



Media Literacy for All

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Background and context

Media Education Center of Armenia is the non-governmental organization, committed to media literacy, we coordinate safer internet activities in our country. Our activities are aimed not only to empower citizens to use on-line and mobile technologies safely and wisely, but also help to make use of incredible opportunities of e-learning, creative expression and civic participation.

Our projects range from fostering reading to development of math capabilities. Starting our activities in secondary schools we have attracted public and private sectors and brought these issues to the agenda of the Public Council of Armenia. Currently we develop a Concept on Media Literacy in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science of Armenia.

How do we approach to media literacy concept/definition: “skills and capabilities necessary for civic participation in the digital economy and social inclusion in a knowledge-based society”.

Speaking of what are the strength and brakes of our projects, the success was evident in acquisition of new technological skills and production techniques, which is very natural for the country having a 50-year-old tradition of ICT education. In respect to social and communication skills, perception



of media texts, evaluation of content, critical understanding of commercial manipulation, etc., there is still much work to be done.

Until recently, there has not been even a general consensus in the society about the necessity to develop those skills, not to speak about the understanding of decision-makers. Unexpectedly the situation turned over thanks to the very popular soap opera ‘Trap’ came out on Armenian TV. That soap opera did much more to change people’s attitude towards media literacy than several years of our dedicated work.

‘Trap’ was featuring a criminal leader as a positive and strong character vs. a software engineer, weak-willed and characterless. The lobbying of the software engineering community forced the producers of the film to change the script of the soap opera, turning the weak-willed person into a self-sacrificing hero.

Software companies have a special role in the Armenian economy: Armenia gives twice more software products, than neighbouring Azerbaijan and Georgia, which have 4.5 times more population together. And this is not only about the quantity, but the quality of the products: such big companies as Synopsys, National Instruments, Sun Microsystems have R&D labs in Armenia.

Those hot disputes around the film stimulated the interest of decision makers towards media literacy aimed at acquisition of critical thinking skills. And recently the minister of education and science during his meeting with Journalism students at the Yerevan State University told, that journalism education should become a part of media education.

In Armenia, a new democracy, most of initiatives come from the bottom. Our recent survey on people’s attitude to media literacy was another demonstration of that: that only 17% of parents think that government bears responsibility for safety and security matters on the web, one out of

ten believes, that in the digital age it is the responsibility of every citizen to keep the on-line environment secure and safe.

On the contrary initiatives which come from above are very difficult to be fulfilled, especially if they are not understandable to the public.

Relevant facts and figures:

- a. Weak and uncompetitive media vs. strong ICT industry;
- b. Very conservative approach to education vs. traditionally literate society (50-year-old tradition of ICT skills, 100 per cent of literacy),
- c. Absence of community - school administrative link vs. strong parent-school informal link (with financial support involved);
- d. 35 % of population having access to the Internet, growing demand for high speed communications
- e. Mass media and Internet are still not treated seriously, the Internet has been rather approached as entertainment means until recently.
- f. Few researches have been conducted in the field of media literacy, Internet and media appropriation, children's on-line activities, child-computer interaction, evaluation of content, exposure to risks, to harmful content and to commercial risks.

Survey outcomes:

Nearly 60% of Armenian parents are concerned about various risks children encounter in their on-line life and convinced that media literacy taught at school from early grades can help children be better protected from those risks.



60% of parents say that media literacy should be taught as a separate subject at school. Those parents, who oppose them (27%), are certain that media literacy education must become an indispensable part of ICT classes obligatory within the formal education system in Armenia.

Most of experts seem to agree on the following: media education incorporated in ICT classes could become the most successful model in our environment, it would help to benefit from the very positive perceptions of the ICTs and ICT education in our public,” experts say. This approach is quite common in our country, which still has weak media vs. strong and competitive ICT industry.

Our experts insist that media education taught as a separate subject help youth to develop not only up-to-date technological skills and production techniques, but a lot of new social and communication habits, that make them more adapted to the new rapidly changing environment, in which boundaries between on-line and offline worlds become obliterated.

In general, protective approaches are not dominating in the country, where Internet is rapidly growing. With a 100% of mobile Internet penetration and nearly 90% of school children connected to the Web through mobile phones, and with an increasing demand for high speed communication, people become more and more interested in positive aspects Internet and social networks can bring into their everyday lives. Fears of dangers yield to tremendous opportunities for free communication, learning, creative expression and civic participation.

Moreover, the usefulness of Internet filters is often challenged for several reasons. One reason on the surface is that children very quickly learn to manipulate these tools. Beneath the surface, there is a deep belief that youth must learn to cope with complicated situations online to develop healthy immunity off-line. At last, studies show that, youth most at risk of on-line harms are still those at risk of offline harms.



Quotes of teachers – survey participants:

“New technologies and media motivate children’s creativity and critical thinking. The usage of smart-boards during our classes brought a lot of positive change to the lessons. In general, children become more independent and some of them even perform better,” said a teacher of the school, which has 40 smart boards/ per 1200 children (1 smart board per 30 children).

“Of course, technology-savvy children are more self-confident and think they possess much power, they often feel superiority even over their teachers”.

“Children usually are ahead of their parents and teachers. In the Armenian society, which historically became child-centered, adults do not fear that children will obtain much power in comparison to their parents”.

“We think that parents also should be taught, and some adults are eager to learn from youth’s experiences”.

As the survey demonstrated, the vast majority of parents (82%) think that knowledge gap about new media across generations should be bridged. At the same time, as our experience proved, it is very problematic to bring parents to school for learning.

Empowerment brings protection

Media Education Center monitored the patterns of web content consumption by secondary school students, participated in media education projects. As the monitoring demonstrated, “empowerment brings an increased protection (self-protection)”: creative media production in the classroom resulted in a considerable change in the quality of Internet resources consumed by children. Children who started actively using multimedia technologies in the



classroom, generally shifted from entertainment resources to educational web sites. That change in consumption patterns was particularly recorded for after-school hours in the computer laboratories of engaged schools.

Inappropriate web sites require confidence, being alone. On the contrary, any educational or learning activity on the Internet can be carried out with the help of a parent. School assignments, requiring usage of the Internet as a tool, encourage and promote a cooperative work of children and parents.

One of our most successful projects was implemented not in an elite district of the capital, but in the suburb, far from city's cultural centers. Tangible effects were recorded when young people ('difficult youth', or 'suburb children', often coming from low social-economic status homes) were given the opportunity to use ICTs extensively during their classes with the aim to produce educational materials collaboratively with teachers.

Education about media and education through media

The Armenian Government promotes wider application of digital technologies in education through establishment of educational portals and distance learning programs. Half of 1420 Armenian secondary schools have computers with Internet access. By the end of 2011, all schools will become connected to the World Wide Web, the government projects to unite most of them into a common network by the next year.

Equipment, infrastructure, safety – these terms are measurable for officials. State agencies raise funds to buy equipment, while the educational community adheres to conservative approaches in respect to curriculum, preventing media education from being integrated into school programs. Unlike obligatory ICT courses, media education is not a part of pre-service teacher training so far.



It is not only the issue of resources of a certain country but also of priorities to choose between 'a separate subject' or 'cross-curricular' approaches.

Media literacy as a separate subject generally results in better acquisition of knowledge about media, understanding of political implications of media and strong critical thinking skills.

On the other hand, media literacy across curriculum brings better production techniques rather than abilities to interpret media messages. Cross-curricular media literacy results in rich educational e-content, produced cooperatively by students and teachers.

In both cases best and authoritative teachers should be engaged.

Key Challenges Ahead:

Digital literacy skills, media production skills, critical thinking and social, communication skills – all these can be measured. But how will children use the new skills they acquire? Will they become producers of culture or manipulators?

How to prevent negative and unethical use of new technologies? How to cultivate creativity and critical thinking? How can the Web 2 with its sharable content and potential for becoming collective intelligence be better exploited for the democracy – these are questions that media literacy education should address in different social, cultural, historical, local and global contexts.