vreese, Neijens, 2016: 74). As a result, all this has created additional challenges for media education that were not previously of such serious importance.

And here it must be said that Fedorov's scientific school pays a great deal of attention to the problem of media manipulation and fakes (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2020; Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2020).

4. Results

A number of issues that are very relevant to the current state of media literacy education are also raised in the works of A.V. Fedorov's school.

First of all, we would like to draw attention to certain terminological nuances. Since a certain moment A.V. Fedorov prefers "media literacy" to "media competence", considering it "more accurately defines the essence of an individual's skills in using, analyzing, evaluating and transmitting media texts in various types, forms and genres" (Fedorov, 2015: 332-333). We believe that, in general terms, both of these concepts are largely synonymous. Yes, if one delves deeply into the lexical nuances, one can indeed find certain differences between them. In the works of representatives of A.V. Fedorov's scientific school they are clearly spelled out. On the other hand, there are also arguments in favor of media literacy. In our opinion, there are at least two of them.

The first is that in Western science (at least in transoceanic science), *media literacy*, rather than *media competence*, is more common and customary. To be sure of this, we can, for example, compare the number of publications that have been queried in the Web of Science database: *media literacy* appears in the titles of scientific papers much more frequently than *media competence*. In a sense, following the scientific mainstream (in a good sense of the word) can facilitate the integration of Russian scientists into the global academic space.

The second argument is more abstract and perhaps even subjective: it seems that being "competent at something" is usually perceived as something desirable but not absolutely necessary, while being "literate" (even if applied to a specific media sphere) sounds like something self-evident. We believe that thereby the importance of forming the analyzed skills in each person is

emphasized already at the level of subconscious perception of words. Besides, the very notion of literacy, in our opinion, has been significantly transformed in the last half a century. If earlier it was understood only as the ability to read and write, now it includes a wider range of social communication skills, including the ability to effectively process information obtained from the mass media. It is a kind of "extended literacy" only with which one can fully participate in modern society (Cappello et al., 2011: 68).

However, in the vast majority of cases, let us repeat, the use of *media literacy* and *media competence* is, by and large, equivalent.

The undoubted merit of the research team headed by A.V. Fedorov should be acknowledged to be the identification of the most typical theories (cultural, aesthetic, semiotic, sociocultural, ethical, ideological, environmental, protectionist, religious, practical and some others), directions and models of media literacy education. Especially relevant at the moment we see the analysis of the latter. They include such media literacy educational models as educational-informational (the study of theory and history, the language of media culture, etc.) and educational-ethical (the study of ethical problems of media culture, etc.). The models include educational and informational (study of theory, history, language of media culture, etc.), educational and ethical (study of moral and philosophical problems using media materials), theological (study of religious, moral and philosophical problems using media materials), practical and utilitarian (practical study and application of media technology), aesthetic (oriented, first of all, on the development of artistic taste), on the development of artistic taste and analysis of the best works of media culture) and socio-cultural (socio-cultural development of a creative person in terms of perception, imagination, visual memory, interpretation, analysis, independent, critical thinking in relation to media texts of all kinds and genres) (Fedorov et al., 2013: 167).

Obviously, the highlighted models include almost every possible focus of media literacy education. The proposed list is the result of a scrupulous long-term analysis of the practices used in different countries to cultivate media-related skills and abilities. Meanwhile, the realities of the modern world (primarily the challenges and vices of post-truths noted above), in our opinion, dictate the need to develop and implement an additional or synthetic model. Conventionally, it can be called sociopolitical. In our understanding, it should be focused not so much on cultural, semiotic, aesthetic or ethical theoretical foundations, as on the specific characteristics of the socio-political basis that influence the nature of interaction between the media and their audience.

In other words, this model should provide students with a basic understanding of how the media can be used for political purposes and how they can be protected from the manipulation associated with it.

Moreover, we believe that the proposed sociopolitical vector may be present in one form or another in at least five of the six areas of media literacy education proposed by A.V. Fedorov and his colleagues. These include 1) media literacy education for future professionals – journalists, cinematographers, editors, producers, etc. 2) media literacy education of future teachers at universities, teacher training institutes, professional development courses; 3) media literacy education as a part of general education for schoolchildren and students at schools, colleges, universities; 4) media literacy education in additional education institutions and recreation centers (cultural centers, centers for extracurricular work, aesthetic and art education, clubs in the community, etc.); 5) distance media literacy education for schoolchildren, students, and adults through television, radio, press, and the Internet; 6) independent/continuous media education (which theoretically can be carried out throughout a person's life) (Fedorov et al., 2014: 8). Perhaps only the fourth direction can be "freed" from the socio-political component, while in the other five, in our opinion, it is necessary today.

Actually, speaking of the importance of the political perspective, we do not argue with A.V. Fedorov and his colleagues. In one of their works they themselves quite rightly write the following: "modern media all over the world, including Russia, often use so-called manipulative techniques to influence the audience. Living in a democratic society means, among other things, being able to make informed choices, including in relation to media texts. Teaching students to recognize the ways and forms of the manipulative influence of the media, and how to navigate the modern information flow, are the most important tasks of media education" (Fedorov, Novikova, 2014: 68). Rather, in this case we are merely trying to adapt the focus of critical thinking development in the process of media literacy education to contemporary Russian (and, unfortunately, global, too) conditions.

It is important to note that, unlike L. Masterman, the master of media literacy education worldwide, we are not inclined to contrast the aesthetic and ideological approaches to media pedagogy. Both are important in their own way. Moreover, we are convinced that in most cases they can be organically combined.

For example, wherever possible, what prevents one from simultaneously analyzing the purely artistic, aesthetic merits of, say, films or newspaper publications and the specific historical conditions under which they were created, their political context and subtext? In some cases, this seems to be absolutely necessary. Is it possible to do without considering the political component when discussing, for example, *Burnt by the Sun* or *Salvation Union* with viewers (whether they are schoolchildren or adults)? In our layman's view, it would be wrong to leave such stories out of the media educator's attention in such cases.

We think that, having touched upon this question, we have been convinced of the truth of several other points outlined in the works of Fedorov's scientific school. First of all, we have in mind the thesis about the outlined trend of synthesis of media literacy education and media criticism in recent years, as well as about the potential ability of the latter (addressed not only to media professionals, but also to a wide audience), "to implement media education for the widest social strata throughout life" (Fedorov, 2013: 183).

The second point concerns the role of the authorities in forming the media culture of the population: "In principle, it is clear why the development of media education and media criticism did not receive official support in Soviet times. The authorities were interested in ensuring that the mass audience (both adults and students) thought as little as possible about the goals and objectives of a particular (especially "state-significant") media text. The absence of a media-literate/media-competent public has always opened a wide space for manipulations in the press, on radio and TV, naturally, in the direction beneficial to the authorities (Fedorov, 2013: 188). Has much changed since then? It is difficult to answer this question unequivocally.

It is our deep conviction that, along with legislative regulation of the circulation of fake information, one of the most important ways in which the state can promote media literacy principles is the introduction of appropriate practices into the educational system.

The question of formats and levels of media education also occupies an important place in the scholarly writings of A.V. Fedorov and his colleagues. Speaking about the school, they pose absolutely fair questions: "Could media education still be successfully integrated into traditional compulsory school disciplines? And in addition to that, could we introduce optional courses?" (Fedorov et al., 2014: 5). Obviously, the sooner a young person is immersed in media literacy education, the sooner he or she can become immune to the manipulations, fakes, and other inherent attributes of post-truths that fill the world today. Moreover, in a number of countries (Canada, Australia, Hungary) this has already been successfully implemented – media culture is studied there starting from the first grade.

We are not, of course, saying that it is absolutely necessary to introduce mandatory media literacy education courses in schools. In this case, we can quite agree with those who believe that the school curriculum today is already overloaded. However, at the level of elective disciplines or as one of the subsections of social studies, we believe that a media-educational component should be introduced.

Naturally, in such a format, it is impossible (and unnecessary!) to examine the theory and history of the issue in depth. It is sufficient to simply acquaint children with the most common techniques and goals of manipulative influence through the media, to tell them about the basic social and psychological mechanisms used by the authors of media texts to influence their audiences, to teach them to identify the author's logic and intent, and to demonstrate all of this with specific examples. In this sense, the sequence proposed by the team headed by A.V. Fedorov to develop "anti-manipulative" analytical thinking of the audience on media material (Fedorov et al., 2014: 7) seems perfectly reasonable and – most importantly – implementable in practice. If you wish, all of this can easily fit into a few lessons.

While the voices against the introduction of a media literacy education component in school education can still be heard, it seems that almost everyone agrees that it should be taught in higher education institutions. Moreover, as of relatively recently, the academic council of any Russian higher educational institution may independently decide to introduce media education as a variable (specialized) part of instruction in virtually all pedagogical baccalaureate and master's degree programs. In many ways, incidentally, this was also made possible thanks to the efforts of A.V. Fedorov.

Moreover, there is a growing consensus that media literacy education courses or seminars are necessary for both student teachers and current educators (Baranov, 2002: 18; Considine, 2003: 28; Sapunov, 2004: 31; Semali, 2000: 70). For our part, we would like to add that this need is felt not only by educators (established or just preparing to become such) but also by representatives of other professions. In this respect, we can only regret that the practice of teaching media literacy education disciplines at Russian universities is still spreading rather slowly.

Finally, another level of media literacy education, which is also touched upon in the works of Fedorov's scientific school and other scientists, assumes a deployed long-term public educational activity focused on "the continuous development in society of a culture of adequate rational and critical perception of the content of media texts and independent evaluation of media activity – a culture of information based on democratic and humanistic ideals and values, on respect for the principle of cultural diversity". It appears that in conditions where the introduction of media education components into school and university curricula is "stalling", it is precisely broad public educational work to disseminate the principles of media literacy among the population that is becoming almost the main way to increase the general media culture of citizens.

5. Conclusion

These are the main points that seemed to us worthy of special attention among the wide range of media-educational subjects touched upon in the five monographs mentioned above by A.V. Fedorov, his colleagues, associates and students. We emphasize once again that the choice of these aspects was dictated largely by subjective factors – by what we ourselves (including our own research interests) found important, relevant and in some ways, perhaps, even debatable. In reality, however, these works contain a much broader layer of problems concerning the history, current state, theory and practice of media education in our country and beyond.

There is no doubt that a person who wants to understand the peculiarities of Russian or foreign media literacy education, or a scientist studying this sphere, cannot do without analyzing the works of Fedorov's scientific school representatives.

In the sixties of the last century, glorious city on the Azov Sea – Taganrog – "made a splash" all over the Soviet Union thanks to the so-called "Taganrog Project" by B.A. Grushin, which, among other things, assumed the search for ways to increase the effectiveness of information work in society. It is quite symbolic that several decades later Taganrog again made itself known in a similar field of science, only this time as a center of media literacy education research, one of the goals of which is just to protect citizens from the consequences of not always bona fide methods of this very informational activity.

It is well known that the leader of media literacy education research center, A.V. Fedorov, is also a recognized expert in the field of cinema art. Moreover, he often uses cinematography as an empirical basis for his research. Taking this into account and considering the contribution of his works to the development of national and European media literacy education, we can safely say that the academic school of A.V. Fedorov is a kind of "magic lantern" that illuminates the path of all those who are moving in the same direction.

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