

## INVESTIGATION OF THE EXTENT OF UNDERSTANDING AND THE WAY OF REFLECTION OF MEDIA CONTENT BY PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

*The skills of analysing media content are an important component of media literacy. Uncritical attitude towards the information received poses risks for young students. It could deform their personality. A survey of 100 Bulgarian students aged 9-10 shows the existence of "media traps" in the information environment. The results are a good starting point to clarify certain problems and formulate possible solutions.*

*The survey makes an investigation with regards to the correlation between the level of media literacy, the level of digital skills and the interests of young students in reading books.*

*Some thought-provoking trends are revealed concerning the most popular social media used by the students, the most popular computer games for boys and for girls and the most popular TV shows, i.e. the results show an interesting level of self-estimation of skills and knowledge regarding the digital skills, media literacy and critical thinking of the students.*

**Keywords:** media literacy, digital literacy, fundamental research of digital literacy and media education, early age, critical thinking

## Introduction

The impact of modern technologies and media on the structure and dynamics of social and public relations has long ceased to be an initial scientific hypothesis. For over a decade the attention of the major European and international organizations has been focused on the issue of media and digital literacy of the individual, its role and importance for personality development and social integration. Leading institutions such as UNESCO, the European Commission, etc. have established and are implementing relevant strategies and educational concepts for building media and digital literacy.

Nowadays students have access to huge volumes of information through printed and electronic texts. It is of great importance for us teachers and parents and society in general that critical thinking is to be formed in our children's way of thinking and analyzing the surrounding world. Critical literacy skills give to students the tools they need to think more deeply when using texts and when creating texts themselves (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004).

Some research shows that students believe that texts are true just because they are printed on paper or posted online. Student should be taught how to proceed with the accuracy of the information received from a variety of sources (Daguet, 2000). An accent on the importance of teaching students how to interact with information from different media sources can be found in many research publications. The Internet offers not a linear text but a semantic network of information and students should know how to use it. One way to make students think critically is to do research work and complete projects (Jonassen, 2003). Teachers should teach students to distinguish whether the ideas presented on the Web are correct and how to differentiate between true and false information.

It is a popular and recognised view in Bulgarian educational research that the 21st century is an age of media comfort. People have access to a range of mass information media, which they use for work, entertainment and specific personal pursuits. At the same time, there is a growing fear that the easy availability of different media products may turn into a threat to adolescents (Danov, 2016), (Angelov, 2007).

In specialized pedagogical literature in Bulgaria it is argued that today's children are exposed to a range of media sources that provide more discreet or more aggressive information which has not

always been processed and made relevant to the potential recipient (Karapenchev, 2009) (Lozanova, 2010).

We are sharing these claims because our experience of pedagogy researchers shows that a critical situation concerning the expectations about the media and the discrepancies with these expectations is about to arise. Very often behind the media product, a certain piece of news, for example, there is provocative or misleading information. Through the media, public opinion may be manipulated and dependent and prone to remote control individuals may be formed. It is a task of the school to prevent adolescents from outside influence and develop their objective thinking and critical attitude to the information they receive.

In our research, “media education” stands for the personality development through the mass communication means (Fedorov, 2009), and “media literacy” is the ability to percept, create analyze and evaluate media texts (Eds.N.J.Smelser & P.B.Baltes, 2001).

### Research objectives

The work presented here is part of research on digital competences and media education at pre-school and primary school age. One of the specific goals is to study the formation of the child’s personality in the modern socio-cultural situation through the achievements of media education on national and international scale. The authors look into the problem from the positions of teachers, parents, kindergarten and primary school pupils, and university students doing preschool and primary school pedagogy courses. The present paper deals with the investigations of the pupils’ point of view only.

The goals of this particular study are to:

estimate the level of media literacy of students in relation to their social status, including ethnic characteristics of the social environment;

identify different genres depending on pupils’ age and the specific ethnic diversity.

### Exploratory design

To study the level of media literacy of students a survey has been developed. This survey consists of 8 sections:

Sources of information;

Critical thinking;

Media content;

Communication online;

Internet safety and culture;

Digital skills;

Access to digital devices;

Interest in reading books.

As sources to obtain additional information about facts, people and events (for school work), the Internet, books, TV, the radio, newspapers and magazines are listed. The students can also add new sources not included into the list.

The critical thinking of students is measured through two questions: “How do you check if the information you have read is correct?”, and “What happens when mass communication means (the media) change the content of the initial news?”

The answers to the first question are as follows:

I look for other sources to make sure that the information is correct;

I trust that the information is correct and do not check it;

I depend on my teacher for help;

I look for help from my parents;

I do something else (please specify).

The answers to the second question are:

Yes, they clarify and update it;

Yes, they completely deny it;

Yes, they apologize for the incorrect news;

No, they relate the new information without apologizing for the incorrect news;

Something else (please specify).

For estimation of the media content used by students five open questions are included. The respondent should list movies, computer games, TV competitions, radio games, and periodicals (newspapers and/or magazines) that could improve his/her knowledge in some topic of interest.

Students use the Internet and communicate through a variety of Internet platforms and mobile apps. This is why a question is included in the survey to identify the most popular Internet environments and mobile apps for technologies based communication in early age.

The question of Internet safety and online culture is of great importance at this age. Just like the child's first seven years are important for their upbringing, it is paramount to form an online culture with the very first steps that the child or the young student takes in the Internet. Parents' responsibility in this process is indisputable. The authors of the present study are carrying out and planning to carry out further research in order to evaluate and juxtapose the views of both parents and students about Internet safety and the formation of online culture in children. The survey includes a question where the students evaluate their parents' conduct regarding the home rules for using the Internet and the behaviour model sanctioned in the family.

The survey includes two questions for self-assessment of digital skills at software programs that the child can work with as well as an evaluation of the number and types of digital devices that the student has access to at home.

The last question is related to the interest in reading books. The authors' aims are to collect information about favourable book titles at a certain time and with different age group readers, on the one hand, and evaluate the percentage of active young readers, on the other. Another objective is to establish a connection between digital technologies and interest in reading in the young age group.

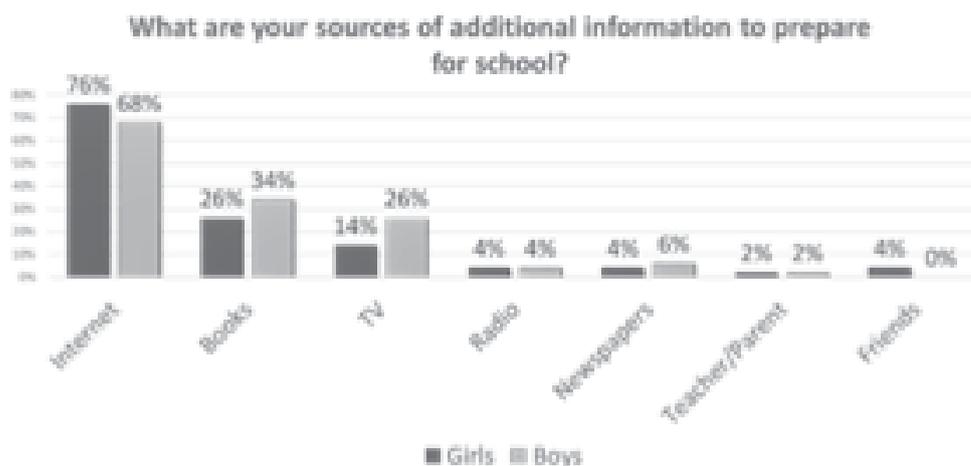
### Data collection and methods

The survey is nationwide. It comprises a series of questions asked to a total sample of 1,000 and is aimed at 1st-4th grade primary school students. The respondents are from 10 schools: 5 from small and 5 from large towns in Bulgaria. Four of the schools are located in areas with a big concentration of ethnic minority groups: two with prevailing Roma students and two with prevailing Turkish origin students. The study is conducted from February until June 2018. The methodology includes a pilot study for clarification of questions, survey adjustment and implementation of the full-length survey.

### Pilot results

The pilot survey was carried out in a large town school. According to the national parameters specific for Bulgaria, a large town is a settlement of over 150,000 inhabitants. The respondents were 100 4th grade students (aged 9-10), 50 of whom boys and 50 girls. With their teachers present, they completed a questionnaire whose answers are analyzed in the present paper.

The students chose the following options to the question “What are your sources of additional information about people and events to prepare for school?” (boys and girls together): The Internet (72%), books (30%), TV serials (20%), newspapers and magazines (5%), and the radio (4%). The results are presented in Diagram 1 with the answers of boys and girls given separately. The students included additional responses – from teachers or parents and friends.



**Figure 1.** Sources of information for school preparatory work

This hierarchical arrangement indicates the dominant types of media in the first two decades of the 21st century. The Internet is the main source of information, fast information search, etc. The book is no longer regarded as a means of aesthetic involvement or mental enrichment, but as an information tool that serves a pragmatic function. The leading medium where to find information remains television, and the periodical press and the radio take the role of secondary source: for the students these are “dinosaurs” offering one-sided visual or audial information.

To the question “How do you check that this information is true and can be useful for you?” the students gave the following answers:

I look for other sources to make sure that the knowledge is correct – 56%;

I trust that the information is correct and do not check it – 21%;

I depend on my teacher for help – 15%;

I look for help from my parents – 50%;

Something else (please specify): help from a friend – 1%.

The issue of reliability of information, mainly for educational purposes, makes students more careful, which, however, does not necessarily mean clear-headed. Those who completely trust the information they receive, who are a fifth of the respondents, have a low critical thinking threshold and trust the source excessively without controlling its content. Half of the students, 56%, look for at least one other source to make sure that they have found the correct and conclusive answer to the educational problem. We consider them to have a medium critical thinking threshold and can successfully deal with information problems resulting from unilaterally interpreted facts. The last group of students, about 23%, also seek help from more experienced or selective people, i.e. teachers, parents and friends. Some of them have decided to double check by searching for another information source besides using other people’s help. They have the highest critical thinking threshold and want to avail themselves of different sources for information filtering.

To the question “What happens when mass communication means (the media) change the content of the initial news item?” only 2% of the students say that they have no opinion. The other 98% give different opinions, ranging from:

a positive attitude to the media and supporting their information: 61% who chose the answer “Yes, they clarify and update it”. These are the ones who are prone to compromising, the non-critical thinking;

a positive mindset, resulting from naivety in their personal position: 11% gave the answer “Yes, they completely deny it”. Practically, they continue believing the media information even when the media state that they have made a mistake. Probably being more good-natured or incapable of strong criticism, these students look for “mitigating circumstances”;

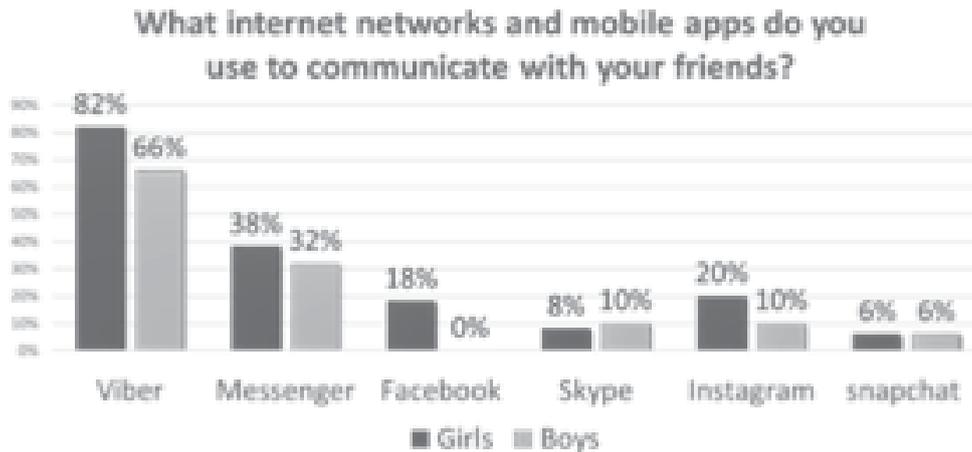
medial position: they realize they are manipulated but look for a convenient excuse for the conduct of the media (14% choosing “Yes, they apologize for the incorrect news”). These are the inert and indecisive, incapable to fight the routine;

critical thinking students with a realistic attitude to media events: 12% who chose the answer “No, they relate the new information without apologizing for the incorrect news”. They are completely clear that the medium which is a source of disinformation does not feel responsible for the untruth it has spread. These students will become adults who will not allow for their brains to be brainwashed through misleading information, but will seek for ways to oppose manipulations.

When preparing for school, children regard the use of media content as a guarantee of success, because they accept it as authoritative and/or recommended. Three quarters of them rely on the Internet and about a third rely on books. When the school subject is literature, the first place is taken by films, mostly full-length features rather than cartoons, based on the respective literary work. Students, however, are aware that sometimes the storyline of the film differs from the storyline of the book, because the film is an autonomous creation of another art. In it, the director has had his own reading and instilled his own views, which are not necessarily those of the book writer. Documentary films are also used as a source of information, mainly to find interesting facts about people and events, or processes and phenomena. On the whole, however, the potential of such films is not exploited enough: only 12% of the respondents draw information from them, while full-length features enjoy a five times larger audience.

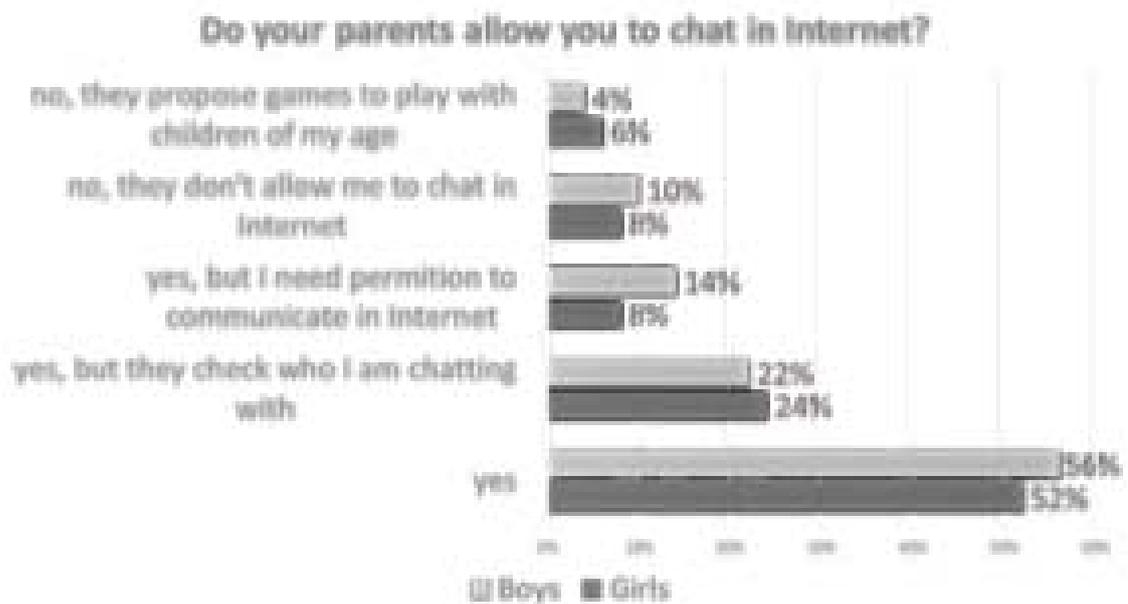
Figure 2 presents the results concerning the technologies used for communication at the studied age. 18% of the girls use the Facebook social network. According to Bulgarian legislation, children under 14 are not allowed to access the network. This means that the girls create fake

profiles claiming they are older or use somebody else's profile to log into the network. This is a question that has to be clarified in a next survey. Over a third of the students use Messenger. This program is part of the Facebook network, which poses further questions. The Messenger is a messaging app originally developed as Facebook chat. Now the app is separated from Facebook, but usually it is used with a Facebook account for logging in.



**Figure 2.** Internet technologies and mobile apps used for communication with friends by primary school students in Bulgaria

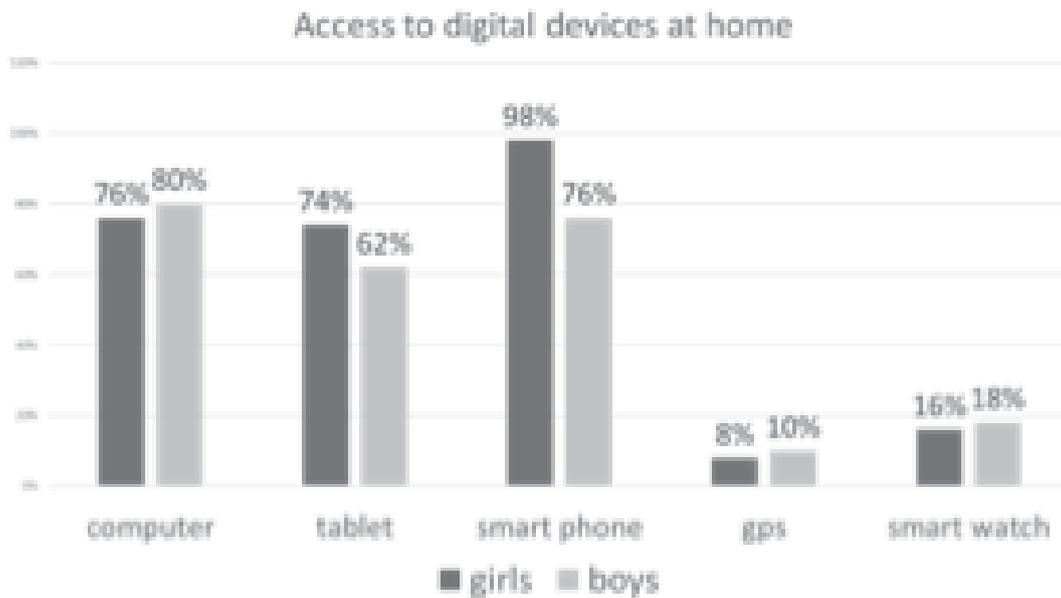
To evaluate safety when using the Internet, the survey includes a question to reveal the children's view of their parents' behaviour. The results are presented in Figure 3. More than 50% of the children are allowed to chat online without any restrictions from their parents. Only 5% of the children are not allowed to chat online. In Bulgaria, the majority of students have their own smart phone and mobile Internet, which allows them to actively communicate with their classmates.



**Figure 3.** Parents' position about Internet chat from students' point of view

Concerning digital skills, the students list quite a big variety of software programs and state that they can work with them. The most popular ones are PowerPoint, MS Paint, and Word. Other answers are "Windows" and "Android", which means that some of the students do not make any difference between software applications and operational systems.

Digital literacy of children is in direct connection with a variety of digital devices they use at school and at home. Among the home devices children list some game consoles, TV with Internet, play stations and a variety of other devices, most of them for fun and entertainment. All responding students have mobile phones and 98% of the girls and 76% of the boys have smart phones with Internet. All students have a computer and/or a tablet for personal use at home. The results concerning the access to digital devices at home are shown in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Digital devices at home

## Conclusions and Discussion

The following conclusions can be made from the present survey:

Students aged 9-10 have access to a range of media sources which are not always under the control of parents or teachers. They begin to form critical thinking themselves, but do not always rely on their own evaluation. Therefore, they trust those older than them hoping that they will support their choice and selection of information.

The list of media used for educational or entertainment purposes is headed by the Internet. The interest in radio and periodicals is still low, but the trend can be changed due to personal pursuits and the dynamics of their development.

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