

IS MEDIA LITERACY STILL ONE OF THE PRIORITIES FOR POLICY MAKERS?

Interview with David BUCKINGHAM and Alexander FEDOROV



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ABSTRACT:

The interviews focus on the key question whether media literacy is still in the spotlight of contemporary society. The past decades has seen rapid development of professional and academic interest in the field of media literacy. The theoretical and practical issues that have dominated the field for many years have already drawn attention to the importance of this concept for the individual and for the society. In fact, the introduction of media education in schools and other areas of public life is still being confronted with many challenges. Moreover, the wide range of related problems is becoming less in the centre stage of policy making – at the European and non-European level alike. The interviews address questions about the priorities of educational policy, which should not be focused only on the topics that can directly contribute to economic growth and job creation. Particularly today, at the times of global conflicts and societal as well as cultural transformations, it is very important to develop the critical thinking of citizens – of course, in relation to the media and their society-wide actions and agendas.

KEY WORDS:

critical thinking, digital age, media education, media education policy, media literacy

Norbert Vrabec (N. V.): *Professor Buckingham, Professor Fedorov, you're both leading experts in the media literacy, theory and practice of media education as well as media education policy. How do you see the future of media literacy and education in the digital age?*

David Buckingham: Good question. If I think back to when I was first involved with media education, I can remember using very basic technology. When children in school were 'making' media, they were literally cutting pieces of paper with scissors and sticking them onto other pieces of paper. And I can remember the beginnings of video but the video was impossible to edit back then. You needed to go somewhere special, bribe a technician to allow you to edit it. It was a real problem. If you think about it now, I have a phone in my pocket, you have a phone here, and we can make a movie, edit a movie and do whatever we want. It's an amazing difference! It's a unique opportunity.

Another thing is that what we think of as media has changed. People of our generation, we think it's television, movies, newspapers... But actually nowadays, it is far more about digital media; and these media are working in a different way. If you think about Facebook as a medium, and Twitter, they are not just media, they are media platforms, but they work in very different ways. Economically, in terms of representation, in terms of how producers get engaged with the audience, they are very different. And we have to grasp that, engage with

that. We have to develop new theories, questions. All of it is very important, very exciting, very challenging. At the same time, what does education do in response to these technological changes? In my opinion, schools and universities have been very quick to use technology. There has been a 'big push', partly from the government, but particularly from the commercial companies: for example, Apple has pushed really hard to get their products into schools. We have big companies that see education as a really significant market. So, we are being pushed and in media education we have to be really careful about this, because many people think that technology is just a very simple and straight-forward benefit. There is a problem with the functional use of technology rather than the critical, and that is the real challenge for us, particularly at school level.

I am old enough to remember the first computers coming to schools as a strange, new thing; but now in every class they have several computers. And I think we need to engage with this but to ask critical questions. So there is a mixture of positive things and the dangers that people who teach media in schools really need to address.

Alexander Fedorov: I think that the future of media literacy education has certain positive perspectives. But of course, we have some negative factors too. For example, some of my university students lose their ability to read long texts. For example, my students have the possibility of a quick click on a link on Facebook or the possibility of using mobile phones, the opportunity to use the video camera and Twitter, because these digital communication forms are very fast and texts are short. But when I ask them about, for example, lexical or other test, it is very difficult to reach interesting and competent answers. It is very difficult to make them analyse a complex media text, e.g. a film by Quentin Tarantino or Federico Fellini, because it is very hard for them to 'read' through such a long sophisticated message. We can try to find a balance in between a short visual picture and more inside, deeper, topical texts.

Of course, Russia is – in certain ways – culturally different from the Great Britain and other countries, because Russia has on the one hand a long tradition of broadsheets and on the other hand a strong tradition of longing for power; the pressure on and of the media is substantial. However, when I read now the western papers like The New York Times or The Times or Le Figaro, I see that many western journalists think that Russian media always cannot offer any faithful, objective facts. But this is not true because, of course we have many problems and main channels, main papers are under the government control, of course, but we have absolutely independent and freelance news texts now, texts with clearly critical position against Russian power, against president Putin; for example, in some privately-held newspapers or in the Internet area. This is very different from the Soviet Union because the power of the Soviet Union controlled everything. But not now: the new position of the new media like the Internet gives Russian people thorough views on all events. I think it is a very good position for the development of critical thinking, because when we have many different national sources, we become cautious about holding any position, any opinion. And we try to teach our students to have their own position, an independent position against the ordinary propaganda.

N. V.: *Do you think that media literacy is still one of the priorities for policy makers at the European level? Or the current status is that the focus of European policy is gradually shifting to other priorities? Such as digital literacy, skills in programming, technical competence, and so on.*

David Buckingham: Certainly in the UK, but also in Europe, these things are changing. And I think that media literacy is no longer a priority. Some ten years ago, this was a topic many people were speaking about. When media literacy appeared on the policy landscape, it wasn't very clearly defined: it was fairly big and broad and for that reason educators, like me, saw it as a big opportunity. Yet the policy became confused, narrower, and much more focused on technology. It became no longer a matter of media literacy but a pure matter of technological literacy, technological competence – learning how to turn on the computer, to use the browser, and so on. And in the process, media literacy became a very much reduced idea, a matter of the ability to operate within the digital field. Also, when we first started to talk about media literacy, it wasn't only 'digital'; but since that time the Internet and the challenges of the Internet have really become the most important things. Internet competence is very important, of course, but knowing how to use the Internet is not the same as media literacy, it is much broader than that.

Then, in 2010, we had a change of government and media literacy was finished as a policy issue. I mean people occasionally talk about it, but as a policy priority, it is really finished. The timescale in Europe was different: somewhere around 2006 – 2008, The European Commission was publishing documents about the topic, but since that time it has shifted and much of the impetus has really evaporated. So people are now talking about digital competence, although they have also started to speak more about film, European film. There's a kind of European protectionism there, certain voices encouraging people not to go and watch Hollywood movies. Yet on the other hand there are other media, television, computer games, and so on, that have been around for a long time already, but are not perceived as respectable enough. I find it very hard to be optimistic on the things that are happening on the European level. Again, I see it as an opportunity but I think that there is no political push behind it.

Alexander Fedorov: When we have a look at Russia, Russian media literacy is, in many cases, based on the ethical and aesthetical value of information shared. When you speak about media education in a broader sense, it is not very 'comfortable' for many Russian educators. We rather speak about a more comfortable notion of information literacy; media may give us a certain sense of feeling uncomfortable, media literacy seems to be unknown, but information literacy is okay. There exists a certain Russian journal in Moscow that dedicates its space to information literacy education. Russian Ministry of Education perceive media education as something additional, something extra, not as a compulsory thing. On the other hand, on the university level, the extent of media literacy is greater nowadays. But on the high school level, however, the range and scope are very small. In Russia, high school education is more conformist, more traditional. It is really hard for the teachers to incorporate the media literacy into high school education.

N. V.: *Media Literacy is a set of skills or a specific form of competency. An important part of these skills and competencies is critical thinking. Do you believe that the leaders at the European level or in Russia are eager to develop critical thinking skills among citizens? In several European countries, we observe an increase in the popularity of alternative, radical political movements and political parties that propose significant systemic changes in the current neo-liberal policies of European countries. Do you think the rise in popularity of these parties and movements, which is also associated with increasing scepticism towards mainstream media, could be the result of previous and existing educational activities in the field of media literacy and encouraging active citizenship and participation in civil society?*

David Buckingham: Well, it is possible. I think that the government would say, 'Yes, we value critical thinking', but do they really want to develop critical thinking? If people develop critical thinking, life is very uncomfortable for the government. Yes, on the one hand there are these challenging social movements but on the other hand there is a rising authoritarianism, a rising form of right-wing populism in politics. So I think we have to be very careful about where politics and media go.

Critical thinking is a very positive, constructive thing: in order to be able to imagine how things could be different, you have to be critical. But criticism actually may become a kind of cynicism. So we can all sit with the arms behind our backs and say, 'Politicians are all corrupt. I don't trust anybody, I don't trust the media', and then we actually become apathetic and we justify doing nothing. What's more, this cynicism may simply justify the authoritarian political and media establishment. It can actually go in many directions.

For example, in the UK there is a lot of buzz now about the radicalisation of young people. Some young people are going to join the fighting in Syria. And the government actually say that media play a certain part in this radicalisation. In fact, when young people look at what is happening in Syria, then they look at the mainstream media and they compare this with what they see online, they might well think the movements are being misinterpreted; they become very critical of the media. And they go to fight for ISIS. This is the story anyway. The point of this example is that distrust in mainstream media is not always leading people towards politically correct directions. Likewise, if we look at conspiracy media and those conspiracy web sites, they really distrust the mainstream media. They claim that the mainstream media simply tell lies about everything. We are told lies about 9/11, and about Princess Diana... Whatever. There is a lot of criticism towards the mainstream media

but it is not necessarily going in good directions. We have to be careful about what kind of criticism we are looking for, and what does criticism mean. Because criticism, cynicism and paranoia are not the same things.

Alexander Fedorov: Well, I completely agree with Professor Buckingham. We need media criticism and media competence, but not cynicism or conspiracies. We may use Professor Len Masterman's approach towards the Internet, because the main question Masterman addresses is, 'Who is the owner of the media agency? Who has the interest in certain information's medialisation?'. This is a very good methodology of judging the mainstream media, the main TV channels, radio stations, Internet web sites (information texts). Unfortunately, now Russia faces very difficult political problems in relation towards the other European countries, so the political level of media is a very important part of media judgment. But of course, we need another methodology for the art house media texts. Well, it is very important to develop media competence of personality. So, of course, we need to develop critical thinking and media competency in all people from the young people at high schools to older people.

N. V.: Media education acts at the interface of different influences and interests. Direct or indirect impact on media literacy is always related to an educational policy on a national or European level, market-driven economy, taking into account the requirements of political correctness, the interests of the media industry and so on. Do you recognise appropriate strategies and methodological approaches that would enable media literacy to face the increasingly complex world and society?

David Buckingham: Well, I don't know. My experience has been that in the UK we have developed a certain conceptual framework for media education. I think that some things may need to be added to that framework and some may need to be changed. But the overall conceptual approach is correct – and it can also be adapted to address the latest digital media. As I have said during the conference, we live in what might appear to be communicative chaos. On one level, we are ready to face the chaos, but what we need is critical tools that can help us to make sense of all that. I think that media education provides us with those critical tools. In the UK, there are people who would say, 'You are old-fashioned, we can't judge this new age of media with old-fashioned critical concepts'. The question is: Do we want to get rid of these concepts? My argument is that we need to keep thinking and challenging ourselves, but actually we do have a framework that helps us to understand the changing media situation.

Alexander Fedorov: It is a very good question. I think, however, that we do not have any universal methodology of media education now. We have and we actually need different competitors with different approaches in methodology (Len Masterman, Umberto Eco, etc.). Now I am a member of the team working on the methodology of the international approach that aims to create an international multi-language media literacy tutorial; now we are working on 10 language variants of this framework panel. I am a member of the team for the Russian language variant of this online media literacy tutorial. We try to create the panel language framework for the beginnings of media education in high schools, now. Not yet for the universities. This panel links cultural, synergic, and critical thinking approach.

David Buckingham: I agree. Sure, we have the key conceptual questions that we have to keep on asking, but the approach needs to evolve. It needs to take into account particular circumstances on the national level, on the ethnic level... The approach you need to develop towards political questions in Russia would be very difficult from the one in the US, or in the UK, or in South Africa. The different approaches need to be local, but at the same time there needs to be a continuous international dialogue.

N. V.: Media education is a cross-disciplinary field that draws on knowledge from multiple disciplines such as media studies, sociology, psychology, political science and beyond. This means that it is a relatively complex and sophisticated educational field that requires specific initial education of teachers, as well as lifelong learning. In some European countries, however, these kinds of teacher education and training are relatively low spread. This is one of the reasons of lack of teachers capable of teaching media courses. What do you think would help to improve this adverse situation that prevails in Slovakia, but also in other countries?

David Buckingham: It is very difficult to be positive about these questions. What has happened in teacher education in the UK is that universities have a smaller and smaller part to play, largely because the government distrusts the universities. In the last 30 years the government has promoted the impression that the teachers are getting these strange ideas from 'crazy' people like me, 'dangerous' people, the teachers at universities who teach them all these crazy things that are terribly impractical. So the government decided to squeeze the universities and push the universities out of teacher education. So I think you are absolutely right.

Becoming a media education teacher is a really long process, and it's hard to get good training. Most media and communication students, and I am sure it is the case here too, want to get a job in media, or in Public Relations, or wherever. Even so, some of them will want to go into teaching or will work in the public sector. They don't see it necessary to work for a commercial company. In the UK, media studies as a subject in universities is significantly increasing. For example, a friend of my son did media studies at university and he managed to find a school teaching media studies, he got training and he is now moving forward as a specialised media studies teacher. But he's got most of the knowledge from his first degree. I think that there will be more and more media studies graduates and I hope that some of them will find their way into teaching in schools.

Alexander Fedorov: I believe that the teacher training is very important. I think it is very important for Russia, too. If we don't have enough media teacher education, then we don't have media teachers educated enough. Of course, there are certain media education teacher trainings in Russia, including one at my university, but speaking in numbers it is not enough for Russia. I can say by guess we have 5 teacher training courses (in Moscow, Yekaterinburg, etc.) but it is simply not enough for a country this big. Moreover, we don't have enough media education teacher licences, too.

David Buckingham: I think it is a question of teachers' status and the general perception of the profession. In Finland, for example, all the teachers have to have a Master's degree and teaching is a high-status profession. In Britain, I have to say that I think that teachers have been de-professionalized. Politicians have no respect for the idea that the teachers should learn about educational theory. The government often seems to regard teaching as an unprofessional job. It has the idea that the teachers just 'deliver' the curriculum like the postman delivers the post, or the milkman delivers the milk. This is how teachers are supposed to 'deliver' knowledge. This is a viewpoint that undermines the status of teaching: it sees teaching as having a functional role. As a result, more and more teachers in the UK are leaving the profession. They get training and after 3 years or so, almost half of them have left their profession – which, apart from anything else, is a big waste of money. I think we have a bit of a crisis in the teaching profession. So it is not only the problem of media education teachers, it is a bigger problem with the teaching profession and teacher training in general.

N. V.: Today's children and young people are now growing up with a wide range of new media tools and applications. Do you consider that education policy and curriculum content are able to flexibly respond to these dynamic changes in media and social environment?

David Buckingham: In relation to media, in the UK, I would say that generally, education has always had a problem with popular culture. It has always had a significant problem in recognising the diversity of children's experience outside school. I think that the argument for the media education is part of a bigger argument. Education really needs to acknowledge the children's world outside the classroom. There is a certain expectation that children will come into school and they will leave everything at the doorstep. That they come into school as blank slates and just then the teachers deliver them the knowledge. As long as education continues to see it in this way, while it fails to recognise what children do outside school, it will always fail to address bigger social changes.

There also is a very strong conservative direction in education policy that goes back a very long way. There needs to be space for the modern, technologically-aware curriculum at school. But certainly many policy makers still have the idea that the knowledge is just delivered as it is to children, that teachers' role is to transmit the whole body of knowledge from the past. However, the world is changing all the time, so surely the

question should be: how do schools prepare children for the future? We need to learn from the past, we need children to have access to the knowledge from the past. Children need to know about Chekhov, too... But they also need to develop the kinds of critical thinking that will help them to respond to the changing world. The world the children will grow up in is not the world that their teachers grew up in. I think this is a very big question. It really needs a change in educators' thinking: how do they prepare children for the future, if we do not really know what the future is going to be like?

Alexander Fedorov: I think it would be good for Russia if media literacy and education were present at every level of institutionalised education. This way of media education integration means elevation of media competence of teachers and students. We have a very much centralised educational system in Russia, not like in Germany, for example, or in the USA; we have it really centralised. The aim shall be, step by step, once the media educators are more educated, to integrate the media education into ordinary subjects like literature, etc.

N. V.: *In addition to the school, media organisations could also play an important role in the development of critical thinking. However, the primary goal of media organisations is not media education, but rather fulfilment of commercial interests. Do you believe that critically thinking audience is in the interest of media organisations? Or do they prefer an 'indoctrinated' viewer, listener or reader who is a satisfied consumer of media content, and therefore an easily influenced target of marketing strategies and advertising?*

David Buckingham: I can give you a certain utopian answer, which would be that it should be in the interest of media industries to have an educated audience, because such an audience would be a demanding audience for good quality media and that would be a productive challenge for media industries. So yes, I think it should be in the media industry's best interest to do that. A more cynical answer would be to say that in the media industry there are people who say, 'Yes, media literacy is very good', but in fact what they do to enhance the general public's media literacy is really very limited. Actually they are not very happy about people asking critical questions about what they do. Even the BBC. I mean, you would expect the BBC as a public interest broadcaster, to have a view of media literacy as an important dimension of participation in the public sphere. However when you look at what they do in relation to media literacy, it is quite limited. The media industries ought to have an interest in the general public being media literate, even though I am a bit sceptical if this is really what they want.

Alexander Fedorov: Yes, I once again agree with Professor Buckingham. We have many media agencies and organisations in Russia and when their representatives speak about media competence, they always support it; however, when it comes to action, they say that this is not their problem, but it is the task of the Ministry of Education, though. I think that this is a pretty cynical answer from the media organisations because their employees choose to produce their programmes. They, in fact, don't want to have media competent audiences. Because who media competent would want to see, for example, soap operas? Nobody really does, but we have many soap operas on TV because their production does not cost too much money. It is also necessary to point out that many cinema distributors in Russia are Americans, but not all of them. We have a considerably big film market segment related to domestically produced movies, movies with their own topics and cultural frameworks that compete on the [mainstream] cinema market, but most of these movies are still based on entertaining narratives, not of high quality. It is something rather American, only slightly adjusted to correspond with the Russian nature. It would be challenging for Russian media producers to have demanding people as their audience.

David Buckingham: I probably do not agree fully on this point. I actually don't think that a media literate viewer would not demand soap operas. I think that a media literate person would demand better quality soap operas and also better entertainment. I really don't think that a media literate person only watches serious news and documentaries.

Alexander Fedorov: Maybe people want them, maybe they don't.

David Buckingham: I think we all have a right to choose to watch anything we like, including soap opera. The question is whether the soap operas and the entertainment are simply patronizing and repetitive or whether they are thoughtful and engaging. At the moment we have a great controversy going on in Britain in regards to one of our radio soap operas, to do with a storyline about domestic abuse, psychological abuse. It generated a big public debate about whether you can deal with such issues in soap operas. It is not a simple issue to talk about; it is actually complicated – from the formal and fictional point of view. I think that we all have a right to a diverse media 'diet', but I also think that we have a right to demand that things will be dealt with in a complex way. I think that we deserve entertainment, but good quality entertainment. And that is what a media literate person would be demanding.

Alexander Fedorov: I mean, what is the good quality entertainment... I guess that most soap operas or film trash are not a good quality entertainment. But I agree that a more demanding audience would want more quality soap operas, too. Of course.

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Prepared by Norbert Vrabec

