
MEDIA EDUCATION IN THE LIFE OF SENIOR POPULATION

Dana Petranova*

*The Faculty of Mass Media Communication, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Trnava,
J. Herda's Square No. 2, Trnava 917 01, Slovakia*

(Received 25 March 2013, revised 21 April 2013)

Abstract

When discussing media effect and its impact upon human beings, children and youngsters are considered to be a high risk group. It is mainly due to the fact that they do not have a consistent value system, learn through imitation (not only from real life, but also media reality), and in their early age are incapable of telling fiction from reality. Another high risk group, although significantly less discussed within this context, is seniors. There are European, as well as Slovak standards and legal norms that stipulate and emphasize the necessity to educate seniors, or at least make an appeal to improve media literacy of the elderly. However, the concrete forms and methods of media education are minimal, or they do not exist at all.

Keywords: media, media education, media literacy, media effect, competence

1. Introduction

Media literacy development and achieving media competence through the process of media education have become a natural part of contemporary world. Non-professional and professional public opinion on the control and the power of media has been changing throughout past decades – from the theory of omnipotent media (at the turn of the 20th century), through the theory of weak media (‘20s and ‘30s of the 20th century), then the period when powerful media was rediscovered (‘70s-‘90s of the 20th century) to the period of the ‘arranged’ media effect (at the end of the 20th century). In this connection J. Carey points out that the main reason of effect controversy – from powerful to limited, and back to more powerful – is the fact that the world and society have been transformed in the process of that controversy [1]. They have been formulated by time, place and other factors - like the interests of governments and lawmakers, changes of technology, historical events, activities of pressure groups and propagandists, public opinion as well as research and development of the social sciences. The potential effect of media can be changed by different conditions. For example, research has proved that media had stronger effect in

* E-mail: dana.petranova@gmail.com

the matters that do not include intermediate personal experience of individuals, as well as in the time of insecurity and social tensions. On the other hand, the issue of media effect and impact is constantly accompanied by two fundamental principles of democracy - the preservation of freedom of speech and the right of information. According to H. Pravdova, "development of the opinions in the realm of scientific reflection of media effect in the last century was influenced by social and political events, historical circumstances, development of mass media and naturally, also by the level of acquired knowledge in each particular discipline (mainly in sociology, psychology and cultural studies)" [2]. In a historical context, we focus our attention on several suggestions on how to solve the media – individual/society controversies. They include voluntary social responsibility of media, media rights and duties as they are defined by laws, as well as the safe usage of media benefitting private individuals or society. In liberal democratic countries, all three principles intermingle, complement each other and combine with each other. The most promising approach in recent years is a systematic support of safe and rewarding media usage by media consumers themselves, in other words the improvement of the citizens` media literacy. In the European Union, it was the Commission Report to the European Parliament, Council, European Economic and Social Council and Council of Regions under the title European Approach to Media Literacy in Digital Environment KOM (2007) 833 from December 20th, 2007 that played a key role in relationship to media literacy. In it, media literacy is defined as "the skill to gain access to the media, to interpret and critically evaluate different aspects of media and its content as well as to create messages in different contexts" [KOM, 2007, 833, 3, online at: http://ec.europa.eu/culture/media/media-content/media-literacy/c_2007_833_sk_1.pdf]. Education is perceived as a factor that helps to improve the quality of life in a fundamental way. In regards to the elderly, the same is declared also in the European Parliament Directive 2010/13/ES (related to audiovisual media service) [March 10th, 2010 *on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services Directive)*, online at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32010L0013:SK:NOT>] in articles 46 and 47: (46) *The right of handicapped people and seniors to integrate and participate in social and cultural life of the Union is inseparably connected with providing accessible audiovisual media services. The means of access should include, but should not be limited to sign language, titles and captions, sound expression as well as clear and good information about the offer.* (47) *„Media Literacy” represents skills, knowledge and understanding which enable consumers to use the media efficiently and safely. Media literate individuals will be able to select on the basis of information, to understand the nature of media content and service, and make full use of a wide range of opportunities offered by new communication technologies. They are more capable to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive material. Therefore, the development of media literacy should be supported in all layers of society and its progress*

should be closely watched. Recommendations of European Parliament and Council from December 20th 2006, regarding the protection of minors and human dignity, as well as the right to express opinions related to competitiveness of the European industry of audiovisual and online information services, contain a package of possible actions for supporting media literacy, for example continuous training of teachers and instructors, specific internet area preparation targeting children from their tender age, including lessons for parents, or organizing domestic campaigns for citizens. The actions include all communication media and their aim is to provide information about responsible use of the internet.

In the Slovak Republic, this directive has become a part of the Media Education Concept in the context of lifelong learning [*Concept of Media Education in the Slovak Republic within a Lifelong Education Context*, online at <http://www.culture.gov.sk/posobnost-ministerstva/media-audiovizia-a-autorske-pravo-/media-a-audiovizia/koncepcia-medialnej-vychovy-v-sr-1d3.html>]. The Concept was passed by the Government at its meeting on December 16th, 2011 adopting the resolution No 923. The Concept was based on the key documents of European Union, European Council and UNESCO. It conducted a survey about improving media literacy all over the world, including Slovakia, defined the goals, strategy and prerequisites for creation of efficient system of media education in a lifelong learning context. Media literacy is regarded as a fundamental condition for inclusion in today`s information society. It should be one of the fundamental skills not only for children and youngsters, teachers and parents, but also for the elderly. Especially since we consider media literacy to be one of the prerequisites for an active citizenship and one of the means how to prevent and diminish risks of exclusion from community life.

2. Individual and social needs of introducing media education into the life of the elderly

In Europe, but also elsewhere in the world, several research studies have been done with the aim to evaluate the status of media literacy of the country`s citizenry. They mainly targeted the adult population. There were also some partial studies trying to identify the level of media literacy of children and youngsters. Until now, however, there has been no extensive research of the level of media literacy of today`s seniors and there is no existing database of findings related to how they accept new means of communication, how they use it and what their skills are, just as there is no qualitative research on the degree of seniors` critical thinking skills as well as their skills to create media products of their own. Adequate integration of seniors into the process of media education requires formulation of fundamental theoretical and methodological grounds which will be the subject of this contribution. It should be followed by the research that will survey the level of media literacy of the senior population in individual countries.

To move forward on theoretical grounds, we have to define the terms. *Media education* is the education aiming at media skills acquisition. *Media competence* can be perceived as the ability to deal with media, capability to access and interpret media contents and actively participate in the process of media communication. In a simplified way we can say that media education is a process of learning and teaching about the media, while media competence is the result of this process – it represents all knowledge and skills that have been acquired by its participants. Media competence is sometimes termed synonymously *media literacy*. Media literacy is defined as the capability to understand and decipher media contents that we receive through information channels (by means of public press, television and radio broadcasting, internet and the like). English professional literature does not differentiate media competence from media literacy. However, there is a certain difference. Almost everybody is media literate, i.e. he/she can access media, extract the information and be entertained. However, not everyone is competent to interpret media contents – actively select relevant messages from media offerings, make a sensitive distinction between his/her own interests and the interests of the media owners, and critically analyze media information [3].

2.1. Seniors as endangered species`

Elderly people are characterized by their affiliation with the senior age group after they reach the age of 60. It is closely connected with achieving a retiree social status. They are considered to be inactive and unproductive, experience some medical condition like multi-morbidity, loss of the ability to function and a progressive loss of self-reliance. This is a stereotype opinion that treats seniors as a homogeneous group without any individual differences and considers them to be a burden on the society, mainly because it drains a significant part of social resources to finance their pensions and cover the expense of their health and social care. This point of view is lacking any attempt to call attention to the positive values of older age. In the same way the role of a great number of seniors who are still active and working, thus significantly contributing to the society, is being neglected. Reaching senior age and the process of retiring are connected with problems like sharp decline of earnings, decline of energy, change of social status and the ‘empty nest’ syndrome (children leaving the parental home), loss of a life partner, disease, being dependant upon another person`s help, or fear of death. Those problems, feelings of helplessness and inadequacy and attempts to overcome the process of aging often lead to passivity, or even aggression that turns against the elderly or their surroundings. They thus feel limitations in their ability to satisfy their needs and to maintain control over their life. In this way, their quality of life is significantly lowered. The obstacles, however, can be also of psychological or social nature. Inadequacy in one area can produce inadequacy in another one – thus a spiral of incompetence, or acquired incompetence gets started. One of the aims of

working with seniors is to help them get out of the vicious circle of the 'failure to make it'.

2.2. The most frequent problems of media-senior relationship

Media education of seniors should especially focus on the prevention of generational falling behind, social exclusion, but also protection of a disadvantaged group. Its task should be updating abilities and skills of individuals in connection with development of media, new communication technologies and communication systems. Nowadays, it is quite common for young people to create their own media messages and presentations. They took pictures and make videos using their mobile phones, send them to a group of their peers, they make digital photos public on the internet, write blogs, publish videos on web portals like YouTube and the like. With the help of media, young generation is creating its own cultural identity. For that reason we term them as 'media natives'. This term was used for the first time by M. Prensky [4] in order to separate the younger generation that was born in the age of computers, videogames and internet from the older generation whose life was affected by media interference, who had to cope with the reality of digital world and its achievements. Seniors belong to the generation of 'digital immigrants'. While for digital natives the new media culture is natural, immigrants have to learn it – some more and others less successfully.

In addition to the concept of learning by doing, resulting in a 'creative producer' (the author of media products - photos, films, audio recordings, etc.), there is another requirement for senior media education – the critically hermeneutical concept. The seniors are expected to become 'knowledgeable consumers' who will be capable of independent, critical interpretation of media contents. Seniors are an endangered group, and they need to raise the level of their media literacy in order to be protected against media contents and services that, due to their nature, could endanger them and inflict all kinds of harm. Specific features of media education for seniors, besides raising their level of media literacy and updating their media competence, is a system of consultancy of 'media consumerism' and using new communication technologies by their grandchildren. Seniors, as the members of multigenerational families, should be familiar with the means and ways how to protect children from unlawful and detrimental contents.

Most seniors are confident that their media literacy is on a good level. They are familiar with names of favorite TV or radio shows, film titles, they have general knowledge of the scope of different journals and new books. They know media 'celebrities' by their names, they can follow the line of action in movies and TV series without any problem. In spite of that, our media literacy level has not changed since we were teenagers. Only a very small percentage of seniors has extended the body of their knowledge related to the ways how media contents are produced and edited, who owns particular media, how media economy works and what are the effects of media on individuals and the entire

society. According to W. James Potter, when contacting media we encounter four main problems: information oversaturation, the false impression of gaining knowledge, the false impression of control, and false convictions [5]. Media education is the tool that can help seniors to overcome these undesirable media effects.

Information oversaturation emerges as a result of the huge excess pressure of information which flows through all information channels. We react naturally by developing a habit of automatic, thoughtless approach towards media. The false impression of gaining knowledge (just like information oversaturation) is caused by the fact that we are bombarded by a large quantity of information. Its continuous production induces false assumption we know everything that we need to know. A large quantity of information, however, does not mean it is varied and diverse. The opposite is true. The more information the media is dealing with, the more homogeneous the offer is. It does not help that we watch different media because most of them just copy the information from one another and in this way they offer about the same information as the rest. This effect is known as “the play of reflecting mirrors” [6]. The false impression of control is a paradox that was caused by the swift progress in technology. A number of communication and information technologies enable us to significantly increase control over everything that we acquire through media. In spite of this, we are less and less capable of guiding our own media consumption. The excess of media contents forces us to be passive and react automatically. In the end it is not us who regulate the process of media communication, rather it is those who are offering us media contents. False convictions are either caused by the fact that we copy opinions and attitudes that we see in the media or create our own convictions on the basis of insufficient and incomplete information from the media. It is possible only if we trust the information which is superficial and partial. The falseness of the information lies either in the fact that it does not reflect reality or it is logically incorrect.

In addition to that, it can be partly caused by raising seniors` media literacy related to the services that are offered in the information society (e-education, e-government, e-health, tele-health besides other things), that requires technological advancement. Media education should aim at the preparation for the arrival of new communication technologies as well as the prevention of exclusion from community life and social discrimination.

3. Training seniors in the area of media education

Contemporary society is based on knowledge and new findings. Lifelong learning and training, even in older age, is the best way how to face new challenges and changes of technology. Access to information and communication via new information technologies broadens knowledge and cultural horizons of the entire world population. At the same time, the fast development of these technologies brings about risks and insecurities, which can be prevented by creating conditions for continual updating of knowledge and

skills. In order to motivate citizens to actively participate in the open education system after completing their formal education, the rules and procedures for recognizing the results of informal education should be created. Based on his/her volunteer participation, market demands, or his/her own needs, every individual should be given the opportunity to acquire a new professional competence, or as the case may be, to complete, renew, diversify and deepen the competence he/she had acquired in his/her formal school education.

3.1. Roles of media training in the process of lifelong education environment

In European context, lifelong education is defined as a targeted educational activity the purpose of which is a continual improvement of knowledge, skills and the overall capabilities of individuals. Based on its form, lifelong education is divided into three basic categories:

Formal education – completed in educational institutions and vocational training institutions and concluded by the conferring of officially recognized documents and certifications of the acquired qualifications.

Informal education – realized simultaneously with formal education or after its completion; usually it is not concluded by official documents. Unlike formal education, it is done voluntarily on a participative principle.

Non-institutional education – is a natural part of everyday life. Unlike formal and informal education it does not have to be intentional and participants do not have to recognize it as such, unaware of the fact how their knowledge and skills are being developed and replenished.

The following goals of media education are the dominant ones:

- to improve media literacy level of all age groups,
- to update media competence, to have responsible and critical approach to media, effectively utilizing media and new communication technologies,
- to train individuals on how to ‘learn’ and to use opportunities offered by media and the new means of communication to their benefit,
- to protect particular groups (seniors) against the contents and services which could (by their nature) endanger them and which they are not able to judge due to their insufficient level of media literacy,
- to prevent all forms of generational communication and information falling behind, to prevent any form of exclusion from community life caused by the poor level of media literacy [*Concept of Media Education in the Slovak Republic within a Lifelong Education Context*, online at <http://www.culture.gov.sk/posobnost-ministerstva/media-audiovizia-a-autorske-pravo-/media-a-audiovizia/koncepcia-medialnej-vychovy-v-sr-1d3.html>].

3.2. Types of education that is targeting seniors

Education is understood as the intentional development of people`s abilities, their cultivation via educational means. The education of children and

youngsters primarily aims at pupils` and students` mastering all kinds of literacy. The education of adults puts a strong emphasis on innovating and acquiring functional literacy that will be, if possible, in compliance with job market needs. The education of seniors has a much wider application than mere educational activities. According to generation/goal determination of the educational activities, we can divide them in the following way:

- pre-senior education,
- actual senior education,
- pro-senior education.

Pre-senior Education deals with people in their pre-retirement age. It is realized in the form of programs dealing with preparation for old age and a healthy aging process. Its lifelong aspect is in the education dealing with a healthy life style, but also with an appropriate approach to aging and the older generation. Its focal point lies in health measures and psychological preparation that are supposed to prevent aging problems. Actual programs of preparation for aging are intended for people who are five years away from their retirement. They are focused mainly on the achievement of social security and safety during seniors` transition to their retirement.

Actual senior education emerged into social practice during the period of last twenty years. The best known types of institutions and programs for senior education are represented by third-age universities, third-age academies and pensioners` clubs. In this category, we can also include the educational activities of public libraries, programs dealing with physical and movement education of seniors, the adaptation and educational programs in retirement homes, memory training, activities and rehab educational programs of the health and social facilities for the elderly. With regard to objective development of the society (aging population, reduction of extensive social and health security resources, increased emphasis on personal responsibility for one`s own quality of life, etc.) we have to presume that the contemporary state of institutionalized seniors` education ushers in developmental needs as well as the necessity of footholds for its future content and formal development.

Pro-senior education targets all age groups of our population. It has a significant intergenerational aspect in education, aiming at the appropriate approach to the old age as an integral part of human life and to the older generation, values of community life, as well as its solidarity and emotional values. It can be specific as far as its goals are concerned, designated for activists working with seniors, for family members, for volunteering caretakers, as well as the general public interested in these issues [<http://www.magazinpodnikani.cz/vzdelani-a-studium.10/vzdelavani-senioru.21.html>]

By its content and form, media education is a part of the actual education of seniors. Activities, by way of new information, offer them opportunities to make their choices in regard as how to organize their own life, how to be psychologically well-balanced and content. By means of active intervention into one`s own style of behavior, attitude and opinions, a person can influence the

cognitive and emotional side of his/her personality. Education activities of seniors can generally represent:

1. the possibility to satisfy one`s needs according to one`s personal interests,
2. new life content,
3. one of the possibilities how to induce, stimulate and maintain developmental potential of an elderly person,
4. the means for correction in case of desired changes of personal traits, of intentional interference with developmental dynamics of individual personality traits, behavior patterns, value and mindset orientation,
5. the informational support of senior`s possibility of free choice within the course of his/her own life as well as social and economic living conditions,
6. support for carrying out the tasks of older age period,
7. the opportunity to acquire and make use of social contacts,
8. a source of life optimism, enrichment of the senior`s life.

3.3. Specifics of senior education

Education is one of the so-called higher needs, and their satisfaction adds to human life a special spiritual dimension. There are several reasons why seniors have to be educated and closely connected with their lifelong education and the culture of the society in which they live. The need of self-realization and need of social contact are the most frequent needs, being a consequence of feeling old and useless. The need of education gives seniors a sense of life, a certain kind of employment and a chance to be in contact with people of the same value orientation.

Learning about the psyche of seniors and their social conditions is significant at the level of planning as well as the level of implementation. The point of departure here is the fact that a person is capable of learning and creativity even in his/her old age. A specific feature of senior education is the fact that they are no longer expected to acquire qualification, nor they are under pressure to improve it in order not to lose their job and securities. Their education is self-imposed, relaxed and they are absolutely free to choose its content. Education cannot be limited only to passing information. Help is important, too. Help to find new life orientation, to overcome a lack of confidence and overall orientation towards formative activity. In older age, logical memory is more dominant and seniors need more time for learning. Consequently methods, pace and plan of teaching have to be adjusted to the abilities and skills of older people. Third-age universities, third-age colleges, pensioners` clubs, seniors` centers as well as interest organizations and groups are the best known education opportunities for the senior age group in Europe. Third-age universities operate under two fundamental approaches: the one that gives preference to the intellectual activity of participants (in which the academic character of study activities is emphasized), and the other one that is conventionally enlightening, with compensatory functions. Third-age college plan consists of cycles of lectures, debates and seminars, which consist of at

least ten meetings at specified intervals. Instruction should have the distinctive character of amateur education.

3.4. International Media Education Centre and the project of senior education

The Center was established in 2010 by the initiative of the Faculty of Mass Media Communication at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Trnava. Its main purpose is to interconnect all initiatives of media education in Slovakia and Europe and to provide the professional, as well as the lay public with comprehensive and regularly updated information on those issues in one place. One of the main goals is to carry out educational activities aiming at those target groups which could be interested in the topic of media education. In the realm of senior education, the center is working on both, theoretical as well as methodological concepts of media education, and preparing study of the level of senior media literacy. Its goal is to secure the right of education for seniors, to do research and to cooperate with other institutions for the benefit of the elderly, to form a relationship of the community to the elderly, but also a relationship of the seniors to the young, contemporary and dynamic society.

The concept of media education for seniors requires a number of activities and doings related to the concept creation (information campaign, preparation of teaching materials, securing specialized classrooms – study rooms, instructors training, connection with media education centers, etc.), but also to the target group itself, with regard to its socio-demographic specifics.

This project design calls for the formation of educational course that will encourage active aging. The project was motivated by two fundamental and specific tasks:

- to concentrate the potential of `silver brains` and to create conditions for using their knowledge potential in everyday life for the advantage of the entire society,
- to offer knowledge and skills to those individuals who need them and who are interested, in this way contributing to the creation of the conditions for improving their personal life quality and meaningful participation of seniors in social activities. Main goals of the Media Education For Seniors course are the following:
 - to teach them how to control media consumption,
 - to not underestimate media effects,
 - to avoid automatic reactions in contact with media,
 - to instruct them to go after their own goals, not the goals of the media owners,
 - to create their active attitude to media,
 - to familiarize them with the ways as to how media, marketing, and advertisement operate [7]
 - to familiarize them with the ways and possibilities of mishandling information or images,

- to familiarize them with legislative framework (mainly the realm of the intellectual property rights in relationship to media and media contents),
- to improve their media skills,
- to provide consulting related to protection of grandchildren from negative effects of media,
- to instruct them how to make use of new communication technologies.

This instructional course should be accompanied by the survey of the media literacy level of contemporary seniors. Media literacy can be analyzed as a state of:

- skills attached to using and controlling media and the commonly available means of communication (media usage patterns- traditional media versus new media, access to new media and individual communication technologies, reason of their usage, multitasking, individuality/group approach to media usage, restricting grandchildren`s access to some contents, familiarity with new communication technologies, and the ability to produce media messages);
- understanding of the functioning, behavior, risks and institutional media relationships, including fundamental ideas about media`s social role and its development (how the role of media is perceived in society, seniors` awareness of media`s role in their life as well as the life of the entire society, awareness of the dangers related to new technologies usage, awareness of positive serviceability of new technologies – democratic participation, etc., subjective evaluation of individual new communication technologies, familiarity with one`s rights towards media, understanding of `media logics`, development of media contents, ability to decode the intent of coding scheme author, familiarity with some aspects of media functioning);
- attitudes to media and commonly available communication devices which can range between negative-neutral-positive (seniors` opinions related to media contents regulation, legal knowledge, seniors` opinions related to the issues of trade contents publicized by the media, seniors` opinions on labeling, ability of self-examination in the area of one`s own media literacy evaluation – the sources used for media literacy development (third-age universities and colleges, interest groups...).

Seniors` media literacy survey will focus on the following areas:

- the predominant real situation in the area of skills, knowledge and understanding media usage from the point of view of their efficient and safe application,
- the selection habits related to media usage,
- the ideas and values related to media usage and products,
- the conception of risk, connected with media usage.

Results of the survey will help to further modify and tailor work style and methods to the target group needs. Seniors` media education requires a form of repetitive instruction programs (certificated courses, instruction courses and workshops) which will be combined with practical training or exercises. As

supplementary forms can also be used club meetings, round tables, discussions, presentations, exhibits and consultations. In relation to the senior population, it would be ideal to organize regional and multinational continual information campaigns in which media education and experience from other European countries with media education tradition would be promoted.

4. Conclusions

From the point of view of educational process efficiency, media education is defined as a lifelong, systematic and goal-oriented process of acquiring media competency and raising the level of media literacy. Today's information society is based on knowledge and findings. Falling behind or a low level of media literacy, if caused by the lack of education or various economic and social barriers, can result in seniors' exclusion from community life or their severe frustration. Integration of media education into the education system requires creating conditions for the actual system of education. IMEC is preparing a pilot verification of seniors' education. Media is not interpreted as a threat, but as an aid, thanks to which media users are not only informed, but they can also make decisions in their own interest, they can use media and benefit from it. By means of media education, the elderly can form their practical skills; what's more, they can improve their critical approach [8] to the media content interpretation.

References

- [1] J. Carey, *Communication as Culture*, Unwin Hyman, Boston, 1988.
- [2] H. Pravdova, *Determinants of Creating Media Culture*. Faculty of Mass Media Communication UCM, Trnava, 2009, 239.
- [3] D. Buckingham, *Media Education. Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005, 13.
- [4] M. Prensky, *On the Horizon*, 9(5) (2001) 1.
- [5] W.J. Potter, *Media Literacy*, Sage Publications, London, 2005, vii.
- [6] P. Bourdieu, *On Television. KINO-IKON 1-2/01, 1/02*, Slovak Film Institute, Bratislava, 2001-2002, 156-165, 89-100, 126-144.
- [7] L. Cabyova, *Marketing and Marketing Communication in Media*, Mlyn Dom Wydawniczy Michal Kolinski, Lodz Ksiezy, 2012, 80.
- [8] D. Petranova, *Communication Today*, 2(1) (2011) 67.