

Assessing Digital Media Literacy among Youth through Their Use of Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

This project aims to assess digital media literacy demonstrated in the uses of Facebook among Cypriot high school students. Adopting the conception of two dimensions within media literacy – that of individual competences and environmental/contextual factors which affect individual competences (Celot & Tornero, 2009), this study first evaluates individual competences reflected in the social practices on Facebook, and then it examines the role of media education - one of the contextual factors which impact the broad span of media literacy - in improving youth digital literacy. Individual competences are measured by three variables including technical skills of media access and usage, critical understanding skills and communicative abilities. A set of contextual factors have been identified as potentially fostering media literacy among youth; however, the present study explores only the influence of media education which currently is not formally included in the national curriculum of secondary education in Cyprus.

Using stratified random sampling, 300 students, ages 14 – 19, and 100 teachers from 10 public high schools participated in a survey respectively. The student survey results indicate that the majority of the students have the technical skills to use a number of basic applications on Facebook although a far smaller percentage of them have advanced production skills, or the interest, to engage in more creative and participatory activities such as building their own blogs. Also, less students demonstrate skills in conducting critical search and evaluation of information or adequate awareness of media regulation. The students show a range of critical safety skills, with some skills, particularly concerning public display of personal data, less in place than the others. High school students do use Facebook as a convenient means of expanding their social circles and participating in civic activities online, but such effort does not lead necessarily to additional offline engagement. Perceptions of media education among students indicate lack of knowledge and bias. Most (90%) do not know whether the government has policies on media education in high school. Although 80% think that they need media education, their primary interest is to improve their technical skills.

The results from the survey of the teachers suggest that the teachers seem to be overly confident about the technical skills and communicative abilities their students have, which may result in an under appreciation of the value of media education in students. The teachers believe that their students have relatively much weaker critical understanding skills, and their estimations are fairly comparable to the results from the student survey. The teachers also identified issues concerning the use of technology which they believe may have negative effects on students. Many of these issues are further discussed as possible themes in a media education course. Finally, based on the findings from the surveys, pedagogic recommendations are made to policy makers and educators.

Keywords: Media Literacy Assessment, Media Education, and Facebook

Classification: Research Paper

Rezumat

Acest proiect are ca scop evaluarea abilităților digitale ale elevilor de liceu ciprioți în utilizarea Facebook. Pornind de la teoria lui Celot și Tornero (2009) de a adopta abilitățile media pe două dimensiuni - cea a competențelor, respectiv a factorilor contextuali-de mediu care afectează competențele individuale, studiul de față evaluează competențele personale în utilizarea rețelei de socializare Facebook și apoi trece la examinarea rolului educației media - ca și factor contextual de impact major în îmbunătățirea abilităților media ale tinerilor.

Competențele individuale sunt măsurate prin trei variabile: abilitățile tehnice de acces și utilizare media, cele de înțelegere critică și de comunicare.

Deși a fost identificat un set de factori contextuali ca potențiali în dezvoltarea literației media la tineri, prezentul studiu explorează doar influența educației media care, în mod formal nu este inclusă în curriculumul educației preuniversitare din Cipru.

Prin folosirea unui eșantion simplu stratificat, au fost intervievați un număr de 300 de elevi, cu vârste cuprinse între 14 și 19 ani precum și 100 de profesori din 10 școli publice.

Rezultatele obținute indică faptul că deși majoritatea elevilor au competențe tehnice de utilizare a număr de aplicații de bază din Facebook, doar un mic procent au competențe pentru generare de conținut sau manifestă interes pentru a se implica în activități creative precum crearea și întreținerea unui blog personal.

De asemenea, un număr mic de elevi au demonstrat abilități de a întreprinde căutări critice și evaluări pertinente a informațiilor sau conștientizarea importanței politicilor de media.

Deși elevii anchetati cunosc și au însușite un set minim de cunoștințe și competențe în ceea ce privește siguranța online ei se arată preocupați de afișarea datelor personale.

Cu toate că elevii folosesc Facebook ca și un mijloc convenabil de extindere a propriilor cercuri sociale și participă în activități civice online, aceste eforturi nu conduc spre angajament offline. Percepția educației media între studenți indică un nivel redus de cunoștințe. Majoritatea (90%) nu știu dacă există politici de educație media la nivel guvernamental pentru învățământul preuniversitar. Deși 80% sunt de acord că au nevoie de un nou tip de educație media, interesul lor primar este să-și îmbunătățească competențele tehnice.

În ceea ce privește rezultatele chestionarului aplicat profesorilor acestea sugerează că profesorii sunt încrezători asupra competențelor lor tehnice și abilităților de comunicare cu studenții, ceea ce conduce de multe lor la subapreciere a valorii educației media a studenților.

Profesorii sunt convinși că elevii lor au competențe slabe în ceea ce privește înțelegerea critică iar estimările lor sunt sensibil comparabile cu rezultatele chestionarului aplicat elevilor.

De asemenea, profesorii au identificat aspecte negative în ceea ce privește utilizarea tehnologiei de către elevi. Multe dintre acestea sunt posibile subiecte de discuție în noul tip de curriculum pentru un curs de educație media. Și, în sfârșit, pe baza rezultatelor chestionarelor aplicate, sunt trasate recomandări pedagogice pentru actorii educaționalu și responsabili cu politicile.

Cuvinte-cheie: evaluarea literației media, educație media și Facebook

INTRODUCTION

Since their inception, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have become increasingly popular, particularly among young people. Analysis of youth media literacy would be incomplete without addressing the critical skills and competences required for participation in these social networks. Furthermore, among the diverse challenges that promotion of media literacy must face, researchers need to tackle the problems of measurement (Livingstone, 2011). The measurement problems are particularly attracting attention in the European Union that the Audiovisual Media Services Directive has demanded research aiming at reviewing the conceptualization of media literacy, proposing measurable criteria and developing tools for the application of these criteria. It anticipates an evaluation report on the impact of levels of media literacy on member states by 2011. This study intends to assess digital media literacy among high school students through their use of Facebook. Adopting the conception of two dimensions within media literacy, that of individual competences and environmental/contextual factors (Celot & Tornero, 2009), the study first examines individual competences reflected in the social practices on Facebook, and then it explores the role of media education - one of the contextual factors which impact the broad span of media literacy - in improving youth digital literacy.

DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY

Research on digital media literacy, or rather digital literacy, offers a plethora of conceptions. On one hand, there are conceptual definitions that emphasize specific skills and techniques required for using any of the many and varied forms of digital media. Hence, standardized operational criteria have been developed which treat literacy as a standard for adoption in terms of certain tasks, performances and demonstrations of skills. On the other hand, there are also perspectives that focus on mastery of ideas, evaluation of information and expression of creativity. A sociocultural understanding of literacy argues that digital literacy should be treated as a plural concept in that digital literacies comprise a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for generating, communicating and negotiating meanings (Scribner & Cole, 1981). The plurality of digital literacies implies that digital literacy should be understood as „a shorthand for the myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning making mediated by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged, etc., via digital codification” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 5). The diversity of digital media practices cautions against treating uses of any digital medium as a specific singular type as they can take on multiple forms and for multiple purposes. Literacy does not simply demand knowledge of encoding and decoding texts through a digital medium but rather demands „applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use” (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p.236). Digital literacy also requires a broader understanding of the social and institutional contexts of communication, and how these contexts impact people’s experiences and practices (Buckingham, 2007; Luke, 2000). Digital literacy hence cannot be assessed in isolation from the immediate as well as the wider contexts in which it is situated. People do not create meaning individually but through their participation in „interpretive communities” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 38), which encourage and value particular forms of literacy.

One particular conception of media literacy which reflects such understanding is advanced in a study on assessment criteria for media literacy in the European Union (Celot & Tornero, 2009). Media literacy is broadly defined as „an individual’s capacity to interpret autonomously and critically the flow, substance, value and consequence of media in all its many forms” (p.4). Two dimensions are identified within this conception: individual competences and contextual factors. Individual competences refer to an individual’s capacity to exercise skills of cognitive processing, analysis and communication. They are further divided and represented by three key indicators

including media use, critical understanding and communicative abilities. The indicator of media use evaluates the individual's technical skills of media access and usage. Critical understanding examines the individual's fluency of interpretation and evaluation of media content and its functioning, knowledge on media influence and media regulation, skills of critical search of information and critical judgments against personal data misuse. Finally, communicative abilities indicate the individual's capacities for establishing social relations, participating in the public sphere and producing creative content through media.

Celot and Tornero (2009) suggest that a set of contextual factors may affect individual competences and impact the overall level of media literacy. These factors include media education, media literacy policy/regulation, the media industry, civil society and the availability of media and information, core principles on freedom of expression and media pluralism. Having found a correlation between individual competence and these contextual factors, the authors conclude that „individual competence is a significant determining factor only when a certain threshold of environmental support has been met” (p. 12).

FACEBOOK AND ASSESSMENT OF DIGITAL LITERACY

With the increasing popularity of Facebook among youth, it is becoming one of the dominating forms of online communication activities that youth engages in. Statistics on Facebook usage („Facebook Statistics” n.d.) show that about 20.6% of 500 million Facebook users worldwide are 13-17 years old. In Europe, 57% of 9-16 year olds have created profiles on social networking sites, and this percentage increases to 72% of 13-14 year olds and 81% of 15-16 year olds (Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig & Olafsson, 2010). Facebook is the most widely used social networking site in Europe, attracting over 100 million visitors. In Cyprus, Facebook has 394,780 users, nearly 50% of the population. Respectively, 20% and 30% of these users are 13-17 years old and 18-24 years old. About 81.5% of university students have profiles on Facebook (Papaioannou & Roussou, 2009). Facebook, therefore, is incorporated in young people's lives and provides an everyday context in which to examine literacy practices. Young people do not develop media literacy individually but through their involvement in „interpretive communities” such as Facebook, which may promote, ignore or discourage particular types of competences or skills. A context-oriented assessment approach allows for the identification of various literacy practices and their underlying communication processes within that context.

Adopting the conception of two dimensions within media literacy - individual competences and contextual factors - the present study attempts to assess digital media literacy in the context of Facebook use among Cypriot high school students. Although a set of contextual factors have been identified as playing a significant role in fostering media literacy among individuals, the present study chooses to only focus on media education which currently is not formally included in the national curriculum of secondary education in Cyprus. As promotion of media literacy largely depends on grassroots efforts including those initiated by schools, exploration of media education will allow for possible pedagogic recommendations.

METHOD

Two questionnaires were designed, targeting high school students and their teachers respectively. The student questionnaire has 51 questions and 7 demographic items including age, gender, average grade in school, location of residence (urban vs. rural area), if and how long the participant has had a personal computer and whether they plan to attend college/university. The questionnaire aims to assess individual competences in the context of Facebook use through asking 47 questions on three

variables: technical skills of usage, critical understanding and communicative abilities. The questionnaire also includes four questions on students' perception of media education. Regarding technical skills of usage, 17 questions are asked on topics including whether the student uses the Internet and has a profile on Facebook, accessing Facebook across locations and devices, time spent on Facebook, whether the student uses various applications on Facebook, whether they make online purchases via Facebook, and whether they have advanced multi-media production knowledge and skills. Critical understanding abilities are assessed through 19 questions, giving emphasis to the individual's understanding and evaluation of contents on Facebook, conducting critical search of information on Facebook, knowledge and comprehension of media influence and media regulation on Facebook and safety practices regarding displaying personal data, sending and posting sexual images and bullying peers online. Finally, there are 11 questions on communicative abilities, drawing attention to the individual's capacity through Facebook for making friends, participating in public sphere/civic activities and producing creative content.

The questionnaire for the teachers asks for their estimations of their students' digital competences using the same three variables as for the student questionnaire. This questionnaire also probes the teachers' views of the role of media education in youth media literacy. The questionnaire has 32 questions and 5 demographic items including gender, age, years of teaching, subject(s) of teaching and whether they have a personal computer. The 32 questions are separated into the following groups: 4 questions on the teacher's use of the Internet and Facebook; 5,6 and 5 questions on the teacher's estimations of the student's technical skills and usage, critical understanding abilities and communicative abilities respectively; 2 questions on overall assessment of the student's digital literacy skills; and 10 questions on the role of media education in developing and improving students' digital literacy.

Finally, both questionnaires use a combination of question formats including yes/no, multiple choice where participants can select one or multiple options and open-ended questions. This method was chosen so that the comparison and contrast of two sets of data would allow for not only the identification of youth social media practices, therefore assessment of digital literacy demonstrated in these uses, but also exploration of both students' and teachers' perceptions of media education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sample Description

Using stratified random sampling, 300 students, ages 14 – 19, and 100 teachers from 10 public high schools participated in the survey respectively. Among the students, 62% are female; 3% have low grades (less than 10 out of 20 points), 35% have average or slightly lower grades (11-15 points), 43% above average grades (16-18 points) and 19% high grades (19-20 points); 85% live in urban areas; 90% plan to go to college/university upon graduation; 92% have their own personal computer and 54% have had it for 4 or more years. Among the teachers, 75% are female. The average age of the sample is 41 years old; 29% have been teaching for up to 5 years, 37% have been teaching for up to 10 years, 15% have been teaching for up to 15 years and 25% have been teaching for 16 years or more. The participants reported of teaching a wide range of subjects including the Greek language, literature, mathematics, science subjects and arts. All participants have their own personal computer.

Findings from the Survey of Students

Technical skills of access and usage. All participants of the survey reported of having been using the Internet: 63% for up to 5 years, 33% for up to 10 years and 4% for more than 10 years. About 90% of them have profiles on Facebook, and the average time the students spend on Facebook is 22

hours a week. There is overlap among both the locations where students access Facebook and the devices with which they get connected. The majority (90%) uses Facebook from home via a personal computer, most likely their own (92%). They also access Facebook in other places including at a friend's house (23%), at school (6%), in Internet Cafés (7%), and in other private or public places (3%). About 37% have Facebook connected to a mobile device and 7% access Facebook everyday through their mobile phones. Using their own computer and mobile devices other than shared, home or school computers, allows young people to access Facebook, or go online, flexibly. This raises the concern that their online usage can entirely escape the attention of parents or teachers; it may further exasperate anxiety over multitasking among youth. This should drive policy makers to promote media education in such a way that educators need to teach young people digital literacy with a focus on planning, decision-making and self-protective skills.

Most students have the technical skills to use a range of basic applications on Facebook, but they seem less adept in undertaking more creative and participatory activities. About 97% publish photo albums: 93% own photos, 80% photos of friends, 35% family photos, 10% photos of public figures (celebrities), and 38% photos of events/places. Posting photos on Facebook seems a popular activity among young people although their choice and the number of photos they put on Facebook or the Internet in general, have caused some debate about young people's inadequate appreciation of the short and long term consequences of public display of personal information. Safety skills and management of privacy will be discussed in more detail in a later section. Also, 86% of the students chat online in real time, 83% upload/download video/music clips, 73% interact on Facebook Walls, 60% publish links to other websites and 28% have purchased products/services via Facebook. Some participants commented that they would have shopped via Facebook if they had credit cards. While being able to make a purchase online is an important skill in itself, and advertisements on Facebook do seem to draw some young people's attention, further analysis is needed on whether young people demonstrate responsible online consumer behavior.

Young people's technical skills obviously play a vital role in the use of Facebook as they are assumed to result from, and further enable, participation in online social networking activities. On average, the 15-18 years olds are capable of participating in a range of activities on Facebook although they seem to take up mostly the basic/popular activities and are less interested in undertaking more creative and participatory activities -- about 57% can edit video clips, 30% create groups to share content, 27% have tried to learn multi-media production skills required to build a blog and 21% have their own blogs.

Critical understanding skills. Compared to their technical skills, the students demonstrate weaker critical understanding skills. Most students claim that they can distinguish clearly the types of content on Facebook (95%) and usually understand their purpose/function (93%) and that they can distinguish between credible and incredible information on Facebook (84%). But less students actively conduct critical search and evaluation of information. About 81% of the students usually use at least two sources of information when they conduct research on something they see on Facebook. When encountering on Facebook information which seems doubtful, only 57% verify it before making judgments, and only 65% usually research about a group on Facebook before joining. Regarding awareness of media influence and media regulation, 80% recognize that the media, including Facebook itself, influence what they do on Facebook. In contrast, nearly half of the students are not informed about regulations on Facebook, nor do they engage in actions against violations of these rules and rights - about 46% keep themselves informed about regulations concerning Facebook, and 48% know the rules and rights applicable to the content and behavior on Facebook as described in the terms of agreement when they signed up for an account. When encountering messages or images on Facebook that are insulting, offending or even dangerous, their usual reactions are as follows: 62% ignore them/do not do anything, 42% talk about them with close

friends in private, 12% report them to Facebook, 7% post comments on Facebook, 7% talk about them with parents, 3% talk about them with their teachers, and another 3% do research to get more information. About 23% of the students claim that they have reported bad/harmful behavior to Facebook since joined. One important aspect of understanding regulations applicable to media content and user behavior is not to participate in activities such as copyright infringement and piracy. About 80% of the students report that they respect author/owner rights and user rights when uploading and/or downloading content from Facebook.

With regard to critical safety skills, the following areas are probed: contact with strangers, public display of personal data, sharing/posting sexual images/messages and bullying peers online. Young people appear to have a range of safety skills, but some are less in place than the others: when someone sends an invitation to be friends, 65% usually check the person's profile and then decide, 23% usually accept all invitations, and 12% accept the invitation if it is from someone they have met face-to-face. Overall, 42% have friends that they have not met face-to-face. Although the great majority of the students set their Facebook settings on private, 9% have public profiles and there is no gender difference in setting their profile public. About 4% include in their profiles all basic information asked by default setting, and 10% do not include their age. Also, regarding the contact information included in their profiles, 50% give the name of school/place of work, 30% provide their e-mail address and 8% provide mobile number. A sizable minority, as in the examples of giving out the name of school/place of work and their e-mail address, seems to be aware of the type of personal data they disclose on their profile pages, yet oblivious to the dangers that can possibly result from revealing identifiable information in social media environments.

Existing literature (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2011) suggests that although connections between strangers can be made, people primarily use social networking sites to communicate with those who are already in their offline social network, central or peripheral. Results from the study seem to partially concur that Facebook is an effective means of maintaining and solidifying existing offline social circles. Online friends usually share some common offline relationship as seen in the results that most students have Facebook friends who are either schoolmates (92%) or classmates (81%). However, online and offline interactions interface in such a way that the primary deciding factor of accepting someone to be a friend or granting them profile access seems to be whether they are already in the online circle of a Facebook friend as opposed to whether there has been prior face-to-face contact.

Another type of online risk that researchers are concerned with is children encountering sexual images online. As the present study focuses on the older age group of 14 -19 years old, the emphasis is on whether these young people share sexual images online. The results show that 6% have posted sexual images (nude/semi-nude images) on their profile, 12% have sent private messages containing sexual images, and boys are far more likely than girls to engage in such behavior. Overall, sending and posting sexual images are still uncommon practices although there is much speculation that the Internet facilitates the exchange of sexual messages among teenagers. While Facebook may be merely offering means of exploring developing sexuality, educators need to promote the message that such practice can potentially bring about negative consequences.

Results from the EU Kids Online project indicate that slightly older teenagers of 15-16 years old than younger children are slightly more likely to be bullied albeit online bullying is a rare phenomenon (Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig & Olafsson, 2010). While online bullying can take place in a number of ways such as by e-mail, in a chatroom or in a gaming website, social networking sites and instant messaging are the applications via which bullying most likely occurs. The survey results indicate that about a quarter of the students have sent/posted messages that made others look bad, made fun of others or would be considered hurtful or nasty. They indeed need to acquire the necessary critical safety skills as not to engage in inappropriate and risky behavior that could possibly result in harm in themselves and their peers.

Communicative abilities. Communicative abilities are evaluated against three indicators: establishing social relations, participating in civic activities and expressing creativity. High school students certainly use Facebook as a convenient means of establishing social relations and expanding their social circles. The average number of friends the students have is 340, ranging from 2 to 1,100. These friends are predominantly Greek-Cypriots although friends of a variety of other nationalities are also present: Europeans (57%), North Americans (13%), South Americans (10%), Asians (13%), Africans (8%), Arabs (7%), Turkish Cypriots/Turkish (7%), and other nationalities (8%). About 7% have tried to meet Turkish Cypriots on Facebook.

Particular to Cyprus was the question on attitudes toward Turkish Cypriots, who are the closest „Others” for Greek Cypriots. This is important as it is a part of the Cyprus problem and the geopolitical division of the island since 1974. In spite of the multi-cultural nature of the Cyprus population, there still exists a distance between the two communities - Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. The fact that some students have or have tried to establish contact with Turkish Cypriots demonstrates the possibility that more young people could be motivated to get to know Turkish Cypriots online. It is possible that the 1974 invasion and subsequent occupation have created negative attitudes and prejudice among youth against the Turkish Cypriots in general -- the processes of ethnic socialization and cultural production and re-production provide contexts which do not determine, yet constrain, young people’s political being. However, today’s youth in Cyprus, to a large extent, live in a mediated world where Internet-based communication technologies such as Facebook offer opportunities to connect geographically separated audiences in situations of political hostility. Media education in school could possibly be utilized as grassroot effort to promote dialogue between culturally and politically estranged youth, improve their civic literacy and contribute to the peaceful co-existence of communities in conflict.

The survey results show that young people are interested in contributing to the public sphere and many participate in a range of online civic activities. The average number of online groups they belong to is 28, although the majority of these groups focus on hobbies, the media, sport and fashion, some group memberships reflect a moderate degree of civic/social interest: youth groups (44%), political parties/politics in Cyprus (28%), Causes-local groups (23%), philanthropic events (20%), Causes-international groups (12%), cultural events (4%), environmental protection groups (4%) and bi-communal groups with Turkish Cypriots (4%). While the majority of the students, 70%, read and forward e-mails about the groups they belong to, less students participate fully and consistently in all activities or try to tackle - as campaigners - either local or global problems: 30% usually participate in most of the online activities organized by the groups they belong to, 20% campaign for the groups they belong to via their profile/blog, 10% organize e-mail pressure campaigns and 5% make online donations. Overall, 15% of the students share with their friends via Facebook views on social, cultural and political events in Cyprus and around the world. In parallel, offline, only the minority fully participates in the activities organized by the groups they belong to or actively campaign for these groups or causes: about 45% of the students share information with their friends about the groups they belong to, 30% sign up to become a member of groups for social/civic/political issues and read the information they get from these groups respectively, 25% campaign for the groups they belong to, 20% usually participate in the offline activities organized by the groups they belong to, 15% volunteer for the groups they belong to and organize pressure campaigns respectively and 5% make donations. Educators need to focus on the identification of civic activities and participation methods that youth finds appealing and strategies to motivate youth to participate both online and offline.

Similar to the expression of their civic interests, a minority uses Facebook as a forum to articulate their creative interests. Overall, 38% of the participants have uploaded onto their Facebook pages content they have created including photographs they took (38%), video clips they recorded (8%),

articles/essays/poems they wrote (7%) and pictures/paintings/artistic work they produced (4%). As reported before, less students are skilled in undertaking more creative and participatory activities -- about 30% create groups to share content, 27% have tried to learn multi-media production skills required to build a blog and 21% have their own blogs. If Facebook truly represents a participatory, self-expressive opportunity for most young people rather than the self-motivated few, it is important that educators along with policy makers meet the challenge of incorporating such activities into young people's lives through actively promoting them in educational and civic contexts and in popular media.

The role of media education. Perceptions of media education among students indicate lack of information and bias. Most (90%) do not know whether the government has policies on media education in high school. Although 80% think that they need media education and that they need more formal, reliable sources of information and advice than their friends and parents, their primary interest in media education is to improve their technical skills. For example, when asked for suggestions of topics to cover in a media education course, the students' ideas consistently focused on technical skills. One participant said: „I want to learn to use various applications in my free time, photo edits, music download, etc.” Another two similar suggestions – „I want to do innovative things with the help of technology”. „I want to know the easiest and best ways to get important news, especially about celebrities, new movies, songs, games-Playstation”. Only two participants referred to critical understanding skills – „Conducting Research for homework effectively.” „Learn to find useful information – Help with classes at school”. As illustrated by these statements, educators need to draw students' attention onto critical understanding skills and communication competences and kindle interests in developing and improving those along with technical skills.

Findings from the Survey of the Teachers

Estimation of technical skills. The results from the teacher's survey indicate that the teachers seem to be overly confident about the technical skills and communicative abilities their students have, which may be a reflection of the lack of technical skills in themselves but could result in an under appreciation of the value of media education in students. About 26% of the teachers report that they have profiles on Facebook, 15% use Facebook for teaching or communicating with students, 69% have been using the Internet more than 10 years and 1% have blogs. In comparison, all think that most of their students are on Facebook. About 54% of the teachers believe that their students have their own blogs, 77% believe that their students have sufficient technical skills to engage in most activities on Facebook, and 62% believe that most of their students use Facebook to express their creativity such as uploading self-created content. Statistics on comparative questions answered by students are consistently much lower.

This overestimation could partially be a result of some teachers subscribing to this view that young people are creative agents whose „media-savvy” skills tend to be underrated by the adults around them when in reality they exceed the skills and competences of the adults, including their teachers, responsible for them. The reality is that the majority of youth is not as technologically sophisticated and expressive as assumed by their teachers and that media literacy even for those technologically advanced students should include a broad range of benefits, particularly the key skills of creative expression and participation along with the expertise to critically evaluate online resources and uses.

Estimation of critical understanding skills. The teachers believe that their students have relatively much weaker critical understanding skills, and their estimations are fairly comparable to the results from the student survey with a few exceptions. The majority of the teachers think that most of their students are aware of the influence of mass media, including Facebook, on their attitudes and behavior and that most of their students have sufficient skills to understand the function/purpose of

the content on Facebook. These estimations are consistent with the data reported by the students themselves. However, about 15% of the teachers say that most of their students have sufficient knowledge about the regulations on Facebook compared to the 7% reported by the students. About 7% of the teachers say that most of their students respect author rights and user rights, i.e. intellectual rights/copyright of material when using Facebook but about 80% of the students report that they do comply with these rules. Overall, only 8% of the teachers think that most of their students are using Facebook safely and 23% think that most of their students have sufficient skills to evaluate or judge information on Facebook. The students demonstrate stronger skills in both areas in the survey results albeit they still need much improvement. The teachers' estimations of their students' critical understanding skills suggest that they understand these skills are relatively weak; therefore, should be a main focus of media education. However, the teachers' judgments are partially clouded by certain exaggerated assumptions about youth social media behavior as reflected in their underestimations of the students' safety skills and abilities to evaluate online content. It is important for educators and parents to recognize grounds for concerns and intervention without subscribing to beliefs such as young people explore their online opportunities without attention at all to safety or critical judgment.

Estimation of communicative abilities. Among the teachers who participated in the survey, 74% believe that most of their students have Facebook friends that they have not met face-to-face; 39% say that their students use Facebook to meet people from other countries; and 2% say their students use Facebook to meet Turkish Cypriots. Regarding participation in the public sphere, 39% of the teachers believe that most of their students participate in civic activities via Facebook and 15% believe that most of their students use Facebook to express their opinions on political, cultural and/or social issues. Finally, 62% of the teachers say that their students use Facebook to share their own creative work. In contrast with the findings from the student survey, the teachers consistently overestimate their students' interest in participating in political and communal affairs online. Online youth civic engagement is a noteworthy development, and there have been successful institutional and individual initiatives aimed at empowering youth and providing them with online means to voice their opinions and concerns in society (Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles & Larson, 2004). At the same time, educators need to be cautious with drawing overly positive conclusions about the potential of social media to encourage and facilitate youth civic engagement. In addition to observing youth civic behavior in online environments, educators need to be informed about selected issues including the type of activities that interest youth and their participation methods as they reflect the ways in which young people incorporate their civic interests into their everyday lives. Furthermore, in respect to the possible engagement opportunities that social media such as Facebook offer, media education can be utilized to explore such issues as whether Internet-based civic activities can be further promoted and whether they can help stimulate interests among youth in contributing to communities and society offline.

The role of media education in improving media literacy. Finally, when asked about the role of media education in improving their students' literacy, 85% of the teachers said that there was a need in their schools to educate students on new media/technologies. In the context of Facebook use, all participants said that most teachers in their schools were concerned about the possible negative consequences of students using Facebook, and they also identified issues which caused such concerns. These include blurred notions of trust in friends and strangers (not necessarily connected to or result in safety concerns) and privacy through public display of personal data and discussion of personal issues, decline in academic performance, decrease in offline socialization, online bullying behavior, lack of critical judgment skills, excessive use of Facebook and overly demanding mentality in consuming technology. Some participants commented on the issue of confusion among students over trust and privacy:

„They might engage with people who are different than who they portray to be and get disappointed.”

„They don't know for sure whom they are talking to and trusting.”

„Facebook blurs their notion of what's private and what's not.”

And „They don't always fully comprehend the consequences of personal data become public.”

Other participants are particularly worried about decrease in socialization among students in the off-line world

„Many of them become not knowing how to socialize with people when they meet them.”

„They don't want to engage in other activities because of Facebook.”

Some teachers also share the belief of poor judgment skills in students:

„Whatever benefits they are getting, Facebook comes with the side effects it entails.”

„Students may experience negative impact without realizing it.”

„I do believe that they don't have the right judgment and maturity to judge correctly and to benefit at this age.”

Many of these issues are further discussed by survey participants as possible themes in a media education course.

Additionally, the teachers also point out some possible difficulties in introducing media education in high school. While 84% believe that teachers in their schools need to be trained on new media/technologies, along with the teacher retraining issue, other key challenges/problems are identified as lack of funding for technical infrastructure, inadequate experience and expertise in curriculum development, scarce resources devoted to promote media education and difficulties in incorporating media education into the existing curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The concept that media literacy is reinventing itself through new media technologies is no longer novel (Luke & Elkins, 1998), but it continues to have significant implications, particularly for young people as they tend to be frequent users of these technologies. In the meantime, pedagogic ambitions for media literacy among youth are often huge, with the promotion of media education holding out the promise that young people should be able to make informed choices of their use of media, exercise their rights to participation in society and so become effective and creative agents in their online environments. Within the context of Facebook use, this study attempts to assess digital media literacy among high school students along the dimensions of technical skills of access and usage, critical understanding skills and communicative abilities. The results indicate that most students have the technical skills to use a range of basic applications on Facebook, but they seem less interested and adept in undertaking more creative and participatory activities. Also, less students demonstrate skills in conducting critical search and evaluation of information or adequate awareness of media regulation. Educators of media literacy need to look for ways to help students reach a balance between participating in activities that they find pleasurable and popular and engaging in a self-reflective process through which students will become critically aware of their own thinking and choice of media use. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to use or even develop online tools for exploring and expressing their own interests - political, civic or artistic - and „actively engage in producing their own meanings that then become part of the historical and social conditions in which future media texts are constituted and consumed” (Alvermann, 2006).

The promotion of media literacy often heralds hope of empowering youth although this is a much contested notion in that empowerment does not equate with the opening up of new opportunities and access of information (Livingstone, 2002; Quinn, 1997). Rather, empowerment lies in the

provision of contexts in which children and young people are confident to „feel able to do what they can do best” (Livingstone, 2002, p. 237) such as thinking creatively and critically and participating actively and purposefully. Judging the uses of Facebook among high school students against these expectations, the form of empowerment demonstrated is still far from this.

As media are diversifying in form and contents, critical skills and competences required to access, understand, evaluate and participate through these communication opportunities become increasingly diverse as well. The present study evaluated media literacy demonstrated in the use of one particular form of social media, future research may consider refining the measures used in this study and testing them across different communication contexts in order to place media literacy in a larger context of the Internet or other new media use. The activities youth engage in via digital media and their choice in relation to other media in their changing media environment are central to the understanding of youth media literacy.

As the use of media becomes increasingly diverse, there is increased scope for social, cultural and other contextual factors to influence the development and improvement of media literacy. This study explored the perceptions of high school students and their teachers of the role of media education in impacting the span of youth media literacy. Future research may focus on the possible influence of other contextual factors in fostering media literacy in order to make appropriate policy and educational recommendations.

Young people develop skills to engage in particular communication activities and make use of their skills and time to pursue interests which become constitutive of their identity. It remains as a pressing challenge to „identify the kinds of contents, modes of engagement, skills and literacies, and fora for participation that we as a society wish to encourage and enhance” (Livingstone, 2002, p. 243). This study represents one attempt in such direction.

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