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## Media Literacy of Schoolgirls and Schoolboys in an Information Society

**Abstract:** Media play a key role in the everyday life of schoolgirls and schoolboys. Frequent use of the media and the ever-present media culture indicate the need for media literacy and the inclusion of media education in school curriculums. Through a comparative analysis, this paper presents the advantages and deficiencies of particular models of media education, particularly critical media education. The author analyzes the results of studies in media literacy among Slovenian schoolboys and schoolgirls, which reveal that the schoolchildren have production knowledge and skills, but lack reflexive knowledge that would enable them to critically analyze, evaluate, and create their own media content. The author also establishes that media education is deficient in the Slovenian primary curriculum.

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## Introduction

The media consumption among Slovenian schoolchildren is relatively high compared with Western Europe (Livingstone 2002). The majority watch television approximately two hours a day during the week, and three hours a day on weekends (Dolničar and Nadoh 2004). The length of viewing is influenced by gender, as boys spend more time in front of the television than girls, and by success in school. Those with bad grades in school spend more time watching television than those with better grades (ibidem). Schoolgirls and schoolboys in Slovenia are also frequent users of the Internet. Ninety percent of young people between the ages of 10 and 15 use the Internet regularly. According to the Eurobarometer, a qualitative study done in 2007 on Internet safety among children, which included Slovenian children ages 9–10 and 12–14, the most important Internet activities of children around Europe, including Slovenia, are playing games, exploring the web, and communicating. It was also found that children use mobile telephones, mostly to send short SMS messages and to talk with their parents and friends (*Deskanje po varnih vodah* 2009). Today, schoolchildren do not understand different media as separate products, but rather view them as elements in a media mosaic within their media culture. For them, the media world has no physical limits; they perceive it as a global network of wireless, mutual connections (Erjavec 2005).

Media play a key role in the everyday life of schoolgirls and schoolboys. Ever-present media culture reflects the need to include, exchange, discuss, and handle the out-of-school experiences of girls and boys in the school curriculum. As key factors of social »normalization« and ideological communication, the media inform schoolchildren and at the same time (re)shape their evaluation of public and personal matters, ideas, beliefs, and ideals (Livingstone 2004). In this way, schools lose their monopoly on information and education, since media make it possible for education to take place beyond the school walls as well. This explains why many countries strive to adapt the school curriculum to changes in the environment and to prepare schoolchildren for a world saturated with media. This effort is conceptualized as a project called media education. What is media education? What is media literacy? How does the concept of media education come into effect

in school practice? To what degree are Slovenian schoolgirls and schoolboys media literate? This paper addresses these questions.

A comparative analysis is an appropriate method of studying research objects with similar elements (Ladman 2005). Using this method, I critically evaluate the existent models of media education and media literacy, and evaluate Slovenian school practices in this field. The paper critically presents the results of studies on the media literacy of Slovenian schoolgirls and schoolboys. Particular emphasis is placed on the presentation of the model of critical media education. I presuppose that there is conceptual diversity in the field of media education, and that the prevalent models of media education deal too little with the critical dimension of media literacy. Slovenian schoolchildren mostly have production knowledge and skills in media literacy, while lacking reflexive knowledge and skills. First, I present the meaning of media literacy for an information society.

### **Literacy and the Meaning of Media Literacy**

Literacy consists of gaining skills and knowledge for reading, interpreting, and producing texts, artifacts, and intellectual instruments, and the ability to participate fully in culture and society (Kellner & Share 2005). Traditionalists and reformists would probably agree that education and literacy are directly linked. Literacy includes competencies that enable an efficient use of socially constructed forms of communication and representation (*ibidem*). Cultivation of literacy always includes acquiring competences in a particular context, and having particular rules and conventions. Literacy is socially constructed in school and cultural practices and included in different institutional discourses and practices. These appear and change according to social and cultural norms and the interests of elites, which control hegemonic institutions. We may learn that realizing literacy is a history of competition for predominance in the definition of access, interpretation, and production of a written text (Luke 1989). Literacy is always connected to social power, and thus not a universal concept, but rather a contingent and ideological one.

Besides classical reading and writing, teachers and schoolchildren must develop media literacy in an information society. Specifically, if a school wants to prepare schoolchildren appropriately for the problems and challenges of contemporary life, it must expand the concept of literacy and develop a new curriculum. Of course, the era of books and literacy related to the press is not over, as people must know how to critically analyze and select information and communicate in a highly technological environment. Yet, this environment—including e-mail, blogs, and online social networks—requires new skills in writing and reading. In the information society, the multimedia environment defines a new concept of literacy (Giroux & McLaren 1994; Goodman 2003; Kahn & Kellner 2003; Kellner & Share 2005). Therefore, school authorities must realize that the ubiquity of media culture in contemporary society and the dominant position of the media in the construction of contemporary knowledge demand the expansion of the concept

of literacy to include media literacy and the introduction of media into everyday school practice.

This is emphasized not only in academic discussions, but also in policy. For example, in May 2008, the European Commission's Council of Education, Youth, and Culture adopted a resolution on the strategic view of media literacy as an important factor relating to active citizenship in contemporary information societies. In December 2008, the European Parliament adopted the *Resolution on Media Literacy*, arguing that the inclusion of media education in the school system should become the priority task of the EU. The former EU Commissioner for Information Society and Media, Viviane Reding, wrote that media literacy is of key importance to achieving full, active citizenship in the digital era. Today, media literacy is as central to active and full citizenship as literacy was at the beginning of nineteenth century. It is also central for entering the new broadband world of content, available everywhere and anytime. Today, traditional literacy, i.e., the ability to read and write, is no longer sufficient. People must be more aware of the possibilities of expressing themselves more efficiently and interpreting messages from others, especially using the Internet. All people, younger and older, must face the new digital world in which they live. Constant information and education are more important than regulations (Reding 2008).

## Models of Media Literacy and Media Education

Within the pedagogical field, there is a discourse concerning what constitutes media education, with its different agendas and programs. The traditional »protectionist« approach would »vaccinate« young people against the effects of media addiction and manipulation by cultivating a taste for reading and high culture, such as the values of truth and beauty. At the same time, it would calumniate all forms of media and computer culture (see Postman 1985 & 1992). This approach is moralistic and very negative toward the mass media, and is based on the premise that contemporary media are harmful to children. The goal of this approach is to ensure that teachers offer only such knowledge and skills, by means of which schoolchildren will reduce negative and antisocial media effects.

*Information* or *ICT-literacy* puts technology at the center of the literacy concept. An individual who has skills in information literacy uses information and communication effectively. ICT literacy is built upon the skills of reading, writing, talking, and listening, as it is interested in how these skills get a new image in the complex web environment (Hobbs 2008, p. 433–434). It is based on the belief that an individual needs practical knowledge, gained by using media technology, to use information sources efficiently. This approach is very practical and technologically deterministic, and neglects reflexive knowledge and skills.

There is also a so-called *media management*, which emphasizes the importance of redirecting the usual passive use of the media into an intentional and strategic use in response to negative media effects. It is based on behaviorist medical research, which found that children's exposure to media results in negative behavior,

bad food habits, and a poor level of physical activity. Thus, in 2001, the American Academy of Pediatrics advised parents to: 1) limit children's time with the media; 2) prevent children younger than two years old from watching television; and 3) stimulate alternative ways to entertain children (ibidem, p. 436-437). This approach treats children and youth as victims of oppressive media culture, but does not pay appropriate attention to gratification and subversive media consumption. Furthermore, the media professional judges what media contents are appropriate for children and youth irrespective of humanistic and social sciences knowledge, and understands children as a homogenous age (not social) group.

Contrary to the above-mentioned approaches, the prevailing approach to *media education / media literacy* tries to teach schoolchildren how to read, analyze, and decode popular media texts as a continuation of reading literacy. The majority of North American and European models are based on a definition created by the Alliance for a Media Literate America: »In North America media literacy is the process of analyzing, evaluating and creating messages in a wide variety of media modes, genres and forms« (Aufderheide 1997, p. 79).

Even though such media education is widely accepted in the Western world and is difficult to reproach on the level of definition, its realization in social practice has obvious political and ideological implications. An analysis of media implementation shows that it is carried out mostly as a user dimension of the concept of media literacy and media education. This practice of media education puts users who know how to use the media at the forefront, but neglects knowledge and skills education (see Brown 2001; Coleman & Fischerkeller 2003; Erjavec 2006; Hart & Süß 2002; Hobbs & Frost 2003). Its source is a theoretical approach that argues that individuals deliberately use the media to achieve a particular goal and gratification. Audience members actively select and interpret media texts in order to satisfy their needs and desires. The goal of media education is to equip the consumers with the skills necessary for the creative reception of media messages and gaining specific knowledge, such as knowledge of grammar or the syntax of media forms. The conceptual premise of this approach applies to the use of media, but especially to the purchase of media technology. Studies on the implementation of media education in the US pointed to large differences between the definition of media literacy and its implementation in practice. According to Brown (2001, p. 98), media education in the US prevalently puts neoliberal values, most of all consumer and individual values, at the forefront, and prepares schoolchildren for the efficient use of the media, so that they will know how to live in a free market society.

Representatives of critical media, communication and cultural studies, feminist theory, and critical pedagogy are unanimous in the belief that the concepts of media literacy and media education do not enable critical analysis and evaluation of media texts or prepare schoolchildren for today's media-saturated society. Critical media education builds on classical media education by emphasizing the analysis of media culture as a product of social construction and argument, and educates schoolchildren to be critical toward media representations and discourses. At the same time, this approach also stimulates schoolchildren to use the media for self-expression and social activism (Kellner & Share 2005).

Critical media education builds on different critical science approaches (ibidem). Thus, it applies knowledge of feminist theory and its epistemology. For example, C. Luke (1994) proceeded from the epistemological view that points to the cultural construction of »theory,« »history,« and »truth,« and to the cultural dynamics of academic work (ibidem, p. 33). Luke connected feminist political engagement with media representation and stereotypes. This work demands uncovering the political and social construction of knowledge, and emphasizing principles of equality and social justice in the process of representation. Media representation includes and positively presents only certain social groups, while excluding and marginalizing others. In this way, the dominant groups profit while the subordinate groups, which are neglected in the media, lose. This partiality is particularly harmful when: 1) the number of social groups creating media representations is small (a typical example is contemporary multinational media corporations); and 2) messages are neutralized in such a way that people do not ask themselves about the social construction of media representations. According to C. Luke, a classroom teacher is for uncovering the construction of the social power of knowledge and how it serves particular groups more than others. Feminist theory also teaches us that a media education teacher should be guided by the principles of social justice and equality in such a way as to help schoolchildren become aware of homophobic, racist, and sexist media texts, and their principles of functioning. Furthermore, a bottom-up approach, directed toward schoolchildren, makes it possible for teachers to recognize schoolchildren's culture, knowledge, and experiences. C. Luke suggests that schoolchildren should conduct research on themselves; they should make their own video diaries so that teachers and others can hear their voices and views of the world. Although analysis and media production exist in accordance with the prevalent concept of media education, C. Luke argues that we should not stay limited to this level. Critical media education must also research how individuals and media corporations form wider social-political matters in the field of culture, gender, class, political economy, nation, and power (Luke 1994, p. 31). According to S. Harding (2004), teachers must instruct schoolchildren in how to question different views on a matter, and thus get to know the views of marginalized groups. To summarize, schoolchildren must learn to deconstruct meanings in the dominant media discourse and create their own media contents, so that their voices will be heard.

The speech of those who are usually unheard is not enough for critical media education (Kellner & Share 2005). Critical analysis, which researches and uncovers power structures and oppression, is also crucial, as practice shows that the media often quote sexists, radical nationalists, religious fundamentalists, racists, and representatives of groups violating human rights. They are newsworthy because they are in conflict. Therefore, uncovering social structures of power, together with the speech of those who are usually unheard, enables schoolchildren to make individual and social changes. These may occur in various forms, e.g., the rise of self-confidence and creation of alternative media contents, such as blog and web media, which make possible the presentation of a different view of social and cultural problems. Thus, critical media education does not have a preconceived

negative view of the media, but rather includes the idea that the media may be used in a socially positive and subversive way.

Critical media education promotes multicultural media literacy, as the understanding and action of heterogeneous cultures and subcultures that constitute a globalized and multicultural world (Courts 1998; Weil 1998; Kellner & Share 2005). It teaches schoolchildren not only to learn from the media themselves, but also to resist media manipulation and to use media material in a constructive way. It also offers skill development to help them become active citizens and motivate them to participate in the social world. Thus, critical media education is linked to the project of (radical) democracy, and develops skills that support democratization and participation.

Critical media education deals with human relations of superiority and subordination, as well as exposing people to animals, nature, and other linked problems, such as changes in the environment, pollution, or the destruction of animal and plant species. For example, an analysis of the anthropomorphic representation of animals in popular documentaries shows tension and drama in the »real« animal world through the imaginary narration of animal stories, and can uncover an anthropomorphic view of nature. Furthermore, an analysis of the media promotion of »healthy« food can question how we should eat »healthily« (more fruit and vegetables!) if most food is chemically saturated with pesticides and herbicides and »biologically dead« (Komat 2009). An analysis of today's media culture can uncover the promotional attitude of contemporary society, which puts the consumption of goods at the forefront. This question should not be avoided: At whose expense does Western society promote consumption and actually spend too much? One answer, among others, is that it is at the expense of cheap labor and nature (ibidem). Therefore, critical media education does not cover media issues in an isolated way, but always frames them in the widest social context and pays attention to different forms and relations of power.

Critical media education is a participatory project based on cooperation (Kellner & Share 2005). Watching television or using the Internet in a group can stimulate discussion among teachers and schoolchildren, emphasizing the schoolchildren's views, production of different interpretations of media texts, and learning of basic principles of hermeneutics and criticism. Schoolchildren are often more technologically inventive than their teachers, and with their skills and knowledge they can contribute to educational processes. Teachers should guide schoolchildren through the research process with critical discussion and analysis, which add to schoolchildren's critical understanding in the wider society. Given that media culture is a part of a child's identity and one of the most powerful cultural experiences, teachers must be careful when criticizing artifacts and perceptions that are popular among schoolchildren. The promotion of critical respect for differences, and research into nature and the effects of media culture, are desirable.

Critical media education includes engagement, which is above the dichotomy of censure and enthusiasm (ibidem). A media education teacher must provide schoolchildren with a clear insight into the social world, a vision of gender, race, class roles, and complex aesthetic structures and practices, and a clear picture

of how media culture can contribute to education. While doing this, he/she must also uncover how media culture can (co-)create and support sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice, disinformation, problematic ideologies, and questionable values.

### **Critical Media Education Framework: Five Concepts**

In his book *Media Education in the 1990s' Europe*, Masterman (1994, pp. 53–57), the father of media education in the UK, introduced the following basic concepts of media education in Europe: a) the key concept of media education is representation; b) the central aim of media education is denaturalization of the media; c) primarily, media education is research; d) media education is organized around basic concepts that represent the analytical tools, and not the contents, of media education; e) media education is a life-long process; f) media education tries to build not only critical understanding, but above all critical autonomy; g) efficiency of media education can be measured by two criteria: ability of schoolchildren to use their knowledge (critical ideas and principles) in new situations, and the scope of interest, motivation, and responsibility shown by children; and h) for school purposes, media education uses media contents that are topical and appropriate for schoolchildren, and thus excites interest, motivation, and understanding, which would be difficult to achieve using more conventional cases, methods, and learning instruments. Kellner and Sharov (2005) further developed Masterman's delineation of these concepts. Based on their conclusions, we will present the transformed concepts below.

*The principle of non-transparency: All media are »constructed.«*

The first key concept of critical media education is based on the problem of media power: media present their messages as non-problematic and transparent. Semiotics, the science of signs and meanings that are socially constructed on the basis of structural relations of the sign system, has contributed a lot to media education. Barthes (1998) explained that the goal of semiotics is to deconstruct naturalized messages. For media education, the principle of non-transparency is crucial (Masterman 1985). Media do not present reality as a window onto the world or a mirror reflecting the world; media messages are created and are formed through a creative process. This construction includes different decisions as to what to include or exclude from a media text and how to represent reality. Masterman (1986) explains non-transparency using a play on words: »Media do not present reality, but they re-present it.« (Ibidem, p. 33) According to Giroux (1997, pp. 79–80), what appears as natural must be demystified and uncovered as a historical production in terms of its content and form. Demystification of media messages with critical analysis is the first important step in the process of teaching media education.

*Codes and conventions: Media messages are constructed by using creative language, which has its own rules.*

The second key concept of media education is based on semiotics, which establishes how signs and symbols function. On the basis of studying semiotics, teachers of media education can analyze the double meaning of signs through denotation and signifier, and connotation and signifier. When denotation and connotation create one and the same meaning, representation appears natural, while the historical and social construction of meanings remains invisible (Hall 1980). Therefore, the goal of media education is to help schoolchildren differentiate between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (more associative, subjective meaning based on ideological and cultural codes). For younger schoolchildren, teaching must be adapted accordingly and the difference presented in a simple way, i.e., schoolchildren must differentiate between what they see and/or hear and what they think and/or feel. Creating media content can help schoolchildren to research these ideas.

For example, a discussion about class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and racial representation in the media requires the analysis of codes and stereotypes of the subordinate groups represented (e.g., workers, women, and racial minorities) in contrast to the representation of dominant groups, (e.g., elite, rich, male, and white). Analysis of different models of representations of women or social minorities clearly points to the construction of gender and other representations. It also shows that prevalent, negative media representations further subordinate marginal social groups and represent this subordination as natural. When signifiers represent male figures (e.g., Bruce Willis), it seems to us that they only present a male actor, while in fact they construct connotations of patriarchal power, violent manhood, and dominance. Thus, the media offer highly coded constructions and are not a window onto the world.

*Decoding of media messages: Different people interpret media messages in different ways.*

The third concept includes the idea of the Birmingham Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies in the UK, which in contrast to previous theories, emphasizes active audiences. Based on semiotic concepts developed mostly by Barthes and Eco, Hall (1980) developed the idea that there is a difference between a producer's coding of a media text and a recipient's decoding of it. This difference highlights the ability of the audience to create its own reading and meanings, and to decode texts in an oppositional or preferential way.

Cultural media studies have offered great progress in the understanding of literacy. According to Ang (2002, p. 180), textual meanings do not exist within the texts themselves. A particular text can have different meanings with regard to the interdiscursive context in which a viewer interprets it. The audience is not without power; however, it is also not omnipotent when »reading« the media. This has contributed a lot to the potential of media literacy, as it makes it possible

for the audience to be active in the process of creating meaning. Yet, as Hooks (1996, p. 3) points out, while the audience is not passive and is capable of selection, however, it has difficulties in decoding certain messages. The capacity for critical analysis is crucial for schoolchildren because it enables the recognition of preferential meanings in media texts. Audience theory understands reception as a ground of cultural conflict, where critical thinking skills enable the audience to create different readings and to face the dominant discourses.

*Contents and message: Media transmit their own values and views.*

The fourth key concept is focused on the contents of media messages with the intent of making schoolchildren assess the ideology, bias, and connotation of clear and covert representations. Cultural studies, feminist theory, and critical pedagogy offer frameworks for researching questions of media representations of race, class, gender, ethnicity, etc. They do not deal only with the identification of bias in the media, but also help schoolchildren to recognize the subjective nature of all kinds of communication. As Giroux (1997, p. 11) suggests, the idea that theory, data, and research can be objective is based on false values, which are conservative and enable the mystification of political orientations.

Media messages, however, do not have only negative representations and should not be prejudged. For example, television serials for women, can represent women more positively than prevalent media artifacts, and send messages about girls and women who play an important social role. In these serials, homosexuals can also be positively represented, thus offering messages related to a diverse and pluralist representation of sexuality. Since media content is often very symbolic, it demands a broad range of theoretical approaches so that the multidimensional social, political, moral, and sometimes philosophical meanings of a media text can be traced.

*Motivation: The key motive of media functioning is power and profit.*

The fifth key concept stimulates the schoolchildren to think about the origins of a particular message and the reason it has been sent. Too often, schoolchildren believe that the role of the media is only to inform or to educate (Dolničar & Nadoh 2004 & Livingstone 2004), while they lack knowledge about the economic structure and motives of media functioning (Erjavec & Volčič 2006 & Sopotnik 2006). Decades ago, many media companies competed for audience attention. A few years ago, this number decreased, and today, there are fewer than ten transnational corporations competing on the global media market. In the latest edition of his book *The New Media Monopoly*, Bagdikian (2004, p. 3) claims that five global corporations control the American (US) media market, i.e., Time Warner, The Walt Disney Company, Murdoch's News Corporation from Australia, Viacom, and Germany's Bertelsmann. They are organized as cartels, owning the majority of newspapers, magazines, publishing firms, film studios, and radio and television stations.

The consolidation of mass media ownership makes it possible for a few multinational corporations to control media representation. This concentration of ownership threatens the diversity of information and creates the possibility for global cultural and information colonization (McChesney 1999 a; 2004). McChesney (1999 b, p. 13) insists that big media companies' consolidation of ownership is very undemocratic and noncompetitive, and resembles a cartel, typical of a competitive market as it is described in economic textbooks.

For example, the mainstream media in the US positively represented the ex-president George W. Bush because, as a member of the conservative Republican Party, he supported regulation and reduced taxes for profits and advertisements. Some media corporations such as Murdoch's Fox Television News, actively supported the right-wing agenda, which was in accordance with the interests of owners, managements, and directors (Kellner 2002). In the last decade, the ownership structure of the media market has also radically changed in Slovenia. There is a monopoly on the daily press and a duopoly on the television market. Schoolchildren must be aware of the character of media companies in order to evaluate their artifacts appropriately.

#### **Four Models of Inclusion of Media Education in Primary Schools**

Projects in media education can be developed as part of the formal educational system or part of education in the local community. As the first approach is very prevalent, we will analyze its inclusion in educational institutions.

There are three ways of including media education in the school systems. Masterman (1994, pp. 60–61) recognizes four basic models of media education in European primary school curriculums:

##### *Media education as a specialized subject.*

One way of including media education in educational institutions is through the introduction of an autonomous, obligatory or optional, subject. This model is known in Slovenia. The biggest question when preparing the teaching plan for such a subject is how to cover the wide spectrum of forms, practices, and products offered by the media. According to Masterman (ibidem), the most frequent solution has been the sum of different parts and themes. Thus, teachers have divided the teaching program into three parts: explaining television, explaining radio, and explaining the press. In Masterman's (ibidem) opinion, the following model has the most appropriate a) theoretical framework, enabling schoolchildren and teachers to get a clear image of this diverse field; b) basic concepts and principles; and c) characteristic methods of research.

*Media education as a constituent element, which is conceptualized within an existing and established curriculum subject, usually within lessons related to the students' first language.*

Until now, the most popular way of including media education in a school curriculum has been to incorporate it as part of learning the first tongue. Language is of central importance to schoolchildren's intellectual, social, and emotional growth. It is the key element of the whole curriculum, as it presents the basic tools for learning in all other fields. In the Canadian province of Ontario, media education is a constituent part of learning English, according to school law. In the UK, media education has an even longer tradition as part of learning English language and literature. Teachers of language contribute a lot of knowledge about analyzing texts; however, we must pay attention to the distinctive practice of analyzing media texts. Teachers should teach their schoolchildren about media analysis. Language and literature classes should be expanded and variegated with chapters about the media's language, which would include studying general habits, rhetorical instruments, forms of narration, and persuasion techniques in the media. Schoolchildren would carry out exercises in writing texts that would be appropriate for media presentation, such as radio news, soap operas, or audiovisual media.

*Individual parts of media education are included in different subjects, e.g., teaching language, literature, history, geography, etc. This mode is stimulated by a teacher-coordinator.*

For a comprehensive approach to media education, it is important to integrate it into the entire school curriculum, ensure that the teaching programs of all the subjects are connected to media in some way or use mass media technology in some form. If teachers use media as innocent visual presentations of teaching materials, they must introduce a critical approach to the media content. Examples of such inclusion of media education in a curriculum can be found in the Finnish and Norwegian educational systems.

*Media education as spare time activity. Views of media education are topics within an integrated teaching plan that is not based on established subjects.*

An example of such inclusion of media education in a school curriculum is in different non-obligatory school practices that take place in school during spare time.

Which model of media education is the most appropriate and efficient? Masterman does not offer one answer, but claims that media education should be advanced and supported through as many models as possible to yield the most satisfactory results.

There is no model that would be more efficient than others. The introduction of a specialized and autonomous subject has numerous advantages. Specific views as well as specific pedagogical approaches can be more easily obtained within a separate subject, through which the discipline of media education can

establish its identity. In this way, media education develops itself and expands knowledge. Premises, equipment, and library materials for study are also assured. It is important that a subject gains an appropriate status and constant presence in a school; this assures continuity of teaching, the long-term development of the subject, a connection and dialogue between teachers and media professionals, and the organization of networks and meetings to exchange experience and knowledge. However, despite all arguments in favor of the specialized autonomous subject, it will have only a moderate or no effect if its views and principles are ignored or discredited in other classes.

Masterman (1994, p. 61) points out that because of the closed and inflexible character of the majority of school systems in developed countries, which are not ready to accept new, alternative subjects into the existent curriculum, media education is most often included as part of a traditional subject, usually a mother tongue. When media education is taught only as a subchapter of a traditional subject, there is a danger that the specifics of media pedagogics will be subordinate and reshaped according to the needs of this traditional subject. Introducing media education into a curriculum is limited by a belief that such inclusion is unjustified and interferes with the teaching of traditional subjects. Such common convictions and negative reactions to the media in general, and to television and new technologies in particular, are still very much present and problematic.

## **Media Education in Slovenia**

Research on the inclusion of media education in kindergartens was conducted at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Ljubljana; we surveyed 30 pre-school teachers and conducted in-depth interviews with 12 pre-school teachers. The results confirmed the conclusions of earlier studies, conducted more than 10 years ago, and proved that activities connected to the media were rare in our kindergartens (Bahovec & Kodolja 1996, p. 147). We also found that pre-school teachers in kindergartens mostly develop the production level of media education, and much less the reflexive level. The research also showed that the inclusion of media education in the everyday practice of kindergarten activities is dependent upon the individual educator. Similar conclusions have been drawn in other developed countries. Pedagogues in the most developed countries (e.g., Belgium, Canada, Spain, and Norway) are far more aware of the importance of media education in kindergartens than those in Slovenia. However, even in these countries, inclusion most often depends on the interest of an individual educator.

In 1994, Slovenia became the first country in Central and Eastern Europe to introduce media education into primary schools. The project consisted of two parts: the subject Media Education in the nine-year primary school; and media education contents included in different subjects (e.g., civic and patriotic education and ethics, and Slovenian language). According to data from the Ministry of Education, between 10 and 20 percent of all Slovenian primary schools have taught media education in the seventh, eighth, or ninth grade over the last few years. Schoolchildren can choose Media Education as a subject in all three grades,

or in one of them, or none. Media Education consists of three thematic parts, and each is taught in one year. In the first thematic part, schoolchildren learn mainly about the press; in the second about radio; and in the third about television and Internet. In primary schools, School Journalism is an optional subject within the Slovenian language, which is linked to the subject Media Education. Studies on the inclusion of media education (Sedej 2005; Sopotnik 2006; Volčič & Erjavec 2008; Zajc 2008) show that the optional subject Media Education is not enough for media education to be included adequately in the school curriculum (35 hours a year, one hour a week), as relatively few schoolchildren choose it. Compared with other optional subjects, such as foreign languages, the subject is underestimated and is mostly chosen by schoolchildren with bad grades who expect that they will merely watch, listen to, or read the media.

Research also shows (*ibidem*) that teachers of Media Education do not have enough knowledge, and that schools have relatively poor media equipment. Older teachers dislike media-supported methods of teaching, as they believe that children spend too much time watching television or using the Internet at home. An overfilled school curriculum and a never-ending concern with covering all of the topics on a teaching plan are also limitations. Devoting time to media themes would mean burdening the program or deducting time that is intended for other topics (*ibidem*).

For a successful critical media education, it is important that as many educational models as possible are developed in a school curriculum, i.e., models that are linked to one another and enable mutual support, correction, and completion (Masterman 1994). Thus, media education in Slovenia should be included at least in first language classes, where it has been most deficiently implemented and not adjusted to communication science findings (Volčič & Erjavec 2008).

In secondary schools, media contents are included in the curriculums of Slovenian language, sociology, psychology, and art history, but their implementation depends on a particular professor's efforts (*ibidem*).

## **Media Literacy of Slovenian Schoolgirls and Schoolboys**

In Slovenia, there is a lack of in-depth research on the media literacy of Slovenian children and youth. Existent studies (Erjavec & Volčič 2006 & Sopotnik 2006) show that although children and young people devote a lot of time to the media, they use a low level of critical judgment. Slovenian schoolboys and schoolgirls have not developed reflexive knowledge and skills, but do have relatively well-developed production skills and knowledge. To put it differently, schoolchildren know how to use media, but not critically. For example, they believe the media messages that »what is in the media is real,« and they act according to media advice published in magazines.

Research on media usage has revealed that schoolgirls and schoolboys have dynamic access to the media (Dolničar & Nadoh 2004). This is a social process that is not limited to providing media equipment, but includes a continuous evaluation of the quality of media contents and services. This, however, is limited mostly to

the technological side of the media. Studies also show (Erjavec & Volčič 2006 & Sopotnik 2006) that schoolchildren lack broad knowledge about the social, cultural, economic, political, and historical context upon which critical evaluation is based. The World Wide Web, created in the period of information (over)abundance, even increases the need for such knowledge. If we compare the World Wide Web to the press and audiovisual texts, created in the context of deficiency when only a few people had access to the system of production and distribution, we recognize a different way of using the media. Slovenian schoolchildren use the media, play games, and search the web, but they mostly use skills, while they have too little awareness of their interpretative relation with the complex symbolic and technologically mediated text. The key problem is that they are skilled in the technological use of the media, but they know too little about how to evaluate the (lack of) quality of media images and ideas. They lack knowledge about their socio-historical position and about the role of media in a society.

Today, Slovenian schoolchildren are also active media producers. They use e-mail, chat rooms, games, blogs, and social networks, but do so as users and less as critical citizens who are aware of social problems, and can draw attention and react to them.

## Conclusion

Slovenian schoolgirls and schoolboys, similar to the majority of their peers in Western European (Hart & Süß 2002 & Coleman & Fischerkeller 2003) and North American (Brown 2001 & Hobbs & Frost 2003) countries, demonstrate a low level of media literacy in the field of critical analysis and the evaluation of media texts. As we live in a media-saturated information society, it is irresponsible to ignore the meaning of media literacy and media education. In the contemporary information society, media culture also teaches proper and improper behavior, and the role of gender, values, and knowledge in the world. The majority of schoolchildren are not aware that media culture educates them, and also functions covertly on an unconscious level. This situation calls for a critical approach that would enable schoolchildren to become aware of how the media construct meanings, influence and educate their audiences, and impose messages and values. Critical media education includes teaching the skills to analyze media codes and conventions and criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, as well as competences in interpreting diverse media meanings and messages. It helps schoolchildren use the media with intelligence to evaluate media contents, critically analyze media forms, study media effects and uses, and create alternative media.

Critical media education enables schoolchildren to create their own meanings and identities, and (re-)form the social conditions of their culture and society. Many founders of media education support these goals, including Masterman, who suggested that the goal of media education is critical autonomy, the capacity of independent critics. Ferguson (2001, p. 42) argues that our relationship with the media is not autonomous, but always depends on given conditions that are

connected to social contexts. Given that people always declare *for* something, he suggests that we should declare for critical solidarity, which he describes as the means by which we recognize the social dimensions of our thinking and through which we develop our skills of analysis and relative autonomy. Critical solidarity, as it relates to media education, means teaching schoolchildren how to interpret information and how to communicate within their social, historical, political, and economic context. Thus, students can understand the mutual social connections and consequences of their acts and lifestyles. If we connect critical autonomy and critical solidarity, we educate schoolchildren to become independent critical thinkers who are not dependent on the media.

Critical media education offers a framework for learning critical solidarity and skills that question the social construction of information and communication, from hypertext to computer games. Teachers must teach in a way that allows schoolchildren to learn how to analyze and use the media to express their opinions with a sense of critical solidarity. The basis for media education is the idea that all media messages are constructed, and that media literacy is linked directly to an understanding of social circumstances. As long as teachers use computer skills and knowledge of media literacy, media corporations will define what people learn from the media.

When we interpret media messages, our interpretation is partly individual, but partly reflects the position of the reader (i.e., age, race, gender, or social class). For literacy, it is especially important to be aware of social relations as they operate within the social and political context. Teachers are responsible for qualifying schoolgirls and schoolboys to become capable of recognizing and resisting the political and economic functions of media culture. At the same time, we should be aware that teachers are not heroes, i.e., the only individuals who possess a critical consciousness and who can »enlighten« schoolchildren to change and emancipate their societies and themselves. Thus, teachers are the key actors, but they are not solely responsible for media literacy in a society. Other pedagogical workers, school authorities, parents, and other social actors must support them. It should be emphasized that although teachers introduce critical literacy to schoolchildren, they quickly change their media knowledge and practice. In the contemporary world, where the maxim of profitability prevails, marketing skills are more appreciated and financially rewarded than skills in critical thinking, and remain in force above all.

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