Helena Pavličíková, Miroslav Somr

Czech Media Education at the Crossroads

MUZEUM HISTORII POLSKI

Helena Pavličíková, Miroslav Somr

Uniwersytet Południowoczeski w Czeskich Budziejowicach

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It is a cold fact, yet increasingly common in today´s children´s outlook, that our world is affected by media for mass media and new media, in particular, have become so inseparable from modern life that the young cannot imagine their life without them. Hence it is digital technologies, especially the Internet, and, lately, also social networks that have provided the young generation with a tool to acquire knowledge and change their lifestyle accordingly.

A new generational conflict

With the advent of new media, children have started to "escape" from the adult world, seeking refuge in the computer world and spending more time with the media than with their parents, which moves the process of socialisation, quite vigorously and for the first time in history, from the family. Earlier than before, children begin to gain experience outside their own family circle, picking up many skills to outperform their parents. Specifically, young people excel their parents without reservation in taking advantage of digital technologies. According to Marc Prensky, the generation that were born into the the surroundings of digital technologies are *digital natives*, while the generation that have discovered new technologies in the course of their life are *digital immigrants*.[1] Though the process of advancing data digitisation has brought about what could be described as a new generation gap, both generations involved with it avail themselves of the common ground of information society and in order to facilitate their orientation in it and to reap the benefit of everything it offers, they should be able to understand all media, assessing them indepedently and employing them as a source of information, education, and entertainment as well."[2] This is why media literacy, coming onto the scene through media teaching, has taken on crucial importance both in school and non-school activities.

Media literacy and media education

In the last ten years, promoting what is called media literacy has been pursued with special urgency as evidenced by a number of documents issued by European institutions and educational ministries in individual member states of the European Union, which in principle suggest that media literacy is generally conceptualised as an ability to access media, to understand and independently evaluate various aspects of media and media content, as well as to communicate in all manner of contexts. Media literacy then concerns texts, sounds and pictures conveyed through different means of communication, including television, film, video, the Internet website, radio, video games, and virtual communities – to cut it short, media teaching must necessarily involve all media.

Pursuing the aim of fostering awareness about all forms of media communications that people can meet in everyday life, media literacy should become one of the basic skills learned by both the young and old. By general consent it is currently considered to be a prerequisite for fostering active citizenship which could prevent and diminish the risks of social exclusion. The system of methods and means conducive to it through purposefully molding pupils, students, teachers, journalists and the wider public with the aim to develop their media literacy is known as media education. Its aim is to educate an autonomous individual who is media literate and capable of critical assessment. In a nutshell, media studies are designed as "an intentional teaching endeavour aimed at achieving a particular level of media awareness."

A glimpse into the past

The earliest contribution of Czech pedagogical scholarship to the systematic study of media was the periodical *Duch novin – Revue pro vědecké bádání o novinách* [The Spirit of Newspapers – a periodical for scholarly research on press], whose obvious limitation resulted from the fact that press was the only media, with the exception of radio broadcasting gradually developing from 1923, existent in the then Czechoslovakia. Published between 1928 and 1931, the journal represented worthy endeavours to introduce – in present-day terms – media teaching to school children. For a long time this was a unique activity in the Czech conditions and, in a way, has remained so until today for there is no periodical in the Czech Republic devoting systematic, long-term attention to media studies.

A number of articles published there at the turn of 1930s rightly stressed that media function had already been outlined in John Amos Comenius´ writings. "I dare say this theme, so modern notwithstanding

it was already proffered by Comenius, can, if used judiciously, be of tremendous help in instituting topical school connected with real life – the noble endeavour of the present era."[4] In order to complete the picture, let us mention the text entitled *Poutník mezi novináře trefil* [The pilgrim has found his way to journalists], Chapter XXII of his work *Labyrint svět a ráj srdce* [Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart], where Comenius refers to journalists as pipers approaching other people and drawing from their pipes sounds (news) that are pleasing or piercing, according to the impression they have left in the audience and in conformity with the public feelings they have aroused – wonderful or awful. It suggests that pipers – message carriers – spread news about calamities and wars as well as joyous and cheerful celebrations.

Further insight into the subject orientation of articles focused on the content specifics of teaching about newspapers shows that the inter-war approach was basically not very different from today´s concept, as confirmed by the following recommendation: "Pupils need to be induced to read newspapers critically, comparing different viewpoints. It has also proved useful to make a comparison between a newspaper account of an event and an official report issued by a press agency. This is the way to teach critical thinking and respect for the defensible standpoint of another person... Such guidance will produce a generation not so easily succumbing to every cliché, every slogan."[5] Comparing favourably well with the contemporary requirements for critical attitude towards media, this markedly shrewd statement is going far beyond its time and heading for the future.

Similarly high opinions can be held as to the discussion about the appropriate time to start teaching about the reality construed by papers, whether it is suitable at elementary school: "Thus pedagogy splits into two, diametrically opposed, extremes which can be sloganised as follows: Prevent children from touching newspapers. Do not prevent children from reading newspapers. They read papers at home, in tabacconist shop windows and on street corners all the same. Teach them how to read newspapers instead, cultivate their habit of looking for a particular subject and where to find it."[6] The reading of newspapers was evaluated as a risky activity, for there were educationalists who deemed it dangerous for the child, and at the same time, it was seen as a positive factor with regard to the potential spreading of knowledge, training of concentration, and as a source of entertainment. This prompted the following requirement: "Children should be regularly presented with every newspaper material that is valuable and which a young person would not only be allowed but ought to read on a daily basis: expositions on

current issues; fascinating insightful articles about our past; about remote countries and their present-day achievements.“[7]

There are discussions today about the danger arising from the media as a potential consequence of rendered violence, namely from children´s identification with agresssive 'heroes' and their brutality, and from the resulting propensity to violent confrontations. Other risk factors and potential threats are linked with the Internet usage, including the social networks, where the media-related risks are so great that they have become the main argument to justify media studies. The above mentioned quotations reveal that the potentiality of incorporating consistent, systematic media teaching into basic education was considered, not only by Czech professionals, as early as between the wars. At that time, the issues of teaching about the press (media education in today´s terms) was discussed by journalists and university specialists in many European countries, as evidenced by information from the international conference held by the Research Institute for International Journalism in Cologne, Germany, at the turn of March in 1931. Covering a wide variety of themes, the presentations highlighted problems discussed in connection with the media even today, for example, about the impact of press on one´s self-improvement and mind. A concrete example of media education in Europe could be found in post-war Germany, where local society, after years of Nazi propaganda manipulation, supplemented the teaching of German with the critical reading of newspapers, based on the presumption "that consistent implementation of a critical, rational approach to media can prevent mass indoctrination – that is to say that media studies is one of the means to foster the democratic principle of our society."[8]

The 1960s saw a sustained expansion of media education in the U.S.A., whereas in Europe the initiative was undertaken by Great Britain, where the initial intention was aimed at increasing media literacy as regards the film production, and later on, advertising campaigns. Parallel to it, the British project *Media Smart – Opening Eyes* was designed for children aged 7 to 16. Introducing media studies into the educational programmes in European countries has been regulated by a number of documents, such as the UNESCO *Media Education* project, which in 2011 launched the publication of *Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for teacher*, or the Orbicom activities. "The world leader in media studies is Canada, where the subject was introduced in response to the infiltration of media production from the United States. Media awareness is included in the English language teaching and a media text comprehension is an essential skill of every Canadian."[9]

Czech media education at the crossroads

Any attempt to evaluate the contents of media education in the elementary and grammar school curricula documents in the Czech Republic has to be based on the basic postulate of its conception, i.e. the objective of interlocking the interdisciplinarity and the relations between subjects within the teaching process. The fact that media education complies with both of these conditions establishes it as a cross-section theme (along with education focused on: personality development; social relations; democratic citizenship; thinking in European and global context; environmental awareness; and multicultural society). And it is its relation to cross-section themes that has shown that it is essential to frame a concept of their methodological support beause the teaching of cross-section themes have posed methodological problems, stemming in particular from the interlocking of knowledge and skills. The same problem then emerged in media teaching as practice in individual schools revealed that media studies there had been reduced to mere skills, with recording a video on a class excursion or taking photographs at a school choir concert and placing both on the website or publishing them in the school magazine being approved as completion of the media education curricula.

Moreover, the most serious problem has proved to be the rapidly changing media scene itself, including media technologies, the changes being so fast that they cannot be reflected in the official documents of the ministry of education – typically it is examplified by the well-known fact that, when the media education concept was formulated, no one in this country was familiar with words like Facebook or Instagram. This was another reason for formulating the recommended estimated outcome which would aim to concretise and update the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values the pupils should acquire; this, together with removing ambiguities in determining the expected educational targets, was to make the targets more comprehensible and to facilitate concentration on the potentialities of the ongoing educational process.[10]

Although there have been produced a number of media education textbooks in the last ten years, none of them fully covers the thematical specification of media teaching in the curricular documents: "There is no subject to assemble all the materials and by classifying, evaluating and recommending them to shape and determine the orientation of the whole concept, which responds to the needs of the societal situation as well as the educational process in everyday school practice."[11] Vindicated above and over by European empirical inquiry, similar conclusions were reached by the

Czech Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting, whose declaration in the form of press release in June 2015 triggered inquiry into the state of media literacy and media education in the Czech Republic: "Notwithstanding the well-intentioned and professionally supported endeavours, media literacy in the Czech Republic is rather low compared to the rest of Europe. Media teaching standards vary considerably, there is no consistent overall concept, no concrete targets are aimed for. Competent evaluation of the completed projects is missing. Its basic deficiency is apparently the fact that media literacy issues are not unambigously within the competence of a particular department that would bare ultimate responsibility for the state of media awareness in the population of the Czech republic."[12]

Whatever discussions there may be in the nearest future about the issues related to the low level of media literacy and media education in the Czech Republic, it is evident they will lead to a clash of different concepts of the optimal direction of media teaching. Among others, it is indicated by the conference presentations and related discussions of many professionals – e.g., Jan Jirák from the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, who authored the concept of media studies within frame educational programmes, is convinced that the fast changing media world might make us consider abandoning media education altogether because "the adjust-ment of the contemporary society allows transfer of serious problems to the system of education."[13] Therefore many specialised 'educations' (like ethical, multicultural, environmental), which in recent years have been included in educational documents, shall not be, according to Jan Jirák, referred to as independent units, rather they will become an integral component of the educational system.

In our opinion, even these pioneering ideas cannot stop the further-ance of media teaching as a pedagogical means to modify the recipient´s own critical appraisal of media production. The expresssion 'critical appraisal' will have to be explained futher, for it frequently occurs in connection with media education and media literacy in the documents issued by the EU institutions and in Czech curricular documents as well – the two words sometimes seem to indicate, even to teachers, that the major purpose of media studies is to familiarise the pupils with the negative effects of the media (hence the classes include, for example, the rules of safe use of the Internet and social networks, etc.). Such an attitude is unobjectionable and logical, but 'critical appraisal' cannot be reduced to it – bearing in mind that film, theatre or lit-erary criticism is not only limited to the description of the negative features of a work of art. On the contrary it often highlights the work´s omissible

features, which surpass our expectations. That is why it is necessary to apprehend that "the purpose of media education is not to deter us from using the media or to make us afraid of them."[14] The risks associated with media effects are often mentioned as the basic argument for the necessity of media studies, nevertheless, the same applies to exploiting the positive contexts and potentialities media offer for the benefit of an individual – from imparting knowledge to functional use of new media for developing concentration, spatial awareness, or for entertainment. It is modern information and communication digital technologies, in particular, that have altered the hitherto unilateral relation between the active producer and the passive recipient of media communication and brought about original potentialities within the frame of both school teaching and long-life learning.[15]

Conclusion

The important educational aspects in media education are currently mentioned in the *Strategy of educational policies of the Czech Republic until 2020*, which, among others, states that: "Experience from teaching practice shows that the existing descriptions of the expected outcome at the national level are not concrete enough and do not distinguish between major and minor targets. Though constituting a frame guideline for teachers, pupils and parents, they are of only partial use as referential points to monitor learning advancements."[16] For the concept of media education in the Czech educational system, such a claim means an appeal for a more comprehensible definition of the expected media education targets in the fast changing media environment (N.B. at the time when the basic principles of Czech media education were conceived, Facebook was an unknown word, like a 'smart telephone' and others); such a claim represents an appeal for defining a basic concept of pre-school media education, which, in contrast to neigbouring countries including Slovakia, in the Czech educational system is missing.

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Abstract: Motivated by the current expansion of media awareness, this paper examines topical issues of media studies as tackled by educational systems in many developed countries. Special attention is given to the historical background which compelled Czech journalists and educationalists to formulate opinions about the necessity to inform the young generation of the general principles and patterns of the media function. Obviously, the advancement of new media has necessitated acquisition of new skills and knowledge and the ensuing integration of media studies into school curricula has also changed media teaching.