MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION - A USEFUL FRAME FOR UNDERSTANDING MEDIA CONTENTS.

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Abstract

The growth of the mass media in the past century has created a world-wide environment of its own. If it were visible, it might be comparable to the weather patterns which flow and swirl around the planet, sometimes calm and sometimes stormy but always relentless and inescapable. We cannot do much about the weather except to adapt to it. Likewise, we cannot do much about the climate of mass communication except finding ways of adapting to it too. Mass communication process has been tremendously altered across the globe since the inception of the new media. The internet for instance has an unquantifiable effect on every aspect of human existence. It has added a new dimension to communication practice by providing many new communication tools which pose obvious challenges to understanding mass media contents. One of the major challenges is how to adapt to this media environment in order to maximize its benefits and avoid as much as possible its dangers. Consequently, this paper critically examines the realities of adapting to media environment through media literacy education.

Keywords:Media Education, Media Literacy, Media Contents.

Introduction

The media, like the weather, may be annoying but we could certainly have difficulty getting along without it. The trick is to use it effectively and this applies just as much to audiences as to producers or editors. Advocates of media education see it as a defense mechanism designed to protect children and audiences in general from the dangers of the mass media in today's modern communication technological world. Taking television as a point of illustration, today's children and youths have grown up with television as a constant companion. It is always there in the background affecting their social life and influencing their thoughts and actions. (Cronk, 2003). Although these young children know a lot about television and other mass media, yet possible negative outcomes have been identified such as irregular sleep patterns, behavioural issues, focus and attention problems, decreased academic performance, negative impact on socialization and language development and increase in the amount of time these young children are spending in front of screens. Children can be empowered to become better users of the media by guiding them to put into better use what they see and hear from television and other media. This brings us to the main goal of media education which aims at preparing the new generation for living in the modern information world, for perception of different information, to teach a person to understand it, realize the effects of its influence on psychology, to master means of communication based on the non-verbal forms with the help of technical means. The successes and achievements of media education in helping the audience to understand media contents have made its application to learning process more pertinent. Media education prepares the individual for life in a media saturated environment with the ability to make choices in his or her use of the mass media. (Dominiquez, 1990).

The ability to make choices in using the media makes one see the media as presenting him with opportunities and maximizing these opportunities than seeing the media as posing threats to his well-being. Media education helps students to deconstruct an image or media text and make the conceptual leap between the image or text and its contents. It is an empowerment to media understanding. (McMahon and Quin, 1992)

Understanding the Key Terms: Media Education, Media Literacy, and Media Content.

Media Education

The Russian Pedagogical Encyclopedia defines media education as the direction in pedagogic, promoting the study of "regularities of mass communication" (press, television, radio, cinema, video, etc) Media education today is seen as the process of the personality's development with the help of and on the material of, the means of mass communications (media). It is aimed at the development of the culture of the intercourse with media, creative communicative abilities, critical thinking, perception, interpretation, analysis and evaluation of media texts, teaching different forms of self-expression with media technology. Media education according to UNESCO (1999), deals with all communication media and includes the printed word and graphics, the sound, the still as well as the moving image, delivered on any kind of technology. It enables people to gain understanding of the communication media used in their society and the way they operate and to acquire skills using this media to communicate with others.

- Ensure that people learn how to analyze, critically reflect upon and create media texts.
- Identify the sources of media texts, their political, social, commercial and or cultural interests and their contexts.
- Interpret the messages and values offered by the media.
- Elect appropriate media for communicating their own messages or stories and for reaching their intended audience.
- Gain or demand access to media for both reception and production.

According to Reyes and Mendez (1992), media education is a discipline which enables the media perceiver to develop the capacity of critical and creative analysis of mass media messages and apply this capacity with educational criteria to allow autonomous behavior of the person as a final goal. Media education is teaching about media as distinguished from teaching with media. Media education emphasizes the acquisition of both cognitive knowledge about how media are produced and distributed and of analysis skills for interpreting and valuing media content. In contrast, media studies ordinarily emphasize hands-on experiences with media production. (International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences).

Media education includes:

- Using media across the curriculum application
- A topic within another subject
- Develops critical understanding of media through analytical and practical work.
- Teaching about the forms, conventions and technologies.
- Includes teaching about media institutions and social, political and cultural roles.
- Places emphasis upon student's experience of the media and their relevance to their own lives
- Themes and project work

Media Literacy

Worsnop (1999), in his own submission prefers to use the term media education as a broad description of all that takes place in media - oriented classroom. According to him," media literacy" is the outcome of work in either media education or media study. The more you learn about or through the media, the more media literacy you have. Media literacy is the skills of experiencing, interpreting\analyzing and making media products.

The media literate person according to scholars like Smelser and Baltes (2001), is a capable recipient and creator of content, who understand sociopolitical context, and uses codes and representational systems effectively to live responsibly in society and the world at large. The movement to expand notion of literacy to include the powerful post-print media that dominate our informational landscape, help people understand, produce and negotiate meanings in a culture made up of powerful images, words and sounds. A media literate person of which everyone should have the opportunity to become can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media (Aufderheide and Firestone, 1993). Media literacy is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms (Kubey, 1997). Media literacy enables the student to look upon the world and its representation by the media with a critical eye by providing them with specific skills, tools and techniques. Media literacy helps the student to understand and participate in discussions about governments and politics' including using the media to make their voices heard. Media literate students learn to be skeptical about the role of politicians and to critically examine politician's work as representatives of the publics need and interests (Hobbs, 2006). Media literacy allows students to draw on their experience of media forms and to connect it to classroom activities. Research shows that when students are engaged in their topic and can actively connect it to the real world, they are more excited and engaged in learning.

Media literacy can be especially powerful for youth who do not perform well in the school system. Kist (2005), found out that "at risk" and marginalized youth became excited and engaged with reading and writing after their experience with media literacy in the classroom

Media literacy as the result of the process of media education builds on the following outcomes:

➢ An awareness of the impact of media on the individual and society

➢ An understanding of the process of mass communication

➢ The ability to analyze and discuss media messages

➢ The awareness of media context as a text that provides recognition of culture

➢ Production and analysis

➢ Traditional and non-traditional literacy skills

➢ An enriched enjoyment, understanding and appreciation of media content.

The Main Purposes of Media Literacy Education:

Media educational goals can vary depending on the specific themes and objectives of a lesson, age of the students, theoretical basis and so on. However, the choices below are those of many media educators across the globe:to develop a person's critical thinking autonomy; to develop an appreciation, perception and understanding and analysis of media texts; to prepare people for the life in the democratic society; to develop an awareness of social, cultural, political and economic implications of media texts (as constructions of media agencies); to decode media texts and messages; to develop person's communicative abilities; to develop an appreciation and aesthetic perception, understanding of media texts, estimation of aesthetical quality media texts; to teach a person to express himself\herself with the help of media; to teach a person to identify, interpret and experience a variety of techniques used to create media products\texts; to learn about the theory of media and media culture; to learn about the history of media and media culture.

Benson (1993), suggests the following goals which media education should pursue: to increase the enjoyment people can gain from the media, a goal whose value often seems to be underestimated; to make manifest the invisible structures of society underlying the media industry; the aesthetic, economic and political dimensions of the media should all be treated; to impart an understanding of the way the community represents itself through the media to itself and to others; it should result in an informed and critically aware citizenry with power over their own lives. Media education, like all education is political in its aims. Although it has to start with textual analysis, it should go on to raise questions about power and about whose good is being served by the text being analysed. The goals of media education according to Downing (1990), is its ability to conduct rigorous analysis of how the media present values and attitudes and the ability to apply the analysis to current texts such as today's news and their personal relevance. But such a strategy in the views of Quin (1992), might be dangerous both to complacency about the reliability of media messages and certain contexts to the teacher's own job security if those in authority object. Bevort (1992), suggests that analysis of media texts should focus directly on media social contexts and on their relevance for each student.

In any media education programme, some tendency to challenge authority as represented by media managers and their products seem present. This is one of the basic factors hindering the growth of effective media education both in dictatorship governance where it might challenge media used chiefly as a government propaganda machinery or in consumer societies where the advertisers who pay the media bills interpret it as developing resistance to the advertising for which they are paying. Regardless of such opposition, the preservation of human dignity in our modern society requires that individuals be provided with the mental tools to enable them to maintain their autonomy in the face of such coercive forces.

Main Theories Ascribed to Media Education.

Media educators around the world consider the following as the main theories of media education:

- ➢ Critical Thinking\Critical Autonomy\Critical Democratic Approach
- ➢ Cultural Studies Approach
- ➢ Sociocultural Approach
- ➢ Semiotic Approach
- ➢ Aesthetical\Media as A Popular Art Approach
- ➢ Practical\Hands-On Production Approach
- ➢ Ideological Approach
- ➢ Uses a Gratification Approach
- ➢ Inoculator\Protectionist\Hypodermic Needle\Civil Defense Approach

Majority of media educator experts singled out the approach of critical thinking as the leading theory. The least theory among the choice of media experts is the protectionist approach, that is, that which concentrates on the protection of the audience from the harmful influence of media.

Sociocultural Situation.

The sociocultural situation of every country determines the aims and approaches of media education in that country. But in essence, both social and cultural influences are linked to media education. They cannot be studied in isolation. Russia for instance is on the threshold of the transition to the information society that is why people must be prepared to actively participate in media education. The spontaneous introduction to the media is fraught with the deformations in the sociocultural development of a personality (deformations of the values, hierarchy in the cultural sphere, decrease of the cultural needs of the people, scarcity of the spiritual life and so on). Commercialism of mass media, the strong state and corporative control of main media

resources, the lack of public broadcasting, the lack of democratic civil pressures to mass media in Russia for example provokes the interest to Civil Defense Approach, Critical Thinking, Critical Autonomy, and Critical Democratic Approach. (A, Korochensky).

In Switzerland for instance, there is a high degree of prosperity. Private homes, schools and firms are highly equipped with media. Therefore, young people have to become media literate to be able to participate in a post-modern media society and as citizens in a direct democracy. This democracy does only work if citizens are able to evaluate media information appropriately and if they know where to find reliable knowledge. This is influenced by the scientific approaches which are dominant in their universities. Media education is part of social science media and communication research work with surveys and qualitative studies on media exposure, reception and on media effects. Media education is based on democratic parenting style and tries to take into account the needs and educational tasks of young people in a pluralistic society.

Practical Approach to Media Literacy Education.

Media literacy education could be introduced a synthetic way that is, combining the integration of media education into the obligatory courses with the autonomous special courses and electives. This includes formal education plus special courses plus media criticism as special field of journalism and civil activities. The education must be a permanent part of the socialization and the life of a modern man in the condition of changing information society from childhood to old age. (A, Korochensky).

The approach adopted by Center for Research on Media for Education (CIMA), takes a broad view of preparing the individual for life in a media saturated environment. Their programme is based on a five step model. According to Dominguez (1990):

> after initially strengthening skill for critical analysis, it moves on to stress education for new experiences (creativity) which would seem to respond to the need to develop in the students the ability to apply their new analytical skills to current text affecting their own live.

A more critical perspective is taken by Freire (1978), and this is based on the critical reading approach. This involves critical reading of texts taught through the analysis of images (photographs, drawings and so on), involving much dialogue and group participation. The British approach of media literacy education is on the critical cultural approach. This approach aims at training the students for taste and sensibility. There are large out pour of "how to do it" books for teachers. Such books give practical guidance on not only how to teach the subject in the classroom but also on how the subject might be filled into an already crowded curriculum."

An important force promoting media education in the United Kingdom has been the British Film Institute (BFI). It has as one of its chief functions policy intervention. It has for example, consistently pressed for the integration of media education into the English language and literature syllabus of the national curriculum, pragmatically, the only way to get it into an educational system committed to retaining a traditional, ten subject t curriculum. In articulating her philosophy of media education and perception of the goals to be sought, Bazalgette (1991), states that:

> texts are created through processes which are part of their meaning. Learning about the processes gives us more power over the texts we read and the texts we produce. Media education means more than learning how to resist media manipulation. It is the natural electronic extension of reading and writing and should teach how the media reach real audiences and elicit real responses from them. It should give children high

expectations of television, of all media and of themselves.

Presenting some general principles for teaching all age groups, Masterman (1985), is of the view that media education should be demystificatory and critical   showing students how media controllers have power to project things as natural and authentic which are neither natural nor authentic but inevitably are constructions of the production process, The student should be made aware that the purpose of the media is to produce and sell audiences, assembling them by attractive programming, then charging advertisers for access to them as part of the larger cycle of capitalist production, distribution, exchange and consumption.

The real task of the media education teacher is to develop in pupils enough self- confidence and critical maturity to be able to apply critical judgements to media texts which they will encounter in the future when the teacher is not there. In short, they must develop critical autonomy. The principal skill taught should be investigative and not evaluative (Quin and MacMahon, 1985).

Factors Hindering the Growth of Media Education

Several reasons have been given for this unsatisfactory situation. Tyner (1992), is of the view that one of the reasons hindering the growth of media education is the diversity of concepts of what media education is and what it should be doing. Other reasons include:

-the resistance of advertisers who pay the bills of a commercially-dominated mass media and have political influence on the media.

-crowded curricula and administrative elites who are pedagogically conservative.

-decaying urban society who may not find the teaching of media awareness skills easy to grasp and finally is the prevailing assumptions that media education is the responsibility of parents not schools although parents are manifestly ill- equipped to deal with it.

Media Education around the World

The colloquium "New Directions in Media Education" held in Toulouse, France in 1990 brought together 200 media educators from 45 countries and offered one of the first opportunities to compare media education efforts around the world. The colloquium was supported by the Council of Europe aid by UNESCO which has promoted media education since 1964. UNESCO has also supported a number of other international gatherings and publications on the subject. Some countries have relatively long histories of media education. Canada, Australia, Great Britain, France and USA are recognized leaders in media education. In fact, Canada and Australia have gained official status at every primary and secondary school and are known to media educators all over the world. Pungent (1993), summarized the Canadian situation as follows:

> Media education in secondary schools has begun in the western Canadian provinces. There is also some interest being shown in the subject in the Atlantic Provinces. In Ontario, government has mandated the teaching of media within the English curriculum for grades seven through twelve. There are a number of resources for teachers and the Association for media Literacy provides information, workshops, newsletters and in-service training in media.

The Ontario Media Literacy Resource Guide has been used not only across Canada but also in the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippians and even in Japanese translation, A principal center for Media Literacy development in Canada as well as the United States has been the Association for Media Literacy based in Toronto. Religious groups in Canada have also been important driving forces in promoting media education.

In Germany, despite much theoretical writing on the media, only limited practical implementation of media education has been reported, although some local efforts do seem to show promise. Media education had a place in the Austrian national curriculum for some years. In Spain media education has been made a

requirement of both primary and secondary school curriculum giving students a choice between two courses "language and communication or image and production". Japan has shown a growing interest in media education, although there is little space for new courses in the crowded and examination oriented primary and secondary school curricula. In Japan individual educators manifest concern about media literacy. The Philippines manifest considerable interest in media education but most seems concentrated in Catholic schools and other religious organizations, rather than receiving much government support. The Philippine Association for Media Education has been in existence for some years.

Media Literacy Education: -- The Trend in Africa

In Africa, primary and secondary media literacy education have not been given any considerations. Communication educators are more concerned with professional training and research. However, a project to carry out an extensive programme of media literacy research in West Africa, sponsored by the World Association for Christian Communication is going on. There is need for media literacy education in our country Nigeria. We should take a cue from the Latin American countries like Brazil where media education has been widely embraced despite wide spread poverty which limits access to media for many. Brazil is famous for the production and export of soap operas. Nigeria likewise has recently become famous for the production and exportation of home videos. The controversies surrounding home videos with regards to their negative influence on the morality of children and youth coupled with the influx of media products from Europe and America which are equally assumed to impact negatively on our youths are good reasons for Nigeria to embrace media literacy education.

Government and concerned citizens in authority should see the adoption of media literacy education in our educational curricula as a sine qua non. Research has shown that children and youths seem to believe everything they view and hear from the media. Acholonu (2010), in a study on the perceptual impact of heroes and villains in Nigerian home videos found that majority of youths agreed that what they view in home videos is what happened in real life. They failed to understand that what they view is an individual's artistic creation, scripted and put into action. With media literacy education incorporated into our educational curricula, children would be able to critically analyze media contents appropriately to their advantage.

Conclusion

The need for media education literacy is very obvious. In this media saturated society, information comes not only through the written words but also through images and sounds. Media education literacy would help children and youths to fluently read and write audio\visual language. They would be better equipped with highly competitive power to thrive in our multi-media culture. The children and youths of today are increasingly participating in cultural and social worlds that are inaccessible or even incomprehensible to their parents. The new world that they inhabit is largely the world of the media. The media play significant part in the lives of children and youths and how they construct meaning. Media literacy education is also crucial for the development of citizenship skills needed to promote a thriving democracy. Political campaigns and issues are primarily conveyed through 30 seconds adverts or at best half an hour news interviews. With so little attention paid to issues from our primary forms of media consumption, it is imperative for people to learn how to read the messages they are bombarded with and recognize the reasons and decisions behind what is being presented to them. Media studies should not be a separate part of the curriculum but should enter into every aspect of the child's learning about his or her cultural experience.

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