

Communication competence and the information society

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Institut Finlandais, Paris, 13 December 1996

In the early 1996 the Finnish Ministry for Education published a Report by a small committee on cultural and media literacy. It emphasized the importance of the new civil and professional skills and competence in the use of the media and nets. The report, among other things, pointed out that the field of the media is integrating and becoming interactive while audiovisuality becomes a central issue. This cultural change requires the reform of the traditional literacy into media literacy, or in broader terms into cultural literacy where it is of central importance to understand how the images and significance is being created (OPM, 1996).

Our short national Report is in fact very much in line with the global approach of the UNESCO report "Learning: The Treasure Within" by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, chaired by Jacques Delors. In that Report, Rodolfo Stavenhagen stressed the importance of education for a multicultural world. (Delors, 1996: 215-219)

One of the central issues is what do we really understand by the new forms of literacy like "media literacy" and what importance the media competence and communication skills have in the information society?

In America media literacy is increasingly being defined as the "ability to communicate competently in all media, print and electronic, as well as to access, analyse and evaluate the powerful images, words and sounds that make up our contemporary mass media culture. These skills of media literacy are essential for our future as individuals and as members of a democratic society." (Center for Media Literacy, Los Angeles).

The rapid development of information and communication technology, especially in computer and telecommunication applications and systems, is creating profound political and cultural changes and also new learning environments. Traditional institutions of education are facing critical intellectual, pedagogic and institutional challenges.

At least two issues seem to dominate the future of communications. First, the exponential increase in the quantity of information and communication in the emerging global information society; and second, knowledge is becoming the most important resource in the global information economy. (Melody, 1996). The key concepts are interconnectedness and network economy.

There are at least two technological trends in the late 1990's that affect world business, institutions and everyday life. One is the rapid exploitation of Internet by corporations and institutions, and the other is the deregulation of telecommunications and the introduction of new telematic services. It remains to be

seen whether this "liberalizations" of the huge telecommunications industry will create a true competition instead of monopoly systems or create only huge oligopolies.

It is estimated that the trade of world telecommunications is approximately 20 % of the world trade . For example, after 10 years of trying, the United States Congress finally passed a bill in February 1996 deregulating all segments of the communications industry. Telephone companies, broadcasters, and cable operators are all free to enter each other's markets. This deregulation is launching a \$ 1 trillion (thousand billions) digital free-for-all. (Business Week, April 8, 1996). The same process is going on Europe and will accelerate after 1998 when deregulation really will take place. Finland, as a small country, has been a laboratory for telecommunication developments.

The almost unavoidable globalization is promoted by technology which in turn favours simplified answers to most complicated social, cultural and religious problems that are bound to emerge and which are not global in essence. Already in the beginning of the 1960's the French sociologist Jacques Ellul spoke of the new media as a "technological bluff." He thought that each new medium does bring something new in the organizing, processing and utilization of information but also makes something disappear. The new inventions, though, always have consequences that could not have been foreseen. (Varis, 1995). Culture is a changing, interactive process that deals with human values.

But the belief in the revolutionary impact of the new technologies is very strong. New virtual technologies like the Learning Machine are propagated as "the most powerful learning tool since the invention of the book". Learning foreign languages, for example, is said to take place "at rocket speed ! "

The problem of media skills and communication competence was created when the technological change last century had the consequence that the following generations could no more be sure of in what kind of a world would they live. The era of modernism did not only change the environment but also the way in which people perceived and constructed the reality. The emergence of photography and later film were radical innovations in the media world. In order to understand them it was not enough to have the traditional views of what painting is or what is the role of a picture in culture in general.

Henri Matisse wrote:

" Our senses have a developmental age which is not that of the immediate environment, but that of the period into which we were born. We are born with the sensibility of that period, that phase of civilization, and it counts for more than anything learning can give us." (Lovejoy, 1989: 3)

Current media research also maintains the view that the dominant media emphasize some of our senses more than others and also have an impact on the structure of thinking processes. Walter Ong wrote of the "secondary orality" as the consequence of the emergence of radio. He said that to use the term "media" is useful to refer to the technological means like writing, printing or electronic means of communication, but it could also be misleading if it leads us to think that the use of these media would be only transmission of information. In fact, all of the media do much more; they make possible thought processes inconceivable before.

The dominant media culture now is audio-visual in nature. The media environment is increasingly oral and visual, composed of audiovisual images. Furthermore, there is an accelerating speed of information abundance, noise and stimuli. It is often difficult to give significance to the information, symbols and messages. Parallel to the quantitative growth there is a qualitative process as well but it has been less researched.

Régis Debray speaks of mediology; of different eras of logosphere, graphosphere, and videosphere. During the first sphere of oral media the truth was theological with a center in the ancient Greece. Then, during the renaissance and the birth of printing, the truth became aesthetic and the center moved to Rome. Now with the audiovisual media culture the truth is economic in nature and the center is New York. (Debray, 1995).

Franc Biocca has repeatedly stressed the deep and qualitative consequences of the new media environment to design and cognition. According to him the change from a passive two dimensional to an interactive three-dimensional media may be as dramatic as the change from still to motion pictures. (Biocca & Levy, 1995)

It is also widely believed that the new technology solves the problems of employment, teaching and learning, free-time, democracy etc. However, the available evidence is rather contradictory and at least leaves many questions open. (Rifkin, 1994).

Perhaps the artists are least prejudiced utilizers of the new technology because nobody determines them in advance the conditions how to use the new technology. Their imagination and utilization is only limited by economic realities and their own prejudices, customs and ignorance.

Only approximately one hundred years ago the emergence of the automobile changed all understandings of speed, distances and movements as well as of universality, too. Ilya Ehrenburg described in his book "The Life of the Automobile" (1929) how cars do not have a homeland:
"The automobile has come to show even the slowest minds that the earth is truly round, that the heart is just a poetic relic, that a human being contains two standard gauges: one indicates miles, the other minutes . . ." (Ehrenburg, 1976: 129)

Long time ago the skills and competences of the era of modernism have changed into the art of postmodern media. In fact we are living something which could be called a telematic era of photonic communication and information technologies. The integration of telecommunications, computers and multimedia change in a qualitative way our traditional conceptions of almost all spheres of life. Even the ethical and moral standards are affected.

As has been stressed by contemporary French sociologists and philosophers we face three complex problem areas. The first one is the globality of technology, money and markets. The second one is the universality of values, and the third one the uniqueness of forms. Languages, cultures, individuals, random chances etc are unique. If the values are lost, the global techno-structure conquers the uniqueness and homogenizes it.

Most essential in this new learning environment is the fact that whoever learner is constantly facing epistemic conflicts when the learner is presented with a problem that needs to be solved but which is outside the learners current repertoire. Most of the problems of the information society will be of that kind. The learner needs to proceed with self-regulation with an active engagement and self-regulation which is the learner's response to the conflict. The idea is to adjust and reconstruct thinking to deal with the learning problem at hand. (Klemm, 1996)

This information ocean of the emerging information society could be navigated by computer and information literacy and with a broader competence of media literacy. If Ilya Ehrenburg's automobiles could be used quite extensively to learn about the world and move around so could the new information and communication technology be used if proper driving skills are acquired.

Traditional Literacy

However, it is still necessary to maintain and develop what has been called traditional literacy. A recent study in Germany concluded that if a significant proportion of young generations remain literally limited in their literary capabilities, do not get proper introduction to computer literacy, and consequently develop poorly their skills of abstract thinking and imagination, there will never be any information society. A citizen in an information society uses similar frame of reference as a traditional reader when he or she uses information data services, computers or media in a productive way. (van de Lahr, 1996)

In the new media-environment the concept of the "text" extends into visual, audiovisual and computerized dimensions. We can speak of the media space where cognitive, affective and intuitive elements co-exist. The new, telematic multimedia are telepresent everywhere .

In my understanding we face three kinds of problems. First we have to try to understand what is the learning process of becoming literate and what does communication competence and media skills mean in the information society. Second, we have to analyse the increasing neo-illiteracy. Third, we should discuss of what kind of skills should we give to the citizens now as compared to the earlier skills of writing and reading.

According to research, literacy skills are of central importance to the psychological and intellectual

developments of the human beings. Traditional reading of texts and stories to small children seem to be fundamental for their later developments. Consequently, traditional literacy can be seen as a condition to becoming media literate .

What is less known is how the cultural frames filter the processes of reading visual, auditive and other signals and messages. Seeing, for example, is very selective and the power of the dominant media culture is widely based on the audio-visual power of the images.

Neo-Illiteracy

Along with the diffusion of the new media there is an increasing trend of neo-illiteracy in the industrialized countries. In general, the amount of neo-illiterates is estimated to be 10-15 % of the adult population. In the United States the "Commission on Reading" estimates that 10 % of the adult Americans are illiterate and another 44 % only passively capable of reading.

Jeremy Rifkin gives the figure that approximately 90 million Americans are so poorly educated that they cannot write to explain a minor error of their credit card or read bus time-table properly, etc. He claims that today one out of three adult Americans are partially or completely illiterate.(Rifkin, 1996: 60)

Although some European countries may still be proud of having high figures of literacy in general, the average total for the whole of Europe could be much worse than believed.

If we understand by literacy the process of abstract thinking that starts with the first years of birth with hearing stories and matures sometimes at the age of 14, probably no mediated information environment can compensate the neglect of this process of direct human contact and communication using all of the five human senses. Current multimedia usually mimites the communication into two: vision and sound, which are then technically manipulated. In fact, unprepared immersion to the new virtual technology might turn out to be harmful to some processes. At least there should be serious, critical and independent research on the use of different information technologies for processes like learning.

The multimedia genres of "edutainment" and "infotainment" may also have a cultural bias. In some cultures like in the Japanese language the state of mind in learning is to force yourself to strive for acquiring knowledge ("ben kyou"). It is a different attitude than exposing yourself to "entertainment."

In any case, the new media environments, telematic applications in learning, teaching and working, and in citizen services require new skills and competence. It is necessary to know how to use the networked, telematic media both to receive, produce, and disseminate messages in an interactive and collaborative way.

In an intercultural world communication necessarily mediates different values and cultural behaviours. Great civilizations and cultures have very different patterns of communication and use different senses in a different way. In consequence, if a truly global information society is to be created, more attention should be given to the diversity of cultures and the co-existence of different civilizations and cultures.

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