Media Education Must Become Part and Parcel of the Curriculum

Interview with Alexander Fedorov, President of the Russian Association for Film & Media Education

Today both his adherents and his critics refer to Alexander Fedorov as the “main proponent of Russian media education.” He is the chief editor of the specialized journal Mediaobrazovanie (Media Education), president of a professional association for media educators, winner of many prizes, director of several research projects, author of a dozen books and hundreds of articles on the theory, history, and problems of film and media education in and outside Russia, Pro-Rector of Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute...
The list is far from complete, but even this small part of it is enough to make it evident that here is someone well informed about what is currently going on in the world of media education. Our editors, Natalia Kaloshina and Alison Preece, interested in his perspective on this topic, asked Dr. Fedorov a few questions. We hope that his answers will help our readers examine the processes of modern media education and decide for themselves to what extent matters of media literacy concern any one of us—for we all, either teachers or students, live under a continuous shower of media texts, widely ranging in their form and content...

N.K. Dr. Fedorov, as you are a recognized expert in media education, well-known in educational circles within and outside Russia, the questions that Alison and I are going to ask you will be related to this sphere. Nowadays the term media education seems to be known to everyone—however, many people tend to understand it differently. Let us first of all define the topic of our conversation. Does media education stand for knowledge of the means of communication, or the ways of their functioning, or their application, or something else?

A.F.: In 2003 I interviewed 26 media educators from different countries, and, of all the definitions available, 25 gave preference to the UNESCO definition (1):
Media Education • deals with all communication media and includes the printed word and graphics, the sound, the still as well as the moving image, delivered on
any kind of technology;
• enables people to gain understanding of the communication media used in their society and the way they operate and to acquire skills using these media to communicate with others;
• ensures that people learn how to analyze, critically reflect upon and create media texts;
• identify the sources of media texts, their political, social, commercial and/or cultural interests, and their contexts;


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• interpret the messages and values offered by the media;
• select appropriate media for communicating their own messages or stories and for reaching their intended audience;
• gain or demand access to media for both reception and production.
In my view, this definition provides a reasonably complete characterization of the main goals of media education. There are several directions that can be distinguished within media education: (a) media education for future professionals—journalists (the press, radio, TV, Internet, advertising), moviemakers, editors, producers, etc.; (b) media education for pre-service and in-service teachers—in universities and teacher training colleges, and in media culture courses within the system of advanced training; (c) media education as a part of general education for secondary and tertiary school students, which may be either integrated into the traditional disciplines or autonomous (i.e. taught as a specialized or optional course); (d) media education in educational and cultural centers (community interest clubs, centers for out-of-school activities and artistic development, etc.); (e) distance education of young and adult learners through television,
radio, and the Internet; an important component of which is media criticism, a specific sphere of journalism engaged in evaluation, analysis, and criticism of the mass media; (f) autonomous continuing media education, which in theory can be life-long.

N.K.: If you were to compile a list of the main objectives of media education and arrange them in the order of their importance, what would be the first three points on your list?

A.F.: First, to develop the person’s critical thinking skills and critical autonomy. Second, to develop abilities to perceive, evaluate, understand, and analyze media texts of different forms and genres (including their moral implications and artistic qualities). And third, to teach students to experiment with the media, to create their own media products or texts.

N.K.: Are there many people who are still skeptical about media education and who perhaps question its contribution to society? How do you answer them?

A.F.: Yes, there are many skeptics, and some of them are well-qualified and educated people. For example, in Mediaobrazovanie 2, 2005, we published an article “What Is Media Education?” by Professor Kirill Razlogov, Director of the Russian Institute for Cultural Research, who holds a PhD in cultural studies. He thinks that there is no sense in formal media education for all, because those who are really interested receive this kind of education spontaneously all through their life... Some people are certainly able to effectively develop their own media culture. However, public opinion polls show that the media competence of the majority of the audience, especially the younger generation, leaves much to be desired. True, there are some gifted individuals who successfully educate themselves without attending schools or universities—however, this is no cause for closing formal educational institutions... I have no doubt
that all universities, especially pedagogical ones, need media literacy courses, and media education must become part and parcel of the curriculum—and in Canada and Australia media education is already officially included in the school programs.

A.P.: What are the advantages of media literacy for an individual? Or perhaps it’s better to ask, what are the risks of “media illiteracy,” of the person’s lack of awareness of how the media operate?

A.F.: I understand media literacy as the result of media education. In general, predominant among media education concepts are the cognitive, educational, and creative approaches to the use of mass media potential. However, at the implementation level most media education approaches integrate the three components. These are:
• acquiring knowledge about the history, structure, language, and theory of the media—the cognitive component;
• development of the ability to perceive media texts, to “read” their language; activation of imagination and visual memory; development of particular kinds of thinking (including critical, logical, creative, visual, and intuitive); informed interpretation of ideas (ethical or philosophical problems and democratic principles), and images—the educational component;
• acquiring practical creative skills for working with media materials—creative component.

In each particular model these basic components are realized differently, depending on the conceptual preferences of the media educator. The learning activities used in media education are also different: descriptive (re-create the media text, reconstruct the personages and events); personal (describe the attitudes, recollections, and emotions elicited by the media text);
analytical (analyze the media text structure, language characteristics, and viewpoints); classificatory (define the place of the text within the historical context); explanatory (comment on the media text or its parts); or evaluative (judge the merits of the text on the basis of personal, ethical or formal criteria). As a result, the learners not only are exposed to the pleasurable effects of media culture, but they also acquire experience in media text interpretation (analyzing the author’s objectives and discussing—either orally or in writing—the particulars of plot and characters, ethical positions of personages or the author, etc.) and learn to connect it with their own personal experience or that of others (e.g. putting themselves in the place of this or that personage, evaluating facts and opinions, identifying causes and effects, motives and consequences of particular actions, or the reality of events).

Moreover, while working with media texts young people have many opportunities to develop their own creative habits and skills. For example, they may write reviews or mini-scripts; they are exposed to representations of their cultural heritage—and through these to various personal, historical, national, global and other perspectives on those events. While studying the main media genres and forms, tracing the development of a particular theme within different genres or historical epochs, becoming familiar with the styles, techniques, and creative activities of the great masters, etc., they acquire much relevant knowledge and learn methods and criteria for evaluating media text. All of that contributes to the development of the student’s aesthetic awareness, artistic taste, and creative individuality and influences the formation of civic consciousness.

As for “media illiteracy,” I see its main danger in the possibility of a person becoming an easy object for all sorts of manipulation on the part of the media… or becoming a media addict, consuming all media products without
discrimination.

_N.K.: Now let us suppose that some of our readers—persuaded by your arguments—have just decided that teaching media literacy is going to become an integral part of their work with students. Where do they begin? What goals should they pursue?_

_A.F.: It would make good sense to begin by studying the theory and methods of media education—I mean the works of such well known media educators as N. Andersen, B. Duncan, J. Pungente, C. Bazalgette, L. Masterman, A. Hart, D. Buckingham, D. Considine, R. Kubey, W.J. Potter, K. Tyner, J. Gonnet, Y. Usov, L. Zaznobina, O. Baranov, S. Penzin, A. Sharikov, N. Khilko, Y. Polat, G. Polichko, L. Bazhenova, Y. Yastrebtseva, and others. The main goals of media education are provided by the above UNESCO definition, but the particulars of their realization certainly depend on the working conditions and individuality of the teacher._

_A.P.: And how not to teach media literacy? What cautions would you offer teachers trying to introduce this topic with their students?_

_A.F.: I see two approaches to media education that are very popular, but quite wrong. The first one is trying to screen the students from the “harmful” effects of the media by immersing the audience in the teacher-selected world of “masterpieces” (the “protective” approach). The second and perhaps even more prevalent approach (the “practical” one) is confining media education to the use of various media apparatus and computers in class as teaching aids, without critical analysis of media texts themselves. In this case the media texts are only illustrations of the content under study, for example, to some physical or chemical laws._
N.K.: What is now going on in this sphere in Russia? Are there any results that can be identified as concrete achievements of Russian media education?

A.F.: In Russia we now have several specialized web-sites offering materials on media literacy to all teachers—and your readers, too. In 2000, the first two bilingual Russian/English sites on audio-visual media education were created (www.medialiteracy.boom.ru and www.mediaeducation.boom.ru), then a Russian site (www.mediaeducation.ru). Later Mediatheka of the School Sector (http://school-sector.relarn.ru/efim/mainframe.html), the School Mediatheka (http://www.ioso.ru/scmedia), and other sites appeared. In March 2004, the website of the Russian Association for Film and Media Education (http://edu.of.ru/mediaeducation) organized the first all-Russian Internet conference on media education. In recent years, Russian media educators have become active participants in international conferences, many of them publishing the results of their research in specialized journals and academic publications concerned with current problems of media and media literacy in the U.S., France, Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, Canada, Australia, and Norway. In Russia itself, the last five years have yielded no fewer than 20 monographs and study guides on media education, and dozens of articles and teaching programs in books and journals on research and education. In 2002, media education was officially registered as a new university specialty—which I think is a really important achievement. In the autumn of 2002 at Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute we began to train future media educators. Some Russian universities offer their students courses in media education. Several departments of the Russian Academy of Education actively promote media education in schools; in 2004, media education centers were established in Perm and Chelyabinsk. In the
autumn of 2004, the South-Ural Center for Media Education held an all-Russian roundtable conference, in which representatives of UNESCO and the Russian Association for Film and Media Education took part. One of the outcomes was the initial publication of the new specialized journal Mediaobrazovanie—you may read the full texts of all its issues at the website of the UNESCO Information for All Program (http://www.ifap.ru/projects/mediamag.htm).

A.P.: Perhaps you could describe some particularly impressive teaching efforts that you have seen implemented in Russia?

A.F.: Many projects have been realized by my colleagues from the Russian Academy of Education. A network of school mediathekas (libraries containing books, journals, audio and video cassettes, CDs, DVDs, etc.) has been created in recent years, and a number of most interesting creative network projects for schoolchildren have been launched—these directions are guided by Y. Yastrebtseva. Her colleagues, L. Bazhenova and Y. Bondarenko, aim their efforts at promoting media educational work in Moscow schools. During the lessons, play activities are often used (especially with younger children), students perform creative tasks (making a short video film, a photo collage, etc.), and have collective discussions of media texts. Similar work is going on in schools and universities in other Russian cities—Tver, Voronezh, Samara, Perm, Chelyabinsk, Rostov, Taganrog, Tambov, Krasnodar, Yekaterinburg, Volgodonsk… For example, the recognized symbol of media education in Voronezh is the Student Film and Video Club, where participants come to discuss especially significant or controversial films—the club is led by S. Penzin, an art critic and assistant professor of the Voronezh State University. Professor G. Polichko from the State University of Management is the
organizer of annual media education festivals for schoolchildren—with master classes, talks given by well-known figures of media culture, and collective discussions… Such festivals have taken place for about 10 years in different Russian cities. In 2005, the Center for Media Education in the city of Togliatti organized a Virtual Tour of Media Land, an Internet game for schoolchildren (http://mec.tgl.ru/modules/Subjects/pages/igra/priilog_1.doc). The participants form teams, visit some Russian media education websites, study their content, answer questions, accomplish creative tasks, and create presentations. To find out more about the methods used in particular media educational classes your readers may visit the Biblioteka (Library) section of the Russian Association for Film and Media Education website.

N.K.: Dr. Fedorov, as a person who has worked in many countries, you are in a position to evaluate and compare the level of media literacy and the trends in media education development in Russia and in other countries. Are there essential differences—or are we all moving in the same direction at about the same speed? Who do you think could learn what from whom?

A.F.: Both in the West and in Russia, preference in media education today is given to the critical thinking / critical autonomy development theory, and to cultural, sociocultural, and semiotic theories. Less popular is the protective theory, focusing on screening the audience from the harmful influences of the media. However, my impression is that Western media educators seem to prefer a practical approach (with the emphasis on teaching practical skills for working with media equipment) and a consumption and satisfying needs (of the audience) approach, whereas their Russian colleagues often favor
artistic approaches in media education. Universally recognized are the achievements of our colleagues from Canada and Australia, where media education is a compulsory school discipline. The philosophy and practices of the leading British, French, and American media educators have also obtained general recognition. Traditionally strong are the positions of media education in Scandinavian countries. As for the East Europeans, the world obviously knows more about the experiences of Russian and Hungarian media educators, whereas the achievements of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Romania in this sphere remain little-known—not least on account of the language barrier. Of course, Canada and Australia are far ahead of others in making media education a reality. Here in Russia we have much to learn from them.

A.P.: Why do you think media education is so slow to be taken up or incorporated into mainstream education? It’s not given the attention it warrants in North America despite lots of talk about its importance. Why is that?

A.F.: I think that North America should not be regarded as a whole in respect to media education. The achievements of media education are evident in Canada… on the other hand, the progress is much slower in the U.S. Perhaps it’s the U.S. domination in the world media markets—above all, the film market—that accounts for the situation: There are quite influential forces there that are not interested in the development of media education in the country. In fact, the lower the media literacy level, the easier it is to sell any media texts. As for the current situation in Russia, media education now receives backing and encouragement from the Ministry of Education and Science (I’ve already mentioned the registration of the new university specialty), media education projects are supported by the Russian Foundation for Humanities, by the
Program of Russian President’s grants “Support of the Leading Scientific Schools,” and by the program of target grants of the RF Ministry of Education and Science “Development of the Scientific Potential of Universities.” However, media education in Russian schools has no official status yet, and courses on media literacy are still a rarity for many Russian universities.

N.K.: When do you think real changes will come?

A.F.: I’m sure serious changes are inevitable…
keeping optimistic—within the next ten years.

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N.K.: Many of our readers are connected with the RWCT project—you may read about it at our website (www.ct-net.net)—and in teaching they direct their efforts to the use of active methods and the systematic development of critical thinking. In the field of media education such practices are of vital importance; moreover, our teaching goals agree in many respects. Could you comment on their alignment?

A.F.: As I’ve already said, the theories of media education as the development of critical thinking (Critical Thinking Approach, Critical Autonomy Approach, Critical Democratic Approach, Le Jugement Critique, L’Esprit Critique, Representational Paradigm) are now popular in many countries, so the there is considerable agreement with respect to goals and purposes. According to these theories, students need to develop the capacity to purposefully navigate a world of diverse and abundant information. They should be taught to consciously perceive, comprehend, and analyze it, and be aware of the machinery and the consequences of its influence upon the audience. One-sided or distorted information (conveyed in particular by television, which possesses a strong arsenal of propaganda) is no doubt a matter for reflection. That is
why it’s so important for the students to be able to tell the difference between the given or known facts and the facts that need to be checked; to identify a reliable source, a biased judgment, vague or dubious arguments, faulty reasoning, etc. Such skills are especially valuable for the analysis of TV information programs: They make the viewers “immune” to unfounded statements and all kinds of falsehood. Irrespective of the political system they live in, people who are not prepared to interpret the multiform information they are exposed to are not able to give it an all-round analysis. They cannot oppose the manipulative effects of the media (if there are such effects), and they are deprived of the tools of the media for expressing their own thoughts and feelings about what they have read, heard, or seen.

Of course, we shouldn’t oversimplify media education and, setting aside the artistic aspect, confine it to the development of critical thinking and to the study of TV commercials and information programs (where all sorts of manipulative techniques are the most obvious). However, I’m convinced that a developed capacity for critical thinking and mastery of such basic concepts of media education as category, technology, language, representation, and audience are the best aids in the analysis and evaluation of any media text.

N.K., A.P.: Thank you for sharing your ideas with us, and with our readers. We wish you continued success in all your creative efforts and in your advocacy of media education.