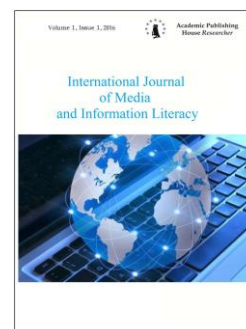


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## Political Aspect of Media Literacy

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### Abstract

The author considers media literacy as an ability to find in mass media the information s/he needs, to critically analyze it, to check its credibility and authenticity, and – in case it is needed – to produce elementary media messages. Different areas where media literacy and political culture overlap are presented in this article. How important is an ability to navigate the vast information landscape within the context of fostering interest to politics and mass media credibility? How does media literacy affect political culture? How does all this influence features of political system? The author tries to find answers to these questions and analyzes results of public surveys conducted by “Public Opinion” Fund and related to the problem discussed.

**Keywords:** media literacy, political culture, mass media, political process, credibility, manipulation, Russia.

### 1. Introduction

For the last decade, different aspects of media literacy have been receiving growing attention of Russian scholars. However, flawing from the analysis of scholarship on this I suppose that the bulk of research falls into purview of pedagogy and media education. Russian scholars are interested in generalizing of the best practices of media literacy principles’ promotion and development of media literacy curricula in Russia and abroad (Chelysheva, Mikhaleva, 2017; Fedorov, 2013, 2015; Gendina, 2009; Levitskaya, 2016), the differences between the notions used in this area (Fedorov, 2013), as well as in peculiarities of manipulative techniques used by mass media and consistent patterns of media texts’ perception by the audiences (Ilchenko, 2016; Kazakov, 2016). Sometimes, such issues are treated within the context of mass media’s political functionality (Vilkovet al., 2011).

It is also worth mentioning that the most significant contribution to this area of study in this country has been made by prominent Russian scholar A.V. Fedorov. As the former President of Russian Association for Film & Media Education (2003-2014), editor-in-chief of the Russian journal *Media Education* (Moscow), he has been exploring specifics of media education in Russia and abroad, conducing to promotion of media competence in Russian society, and uniting like-minded fellows for decades. It is no exaggeration to say that Alexander Fedorov is a real leader of the field among Russian scholars.

While acknowledging the significance of contribution made by all Russian media literacy scholars mentioned above (and many others), I believe that special attention should be paid to political facet of media literacy. In my view, this is one of the factors influencing political culture of both an individual and society in general.

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## 2. Materials and methods

The main sources for writing this article were monographs and scholarly publications of Russian and foreign media researchers. Besides, the results of public opinion polls conducted by one of the main Russian survey company – “Public Opinion” Fund – were also used.

The study applied the basic scholarly methods – comparison, extrapolation, theoretical analysis and synthesis. Comparative method allowed me to find out similarities and differences in a way Russians use mass media. Extrapolation helped to predict what is likely to happen or be true in the nearest future with reference to media landscape.

## 3. Discussion

Admittedly, the main components of political culture are moral evaluations (values, ideas, norms), cognitive (knowledge about politics), emotional (feelings), and behavioral (forms and levels of political participation) aspects. Numerous factors affect them and political culture as a whole. The most important of them are predispositions toward politics that are widely spread within the society, educational system, person’s family and circle of acquaintances – to name but a few. At the same time, I suppose that mass media make a great impact on it, too.

One receives almost all information about politics from the press: as there is no chance to observe the overwhelming majority of political events and processes with their own eyes, people have to rely on journalists’ views. By conveying their own interpretations of reality, mass media largely determine feelings and emotions people have with regard to political facts, actors, and phenomena, articulate values, norms, and ideals that are arguably commonly shared. At last, journalists set frames of appropriate, acceptable, or desirable political behavior.

Thus, mass media influence almost every component of political culture – be it an individual, social group, or the whole society. Moreover, taking into consideration the degree of information saturation and the level of communication channels’ penetration into human life in the modern world, the extent of such influence seems to be even higher. It is hardly possible to express it quantitatively, though. Certain attempt to do it can be found within the realm of agenda-setting research (Kazakov, 2014; Kim et al., 2002; Mamonov, 2008; Weaver et al., 2004). Nevertheless, I think it is abundantly clearly that mass media play a very important role in shaping political culture.

Let me mark here that the way media affect people is not homogeneous. Various outlets may form different attitudes to reality, accentuate diverse segments of political environment (i.e., to shape their own agendas), and promote different formats of political participating. As a result, the content and level of political cultures of different media outlets’ “followers” may stunningly differ from each other.

In this connection, I deem the role of media literacy crucially important. (Note in parentheses that I define media literacy as personal ability to find in mass media the information s/he needs, to critically analyze it, to check its credibility and authenticity, and – in case it is needed – to produce elementary media messages.)

In my opinion, media literacy can be seen as a kind of filter between numerous and often-multidirectional information flows on the one hand and political culture as a function of them on the other. If one can find information needed, critically interpret media stories, and verify facts, s/he at the very least decreases the level of his or her vulnerability to various types of manipulations and consequently blocks pernicious impact of media texts on political consciousness. In this article, I will consider media literacy in this context – as an in-between filter between mass media and political culture.

I argue that, as a rule, media literacy enhances the level of political awareness and participation. In other words, the more experienced one is in analyzing media information, the better informed of current political events and less likely to be politically passive s/he is.

I believe that it is the way an individual and mass media interact that determines the essence of his or her convictions, perceptions, insights, and models of behavior – all that constitutes political culture (Batalov, 2002). Depending on the sources one gets political information from, the frequency he or she does it, and the level of importance he or she ascribes to it, the exact type of both media literacy and political culture is formed.

Having stated that, I do not mean that there is a direct connection between those factors: it is not necessarily true that the more interested in politics people are, and the more frequent news

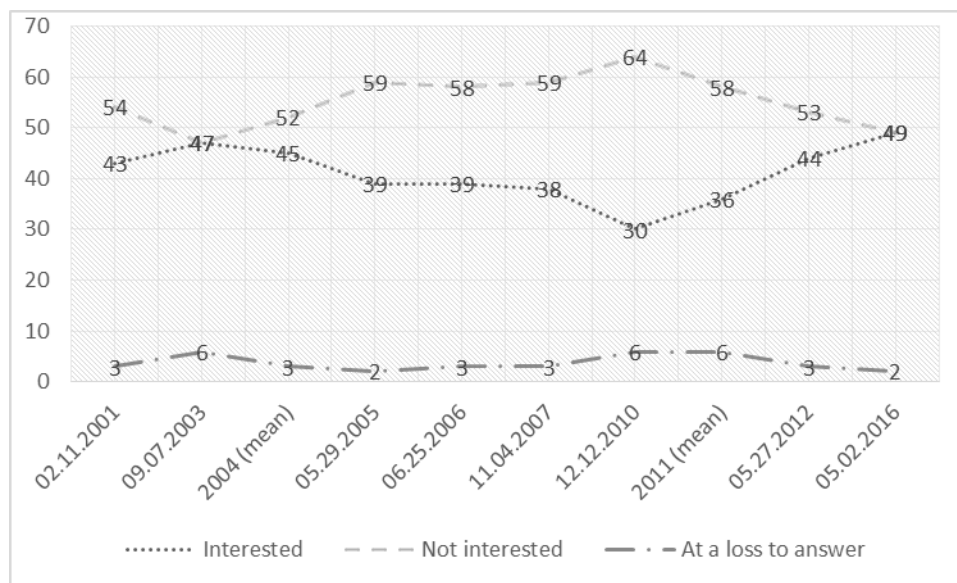
consumers they are, the higher their political culture is. A lot hinges on the type of news channels and degree of skepticism we use. In this sense – let me reiterate this – media literacy may well be considered as a kind of converter between the “quantity” of attention accorded to politics and the “quality” of political culture.

In the meantime, some scholars find the very fact of paying attention to political news quite emblematic. For example, Kim and Miejeong are convinced that news media stimulate the flow of political information through the network of individuals, thereby encouraging personal reflection and group discussions. This role of news media in stimulating political interest is important because interested citizens in general are more likely to participate (Kim, Miejeong, 2005).

I see no reason not to agree with this argument, but at the same time I would add that a so-called “level of professionalism” of such group discussions and political participation may differ. Figuratively speaking, it is quite logical to suggest that a young man addicted to, say, nationalist publics in social networks may be ready to actively take part in discussions and political events. The same will be true for an older and much more experienced person who gets his or her news from different (in terms of their type, style, and content) media sources. But will their political cultures be equally “developed”? Personally, I doubt it.

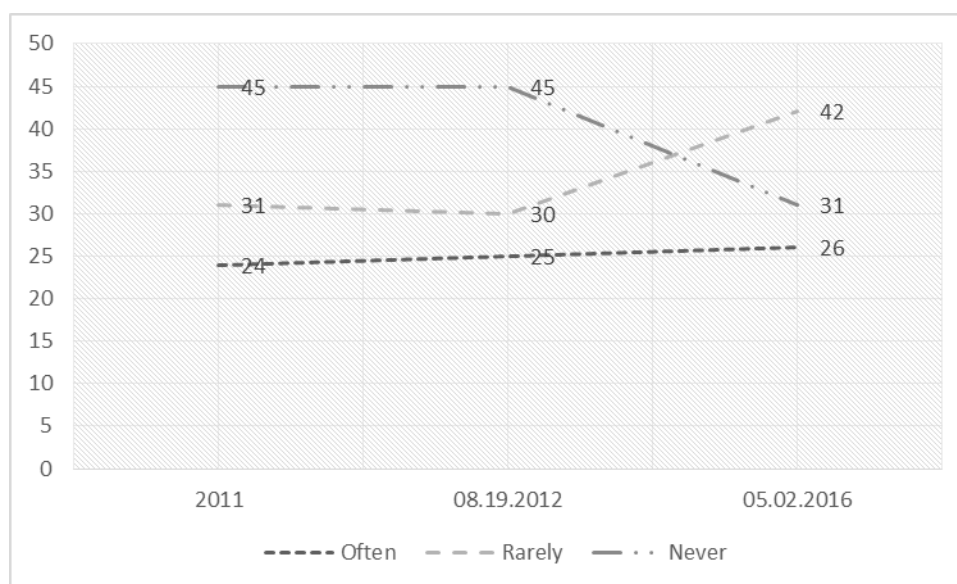
#### 4. Results

Actually, the level of political news awareness and participation to a certain extent depends on whether one takes an interest in politics or not. If the guy is absolutely unconcerned by politics, s/he would hardly be well informed of what is going on in political sphere and regularly participate in elections, rallies, and so on. In this context, it seems interesting to look at an average level of interest in politics among Russians. Gauging by the polls, less than a half of population is interested in politics.



**Fig. 1.** The Level of Interest in Politics among Russians (%) (FOMnibus, 2016)

As can be seen from graph 1, 49 percent of Russian people took an interest in politics in May 2016. Interestingly, it has been the maximum for all fifteen years of observations. However, if we compare the numbers taken from all time periods, we will see that traditionally those who are not interested in politics outnumber those who are.



**Fig. 2.** Frequency of Discussions of Politics with Family and Friends (%) (FOMnibus, 2016)

That being said, only 26 percent discuss political events with their friends and family regularly, 42 percent do it not so often and 31 percent do not touch this issue at all. Notable about these figures is that from 2011 onwards popularity of a political “topic” is gradually growing.

Nevertheless, an average level of interest to politics seems to be fairly low. Here I voluntarily do not discuss what level of interest should be considered appropriate, sufficient, or desirable. One would say that the more people are interested in politics, the better; while others may take the opposite view. I just note parenthetically that within the framework of this article I assume that interest in politics is necessary in order to improve one’s political culture: it is impossible to raise political awareness without it, and, consequently, cognitive element of political culture is at risk.

What are the means of raising such an interest? It is generally thought that mass media can do it through focusing audience attention on socially urgent issues and incentivizing people to both think about and discuss these issues within their ambits of acquaintances (Kim, 2003; Lee, 2000; Stamm et al., 1997; Wolfinger, Rosenstone, 1980). And here the problem of mass media’s credibility arises. According to polls, the content the press offers is by no means always trustworthy.

In my opinion, the most notable figures in the table 1 are the following. First, this is the fact that TV leads by a large margin: the level of its credibility is more than twice as big as that of news sites. Yet within, for the last two years, a number of people who trust TV decreased by 13 percent, while credibility levels of almost all other sources either has not changed or has grown up.

Second, it is also worth mentioning that highly educated viewers consider TV news to be less credible source of information; only 37 percent of them trust it, compared to 55 percent of people who got secondary education. Additionally, those who have a university degree are more likely not to trust any source of information (28 percent). However, they trust Internet news sites (25 percent), forums, blogs, and social networks (11 percent) more than others.

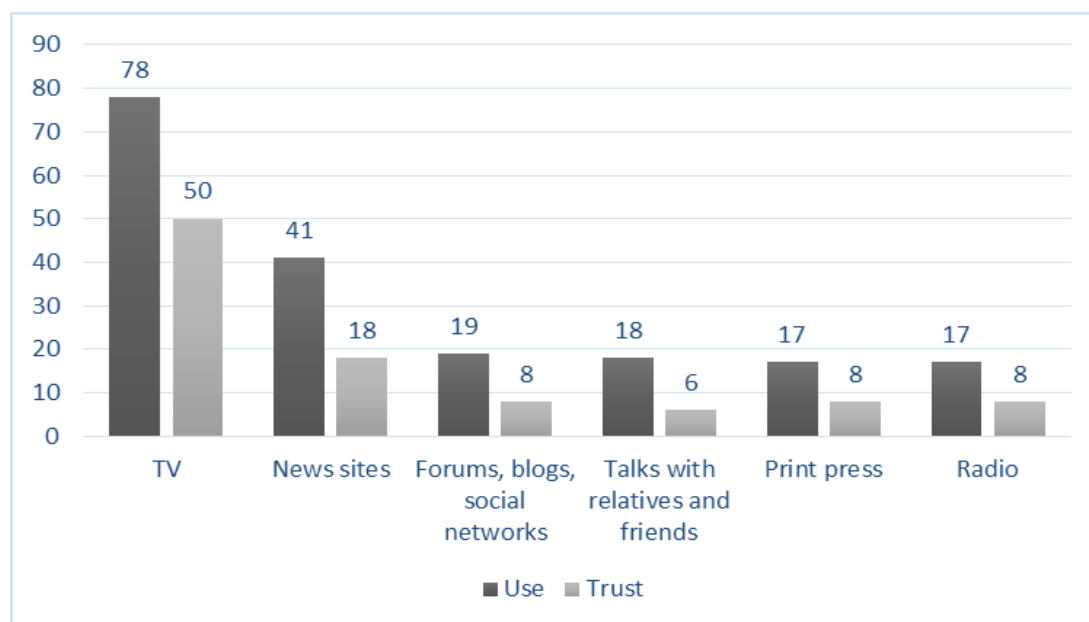
It seems quite interesting to juxtapose ratings of credibility observed above and the list of sources people just use (irrespective of their trustworthiness) in order to get information. To start with, let me show the dynamic of demand for different news sources, from 2010 onwards.

Polls conducted by “Public Opinion” Fund tell us that, as in the case of credibility, TV leads by a wide margin. Nonetheless, if dynamic taken into consideration, it becomes evident that for the last seven years (from 2010 up to 2017) its audience has reduced by 9 percent (from 87 down to 78 percent). Conversely, the number of Internet sites users more than tripled (from 13 up to 41 percent), while forums, blogs, and social networks has become nearly five times more popular (from 4 up to 19 percent) than they used to be before (FOMnibus, 2016).

**Table 1.** Credibility of News Sources (FOMnibus, 2016)

Source	04.19. 2015	01.31. 2016	02.05. 2017	05.02. 2017	Levels of Education (pertaining to the poll from 05.02.2017)		
					secondary general	secondary professional	tertiary
TV	63	58	50	50	55	55	37
News Internet sites	15	19	19	18	14	17	25
Print press (newspapers, magazines)	9	8	9	8	6	10	9
Radio	8	6	8	8	7	9	8
Forums, blogs, socialnetworks	4	5	7	8	7	7	11
Talkswithrelatives andfriends	7	7	8	6	7	6	6
Other	<1	1	1	1	1	1	1
There are no sources I trust more	16	18	25	23	20	22	28
Cannot say	5	5	3	4	5	3	4

As promised, let us unite some of the data mentioned above and compare portions of those who use exact types of sources and those who trust them. For the sake of convenience, I will pick up only results of the polls conducted on May, 2 2017.

**Fig. 3.** Bar graph 1. The ratio of those who use exact sources to those who trust them (%)

What inferences can be made from this bar graph? Apart from TV, each of the sources is at least two times less credible than used. Why is it so? I believe it is a result of disillusionment of Russian people in mass media as an institute. It appears that people do not trust any sources but keep on watching TV, reading newspapers, listening to the radio and so on just because there are no other sources of information at their disposal.

On the one hand, in the context of media literacy a grain of salt with regard to news stories is always necessary. On the other hand, the level of credibility we have now (or, maybe, it is better to name it “incredibility” or “distrust”), in my view, may have far-reaching ramifications for the society and political system. Under such conditions, mass media can hardly be reckoned to be an institute guarding public interest and a kind of watchdog for democracy. It seems to me that those in power cannot be fully satisfied with this, too. How can they effectively address their constituency in the situation when one of the main channels to communicate their messages is not trustworthy?

Therefore, in theory, all (i.e. ordinary people, journalists, and politicians) should seek to make things better. But what can be done for this? I suppose that there is no simple and clear-cut answer to this question. Most likely, the whole range of measures must be taken to improve the situation we have now. Moreover, all abovementioned subjects will have to take part in their implementation. Bearing in mind that our study focuses on an individual and his or her relation to mass media, let me specify my vision of what can be done here by a person alone.

I believe that through developing their own media literacies people can reassess mass media’s activity. Having realized that agendas set by news outlets may differ from each other, that in order to gain more or less balanced insight about reality, one should try to compare and put together content of different TV-channels, sites, newspapers, radio stations, and so on; having got the hang of fact-checking and analyzing of not only texts but implications, connotations, and overtones, one will look at the notion of credibility from a different angle.

Needless to say, by doing so, a person may become disillusioned with some sources. But at the same time s/he will definitely find several news outlets worth his or her attention or credibility. One would form more cohesive concept of media landscape (with all its actors, interest groups, virtues, and drawbacks) and, consequently, shape more nuanced and objective attitude to it in terms of credibility to different sources. Simply put, while answering the question whether s/he trusts, say, print press, one will take into consideration that newspapers as a whole are different: they may not only criticize the Kremlin’s policy (as, for example, “Novaya Gazeta” or “The New York Times” constantly do), but also advocate the government’s interests (as “Rossiyskaya Gazeta” usually does).

Expanding on the thesis stated above (that an interest to events happening in the country and abroad is one of the main factors influencing political culture), I deem it necessary to touch on the issue of various ways mass media affect political awareness and participation. Some scholars believe that newspapers engender interest to politics more effectively than TV does and that there is a positive relationship between reading newspaper and participation in traditional political activities (Liu et al., 2013; Moy, Gastil, 2006), whereas television viewing may in fact function as an obstacle to political participation and reflection (Kim, Miejeong, 2005).

In this regard, quite indicative is an idea offered by S. Bennett, S. Rhyne, and R. Flickinger:

“Certainly people with high levels of political interest will seek out political materials. But their reading capabilities enable them to make sense of the material. Reading requires a range of skills. People must be able to concentrate. They must be able to follow a logical argument. They must make sense of a varied vocabulary. They must remember what they read earlier in the article or book. Reading also exposes people to different issues, opinions, and situations. Certainly people experience such differences through television. However, print outlets have more time to develop such differences...” (Stephen et al., 2000).

Yet within, I am convinced that not only medium of political information distribution influences its “effectiveness”. The content of media messages is equally important – to say the least. Entertainment will clearly distract people’s attention from actual social and political issues – no matter where they get it from (on TV, in newspapers etc.).

From this perspective, it is fascinating to see what attracts audience’s attention the most.

**Table 2.** Rating of TV-viewers' preferences (%) (TeleFOM, 2015)

Type of information	all respondents	gender		age			
		male	female	18-30	31-45	46-60	>60
	<b>100</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>22</b>
News	<b>58</b>	57	59	46	59	65	65
Feature films	<b>52</b>	44	58	35	53	62	61
Entertainment	<b>34</b>	27	39	40	39	28	27
Soap operas	<b>26</b>	13	36	25	19	27	33
Sports	<b>25</b>	42	11	28	27	26	17
Concerts, stage performances	<b>24</b>	13	34	16	20	28	36
Documentary	<b>24</b>	28	21	26	23	24	22
Social and political programs	<b>23</b>	27	20	13	22	27	33
Authorial programs	<b>16</b>	16	17	10	17	19	20
Educational programs	<b>15</b>	13	17	15	18	14	14
Talk shows	<b>15</b>	7	21	17	16	14	13
Intellectual games	<b>10</b>	8	11	10	8	10	10
Other	<b>2</b>	2	3	2	3	2	1
Cannot say	<b>1</b>	1	1	0	2	2	0
I do not watch TV	<b>5</b>	7	4	11	4	2	3

Data from table 2 show that newscasts are oftop priority for Russian TV-viewers. Interestingly enough, older people find them more interesting than youth. The same is true with reference to social and political programs – the only difference is that, unlike in case with the news, men are more willing to watch such programs than women are (27 and 20 percent respectively).

**Table 3.** Rating of newspaper-readers' preferences (%) (FOMnibus, 2016)

Type of newspapers	all respondents	gender		age			
		male	female	18-30	31-45	46-60	>60
	<b>100</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>22</b>
Social and political news (nationwide and regional)	<b>28</b>	29	27	16	29	30	39
TV-program schedule	<b>24</b>	22	25	16	21	28	33
Health	<b>22</b>	10	32	14	18	29	29
Free newspapers	<b>18</b>	16	22	15	19	21	24
Household, cuisine	<b>16</b>	4	25	11	15	20	18
Sports	<b>11</b>	19	4	11	14	10	9
Ads, job vacancies	<b>9</b>	9	10	10	10	13	5
Culture, literature, theater, cinema	<b>9</b>	6	12	7	8	10	11
Popular-scientific	<b>9</b>	10	7	6	10	10	9
Show business, celebrities	<b>8</b>	2	13	10	7	8	7
Business, economy	<b>8</b>	9	7	6	10	8	8
Fashion	<b>8</b>	2	13	13	8	6	3
Professional (pertinent to one's occupation)	<b>7</b>	8	7	8	10	9	2
Cars	<b>7</b>	14	2	10	11	6	2
Psychology, humans relations	<b>7</b>	3	10	6	8	8	5
Other	<b>3</b>	3	4	2	2	4	5
Cannot say	<b>2</b>	2	2	2	2	2	1

As far as newspapers are concerned, according to data from table 3, there is the same tendency as in the case of TV-viewing. The older newspaper readers are, the more they prefer social and political issues. It should be noted here, just for the sake of argument, that this setup can be well due to the fact that social and political newspapers are more common and widely spread. Outlets that focus on federal and local politics just outnumber others, they are more accessible and thus more often read.

In closing, we deem it necessary to mention very interesting results of empirical research conducted by several groups of scholars in relation to people who prefer to follow political commentary of leading bloggers. It was found that people who do it via newspapers or TV, as a rule, are more likely to discuss the most pressing issues of media and political agenda with both their like-minded fellows and those holding alternative views. On the other hand, people who regularly use political blogs and microblogs for their political information are the most likely to immerse themselves in partisan echo chambers. It has also been suggested that political blog users are strongly partisan people who seek out only those political messages that are in-line with their already existing political views while avoiding information that contradicts their notions of the political arena (Kim, Johnson, 2012; Ponder, Haridakis, 2015; Saletan, 2010).

Such an observation seems to be very important in terms of media literacy. If several scholars have independently come to the same conclusion, the tendency is in existence: people who get political information from blogs are less likely to discuss their views with “opponents”, are more opinionated and adamant, have less chances to be introduced to alternative stances and hence are more vulnerable to the risk of being labored under a delusion. Therefore, the one who wants to be media literate should take it into account while forming his or her media diet.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum it up, it should be stated that most Russians got used to receiving current political information. There is quite a stable demand for news about home and foreign politics in society. However, the problem of mass media credibility cannot go unnoticed. Polls’ data pinpoint the fact that people are far from taking the news at face value.

Clearly, all should be concerned with this situation. The present state of affairs significantly blunts the effectiveness of mass media as one of the main channels of communication of the powerful with citizens: how can politicians convey their own messages to the constituencies and affect them when people do not trust the press? As far as journalists are concerned, in the long run they risk becoming redundant because so-called “citizen journalists” will take over the job professional correspondents, camera men, and production directors did.

At last, people themselves should have the strongest incentive to make things better. No one can be satisfied with the fact that they have to get information from the sources they do not trust. But is there something than can be done on a personal level? I think the most appropriate and feasible method to do it is to develop his or her media literacy. Like they say, “If you are drowning, you are on your own”: it is absolutely unlikely that anyone would care about an individual apart from him or her.

Having got the experience of looking for the information, having learned how to critically interpret it, to check the facts and compare them with those from alternative sources and, if needed, to create media messages, an individual would not only become less vulnerable to possible media manipulations, but – at the same time – make his or her political choice more informed and conscious.

Besides, it goes without saying that a media literate person is much more difficult to mislead. In a sense, I believe that spreading media literacy principles within the society would conduce to cleaning up the whole media landscape. What I mean is that more media literate audience could eventually get rid of the news sources abusing the trust people had in them. Ultimately, all this would help to raise the effectiveness of communicational segment of political systems.

At the moment, the prospects sketched above, unfortunately, are rather pipe dreams than true perspective. However, it does not prevent us from ruminating on the ways that could aid us in reaching it. Media education is no doubt one of the paths we should follow.

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