

## THE MEDIA EDUCATION OF DISABLED PEOPLE

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**Summary.** So far little attention has been paid to the importance of media education amongst disabled people. However, the difficulties connected with the complexity of the world and the problems when it comes to using the media apply also to this group, if not mainly to them. Thanks to the media, new possibilities of personality development and the elimination of restrictions have become accessible. It should be also remembered that the actions in the media world (or the virtual world) may bring about various threats. Media education in these scopes may either prevent or counteract numerous problems.

The pilot questionnaire study undertaken reveals that disabled people are exposed to almost all the media also used by non-disabled people. One of the basic difficulties that occur in their case is lack of skills to operate the equipment on their own. The other difficulty is lack of a critical approach towards the received information and, as a result, undertaking the actions the media “persuade” them into (e.g. starting phone connections that cost a lot in the “audio-tele” programmes). Rarely can they expect any help – even when received, it is scarce.

Therefore, we should realise how important media education is, also for disabled people. Media usage may still be a very effective therapeutic tool; it may help to reduce the weaknesses and provide entertainment. Leaving these people without any assistance in this field may lead to some serious consequences.

**Key words:** media education, disabled people

So far, a great deal has been said about media education as far as non-disabled pupils attending public schools are concerned. A lot of attention has been paid to the fact that school should prepare children and adolescents to live in a society with an omnipresent media and more and more frequently used modern technologies. In 1999, together with the implementation of education reform guidelines

in the Core Curriculum of general education, there was even an inter-subject path called reading and media education, which included the guidelines for these types of actions. However, little attention has been paid to the need to implement media education for the disabled. Yet, the complexity of this world, as well as the possibility of using media, apply to them as well. The media frequently create new opportunities thanks to which disabled people may develop their personalities and reduce their limitations. However, first and foremost, it is worth mentioning that media education as referred to in this group, since some actions in the media world (or the virtual one) may pose a profound threat to those people, especially refers to the intellectually disabled, as well as those with other difficulties. Lack of experience in the discussed area may lead to numerous problems. This paper is an attempt to shed some light on these issues, and it also sets the following aims: to study the content of the documents regulating the education of disabled people in special schools, in terms of the existence of the media education content; to establish the nature of difficulties that may be experienced by the disabled whilst using certain types of media; to determine the scope of assistance the disabled may expect while preparing to receive and use the media; to study the preferences of the disabled while using the media.

“The media education is an interdisciplinary field of education that deals with the role of mass media in the processes of socialisation, teaching-learning and education, preparing the people to

confidently pass information via new technologies, shaping competences for using electronic multimedia and preparing for a critical reading of the meanings of the visual culture” [1].

Hence understanding media education is a practical side of media pedagogy, fundamentally to understand and create meanings in the reality dominated by media culture [6]. Its interdisciplinary character results from the necessity to seize and interpret globally the phenomena originating with media participation. Therefore, media education draws a lot from sociology, culture anthropology, psychology, and obviously, pedagogy.

There are a few areas of interest of media education, including the following:

- the cognitive theory of media communication, dealing with the manner in which a human brain receives media announcements,
- the mass media theory and practice, covering the phenomenon of creating and functioning of popular culture,
- information technology – connected with a tool-like aspect of information operation by a human (how it is gained, processed, sent and stored),
- the methodology of media education – within its framework the most effective ways of using media in didactic and educational processes are established [6].

Generally speaking, media education in school conditions may be looked into from three distinctive perspectives. First of all, as *the education about the media* – with a remark that media is a subject of study and that knowledge about the different types of media can be deepened. It can also be seen as the *education through the media*, when they serve as tools for different actions undertaken by students, and, eventually, as *the education for the media* understood as an introduction into the world of the media culture [2].

The Core Curriculum of general education for the primary and junior high school stipulates that due to media significance in the individual and social life teachers of all subjects should devote a lot of time to these issues. This ought to be done because, regardless of their basic areas of interest, the pupils should develop the skills for searching for the information, using media in self-development activities, approaching any media production in a critical way. These are the main aims of media education. As a result, it should lead to the development of the following competences:

- differentiating between informative,

- persuasive and manipulative messages,
- differentiating between what is real and created – fictional,
- analysing the media offer and making proper decisions as to what to choose,
- taking notice of the context of the communicated information,
- controlling the time devoted to receiving and consuming the media,
- creating objective opinions about the phenomena and facts which reach us from the surrounding world [3].

However, it should be noted that the greatest content convergence for the realisation of media education can be observed in Polish language lessons. Other lessons, which may facilitate the introduction of such content, are the following: history, arts and crafts, social science, IT, technology, but it cannot be said about other school subjects, e.g. those which deal with science [5].

A question that may be asked here is as follows: is media education carried out in special schools? The analysis of documents serving as a basis for functioning of these institutions will be, among others, a subject of the following part of this paper. It should help to determine whether it is designed to be carried out in such places at all. The answers given in the questionnaire (presented below) will provide answers to the questions regarding the adjustment and preparation of the disabled for using the media.

#### THE MEDIA AND MEDIA EDUCATION IN THE LIVES OF DISABLED PEOPLE IN LITERATURE

To determine the issues indicated in the title above, two research methods have been applied – document analysis and a diagnostic questionnaire. In the first case, the content analysis technique was applied, thanks to which it was attempted to establish whether the special schools, being or having been attended by disabled people, have carried out media education. Core Curricula were studied, i.e. the documents including the guidelines for educational activity of the specified schools. The second method – the questionnaire technique – helped to establish the place and role of the media in the lives of those people, as well as the presence of media education in their lives so far. Two questionnaires have been applied – the first one for those, who could answer for themselves, and the second one for parents – in the case of those, who

could not do it themselves for various reasons. The study, the analysis of which is presented below, was carried out in the city of Opole, Poland. It was a pilot study; therefore, the cases of only 36 respondents with various types of disabilities were investigated.

### THE MEDIA EDUCATION IN THE LIGHT OF THE CORE CURRICULUM FOR SPECIAL SCHOOLS

The Core Curriculum of general education for pupils with moderate or severe mental disabilities in the primary and junior high schools [3], as well as the Core Curriculum for general education for special schools adapting to work for pupils with moderate or severe mental disabilities and for the pupils with multiple disabilities [3] – two documents which regulate the functioning of the educational facilities for intellectually disabled people show that media education has been provided for, yet to a very limited degree. However, some of the records included therein do not show unequivocally that it refers to, e.g. familiarising with the functioning and specificity of the means of mass media, which is a significant aim of media education. Yet, general statements may also be a chance to work towards this direction/aim. For instance, the first of the above-mentioned documents states that the aim of the school is to “create conditions for obtaining technical skills and using them in various life situations.” Moreover, another duty of the school is “to ensure participation in various rehabilitation activities (...), which aims at, inter alia, developing interests (especially musical, theatrical, dancing, singing and sports).” It is also important “to enable pupils to participate in various social and cultural events as recipients and creators of culture and, simultaneously, to teach them how to express their feelings and emotions.” And as it was said above, there are no direct references to the mass media or hypermedia, but teachers may apply numerous solutions with the use of these media (or point out the possibilities of their application) to develop skills and shape pupils’ personality traits.

The discussed document in the *Teaching Contents* section includes a suggestion that the pupils who will not acquire handwriting skills may, if possible, be taught to use a typewriter or computer. The same part of the document, under the entry “artistic activity,” mentions that pupils are to experience pieces of music, art, films and theatre performances. Another context for the issues

regarding the media education can also be found under the “health care” entry. The educational content will therefore be “avoiding the factors harmful for health.” As it is commonly understood, the irrational use of the media may have a negative effect on the whole human organism. This part of the document also includes the “technical education” section – and one of its detailed records is “teaching ecological behaviour while using the tools, and using the social and technical tools” – also important from the point of view of this paper.

The Core Curriculum for general education for special schools adapting to work for pupils with moderate or severe mental disabilities and for the pupils with multiple disabilities also includes some elements of media education. According to this document, one of the basic school tasks is “preparing pupils to differentiate between fiction and reality in what the mass media present.” There are also other records which, as mentioned earlier, create the opportunity for similar activities. For instance, these include *The Educational Aims*:

- shaping the skills related to work search, including the use of various information sources,
- shaping the skills related to an unassisted organisation of rest and free time.

Specific *Teaching Contents* will be favourable for the implementation of these aims as well as the aims of media education. To quote: “Passing, receiving and using different information, including reaching the information, using, creating and processing the information through different means (also using computer).”

### MEDIA AND MEDIA EDUCATION IN THE LIVES OF DISABLED PEOPLE

As mentioned above, in order to study the role of the media in the lives of disabled people and to determine the educational activities helping to receive the media contents, a questionnaire study has been carried out.

The study shows that disabled people are the extremely intensive media recipients and users. For instance, each of them watches TV, where 44.4% “very often” and 27.8% “often.” Only four of the whole studied group do not use computers. The remaining ones do it “very often” (41.7%), “often” (22.7%), “from time to time” or “seldom” (11.1%).

Among the most frequently used media, the first position is occupied not by the TV, computer or the Internet (which is used by 83.3% of the

respondents – 44.4% “very often” and 19.4% “often”), but by the mobile phone. Only 3 persons in the studied group do not own this means of communication. 52.8% of the respondents use it “very often,” 22.2% “often,” and the remaining ones “from time to time” or „seldom” (both categories 8.3% of the studied group).

A lot of disabled people use the radio, although it is not used as intensely as the above-mentioned media. Only 8.3% resign from the radio completely, 30.6% listen to the radio “very often” and 22.2% “often.”

Printed media are slightly less popular. As far as the press is concerned – 27.8% of disabled people use it “very often.” 13.9% of the studied group marked the “often” option in the questionnaire. The same percentage does not feel the need to read the press at all. When it comes to books, 63.9% read them “seldom” or “never.” However, it should be pointed out that among disabled people, there are persons who read “very often” (13.9%) or “often” (8.3%). Still, a continuous drop in the number of people who read books has recently been observed in general. The OBOP (Public Opinion Research Centre) studies commissioned by the National Library of Poland show that in 2010 only 44% of Poles read a book. While among the pupils above 15 years of age as much as 1/3 did not read a single book (while within a month 27% of them did not read a text of more than 3 pages) [4].

Moreover, disabled people use, yet much less frequently, tape recorders, CD players, game consoles, MP3 or MP4 players.

Particular preferences can be observed as referred to each type of the media. As for TV, various TV series are the most popular among 63.9% of the respondents. The conversations during the study revealed that some disabled people watch almost all of them, provided they are at home. A rough analysis of TV programmes of the three main Polish channels: TVP, TVN and POLSAT helps to establish that at the moment a TV viewer can be engaged in the stories of at least a dozen of TV series. Bearing this in mind, the respondents are unlikely to be bored.

Quiz shows and comedian shows are also readily watched and 55.6% of the respondents marked them in the questionnaire. Other shows are also very popular, e.g. *Dancing with the Stars*, *X-Factor*, *Must Be the Music*, *The Voice of Poland*, *Got Talent* and others. They are watched by 44.4% of disabled people. Documentaries are also the most frequently watched programmes, and they are

chosen by 41.7% of the studied persons. A slightly lower percentage was observed in the case of sport programmes and concert broadcasts (36.1%).

While using the Internet, disabled people mainly surf the net and play computer games, and occasionally they use the educational programmes.

As for the primary way of computer usage, the disabled – according to their own opinion – do not use the Internet for surfing incidental websites (only 5 respondents marked this category in the questionnaire). First and foremost, they go to such pages that are connected with their interests, to develop their personalities. The other reason of using the Internet is a need to find information which they need in everyday life. Both the first and the second statement were given by 63.3% of the respondents. Moreover, the Internet is a medium thanks to which the disabled may get to know what has happened in the world (50.0%), while 40.0% of the respondents download movies and music.

Nearly half of the respondents who claim to be playing computer games list almost all game categories – starting from sports and arcade games to strategic, adventurous and logical games. Some of them even use the so-called MUD games – i.e. the Internet games.

The educational programmes that were mentioned above as one of the ways of using computers by disabled people – are used to developing their perceptive skills, memory and mastering the reading and writing skills.

The mobile phone is currently a device which resembles a small computer. Apart from its main function of holding a conversation, it has also many other functions – sending text and multimedia messages, note taking, filming and photo taking, web browsing, sending files and many more, the description of which could occupy a lot of space in this paper. Disabled people use mobile phones mainly to hold conversations with their relatives and friends. 75.0% of them state this. A slightly lower percentage, i.e. 55.0% sends text messages, and only 19.4% send multimedia messages. But there are also those who try to use also the remaining functions of a mobile phone – their percentage equals 19.4%. One person of the studied group uses a mobile without any particular purpose, just plays with it.

Disabled people also have their preferences as far as the radio is concerned. First and foremost, they like listening to music broadcast by each radio channel. They praise this medium for providing latest news, which is definitely what the radio does.



Radio is a means of communication which, when compared to other means, may broadcast the latest news to the mass recipients to the greatest degree. Moreover, a certain degree of local patriotism may be observed among the studied persons – since the most valued channels (or programmes) are those which are broadcast from their province, or even the place they live in. The statements of the disabled respondents also suggest that they also listen to conversations and discussions on political and social issues, which often take place on the radio.

Among the newspapers and magazines most preferred by disabled people, there are those which are connected with hobbies – car and motor magazines, music magazines, but equally often the examples of glossy magazines, even everyday papers.

Thus, it can be stated that the discussed group consists of very engaged recipients of the media. Therefore, we can also consider the possible difficulties connected with using the press that appear in the lives of disabled people. What are the real threats?

The questionnaire studies as well as the observations carried out by the author of this paper show that the problems and threats connected with using this type of media are extensive. The direct reason for writing this paper was an observed situation in which a disabled person asked the therapist what to do because this person received a text message and had no idea how to react to it. It appeared that it was an advertisement of an escort service with some obscene content and pictures. This has led to the realisation that as it comes to certain actions undertaken by the media (or with the use of the media) some inexperienced people (especially those with intellectual deficits) face situations which outgrow them.

Nearly half of the studied people admit that they are extremely tempted to take part in the “audio-tele” programmes, which involves certain costs – not always stated clearly. 41.7% of the studied group believe that it is easy to get addicted to using the media. One-fourth of them also admit that they do not understand some contents passed to them by the media. A similar part confesses that they believe in everything that is said in the media. 16.7% of the studied people express the opinion that negative patterns of behaviour presented mainly in the feature movies encourage to be imitated. The same part of people simply cannot use the media at all. Five respondents admitted that in their lives,

they have undertaken at least one action connected with the media which can generally be referred to as “a dangerous one.”

The data presented above suggest that, similarly to non-disabled people, also disabled people should participate in the courses preparing them to receive and use the media. However, almost 2/3 of the disabled could not recall whether at any time in the past, be it at school or in various institutions they have attended, there were any courses or talks connected with the media. Those who declare to possess any knowledge on this subject claim that they received this knowledge from their parents, friends or institutions they stayed in.

## CONCLUSIONS

The media play an extremely important role in the lives of disabled people. This group of people spend a lot of time with the media, which helps them fulfil their various important needs. The compensational function of the media, which is especially significant in this case, has been paid attention to earlier. Due to various difficulties, it would be extremely difficult (if not impossible) to participate in certain events, visit distant places, meet other people or manage different tasks (e.g. do the shopping via the Internet). The media are also providers of the entertainment, so vital in the life of each of us. Thanks to the media, we can also learn a lot. Not infrequently, different media productions (e.g. *Ekspres reporterów* [Reporters' Express] or *Zawsze po dwudziestej pierwszej* [Always after nine p.m.] and many other similar programmes) present and stress the problems of the disabled, which almost always results in real help to those in need. However, it should be remembered that disabled people who use the media or spend time in the Internet environment are exposed to certain threats and difficulties. Therefore, they cannot be left unassisted.

The study presented in this paper is a pilot study. Some problems are only signalled here. Numerous issues should be worked on in a more detailed way, which will happen once the research tools are improved and proper studies are carried out. This study only confirmed the fact that disabled people also need to be prepared to use the media more effectively and not use them only as a time-killing activity, but a valuable entertainment and a chance to get some valuable knowledge.

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