The role of critical media literacy in further development of consciousness of citizenship

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Abstract

Among the academic studies carried out in the field of communication in Turkey, attention to subject of media literacy is relatively new. When ever increasing importance of both traditional and social media is taken into account, media literacy studies present essential awareness and contributions to education of “conscious and democratic” citizens. Nowadays, mass media being referenced as a basic source of information has great importance in development of cultural, social, political, democratic conscious and especially in the development phase of culture of conscious citizenship. Media literacy, being a lifelong educational process, is an inevitable pragmatic action movement primarily for both educators and students, and in general for all citizens. In creation and development of democratic milieus, the presence of conscious, active and participating citizens gain value in the interpretation of both visual-auditory and multimedia messages and in making sense of these messages with a critical eye. Due to the fact that well-informed citizens will bring about free and democratic public opinion, each individual’s being a media literate has become a necessity for modern societies.

In this context, this study opens the role of critical media literacy in development of citizenship awareness and formation of democratic-pluralistic societies up for discussion; and is aimed at exposing the reasons why media literacy education is important in decoding phase of media messages, which plays a crucial part in the constitution of information on world in which we live.

Key words: Media literacy, citizenship awareness, democracy.

1. Introduction

Media literacy is defined as analysis of media code and traditions, as ability to criticise media’s values and ideologies, as interpretation of messages produced by media texts, evaluation of media content and being selective, being aware of effects of media and a pedagogy which enables using media luminously. (Uysal,
One of two formative terms constituting “media literacy” word is media, and the other is mass which is able to be literate.

Common features in media literacy guidelines are listed as follows:

1) All media messages are constructed.
2) Media messages use a creative, idiosyncratic language within the frame of specific rules.
3) The same message can be perceived differently by different people.
4) Values and point of views in media are latent.
5) Media messages are constructed with the aim of power and commercial gain. (quoted from Baran: Türkoğlu, 2011:256)

Individuals starting to learn about media, are able to look with a critical eye at media messages they experience. To this respect, media literacy education is of help to develop critical thinking and analysis skills beyond protecting students from negative effects of media messages. It aims to teach students to ask the following fundamental questions while decoding media messages:

1) By whom was this message created?
2) What sort of techniques was applied to attract my attention?
3) How may other people have understood the message differently from me?
4) Which lifestyles, values and opinions were included and which of those were ignored?
5) Why was this message sent? (Jolls ve Thoman, 2008:27)

The purpose of media literacy is to enable students to be conscious and critical literate in the face of media texts; thus, making a contribution to students’ being not passive but active individuals against media. In accordance with progressively increasing student-oriented approaches, critical autonomy and active participation come into prominence in media literacy education, either.

The development of media literacy education with a critical perspective will make a major contribution to students make sense of media messages. That is to say, individuals will gain the ability to interpret media messages; hence they will recognise the differences between “the reality” and “the reality presented by media”. Individuals who are critical media literate, besides reading messages circulated through media texts, will also be aware of the sources (roots) of those messages in daily life. (Binark ve Gencel Bek, 2010:103)

This awareness will enable to know what political, ideological and social structures are behind these messages. It will teach questioning how hierarchy is established in media texts through which power and dominance relations such as gender, ethnicity, class division, race discrimination frequently produced. Dominant representation practices and dominant standards of judgement have been implicitly placed into media texts, naturalized and legitimated. Therefore, necessity of media education with the intent of raising individuals who are capable of critical thinking and developing this skill in the face of structured media texts.

According to Kellner, media literacy involves knowledge regarding how media works, how meanings are established, how it serves as a cultural pedagogy form and how it functions in daily life. A media literate is a person who has good skills at analysing media codes and traditions; who is literate in reading media in a critical way and expostulating stereotypes, values and ideologies. (quoted from Kellner: İnal, 2009:96) Thus, media literacy generally research into what mass media and other means of media are, their use in education, possible effects and educational communication processes which are conducted through those means. Besides that the purpose of media literate is to raise sophisticated individuals with an ability to analyse and synthesize who read media correctly, question what they see or watch, interpret, internalize, evaluate with a critical eye. (http://www.turkpdr.com/corner-post.php?ss=1300&w=medya-pedagojisi-ve-medya-okuryazarligi-188)

Primarily suggesting realization of fictionality of everything which is read, seen and heard in the media; media literacy, on that sense, lays emphasis on the fact that media contents are not inartificial and can be manipulated.
easily. Awareness of the fictionality and processes of mass communication, subjection of media messages to analytical evaluation and administering community participation lay weight on change of status quo by means of developing remunerative messages. (Türkoğlu, 2011:254-255)

2. Connection Between Citizenship Consciousness and Media Literacy

Both traditional media and social media, much more is at the center of our life every day. That is why media literacy is needed for individuals to know the differences between the truth and structured truth and to make use of media facultatively with proper guidance. Considering the presupposition that media representations are of functional importance in establishing perceptions related to world and constructing the sense of reality; to understand media contents and evaluate correctly has become a social necessity. Becoming a conscious citizen is also one of many aspects of media literacy.

"Acquisition of knowledge and making use of acquired knowledge are basic citizenship rights. Mass media is an indispensable source for implementation of these rights. In order to live in a world equipped with messages constituted by all written and visual sources, there is need for new communication skills. Whereas newspapers, magazines, radio, television, cinema and the internet is making use of rapidly evolving technology, the citizens should be acquainted with the new concept of 'media literacy.'"(Türkoğlu, http://bianet.org/bianet/medya/84160-medya-okuryazarligi-herkes-icindir) In order to speak of right to information and participation; first of all, the media must treat every segment of society equally and has to be voice of everybody. What is more; in order to bring citizens, who know their rights and duties in democracies, in participatory identity, firstly media's fulfillment of its public liabilities is absolutely inevitable.

Acquired knowledge from the right sources must be reliable in developing world views of citizens and in shaping their decisions. It is supposed that quantitative increase in mass media will allow for plurality; however, when we consider today's media forms, it is seen that only dominant and hegemon views have widespread media coverage. This fact constitutes an impediment against multivocality and multiculturalism; it means ignoring the cultural diversity created by differences in formation of democracy culture.

Formation of free public opinion and well-informed citizens are of capital importance for the choices and decisions required by democracy in a pluralistic and democratic society. However; nature of communication has changed in the existing sector construct based on conditions severe competition; thus, knowledge/ information flow has increased quantitatively with the impact of technological advances, while declined qualitatively, "content" issues have emerged. In our country, media is a ever evolving and ever changing, dynamic sector with 254 television channels and 1092 radio stations. These numbers which are very high compared to many countries, draw competition/rating wars to their limits. In such an competitive environment, media has lost its fundamental function, informing and control on behalf of society and has brought entertainment to forefront as result of commercial concerns. (Treske, 2011:31) Knowledge acquired via media and its quality has been started to discuss. Critical media literacy comes into play right at this point. Critical media literacy prepares the ground for individuals to develop ethics of responsibility in civic consciousness; to participate in every kind of decision mechanism such as cultural, political and economic areas as an active actor; and to take responsibility of decisions they make.

Individuals who act in accordance with this ethic of responsibility, comprehend that common living spaces can be created without alienation each other; and respect each other. Media productions studied in a critical way as cultural artifacts enable individuals to think about their own social existence and creates a social system awareness based on equality. "Target of critical media literacy must be to help individuals to be knowledgeable about power relations, respectful towards the other, responsible citizens and to transform marginalizing values and mechanisms instead of serving to reproduce some already powerful and hegemonic values once more. For this reason, critical media literacy is closely related to development of citizenship consciousness which can read media texts with a critical perspective and be involved in production process." (Binark,Gencel-Bek, 2010:221)

Further development of critical awareness and sense of social accountability are fundamental components of
dynamic learning process which media literacy education redounds. Thereby we can say that it is in the intermediary position in ensuring a democratic social order and development of citizenship consciousness.

Whether they are parents or not, all adults' awareness need to be heightened against media. Basis of this awareness relies upon specifically individuals' rights and liabilities and generally their access to exact information about every topic. In this age where media is the most basic source of information, the problem of how adults as citizens overcome the obstacles in front of access to exact information such as censor, misinformation, disinformation, manipulation, propaganda, false news, made-up news, stereotypes, prejudices and perspectives. It seems difficult for the individual who cannot overcome this problem to become a conscious citizen. It is inevitable for individuals to go through an education of media literacy in order to abolish aforesaid problem and to fulfill their rights and responsibilities in a healthier way. (Altun, 2009:107) Questioning representation practices of media is one of the first steps to take in the process of overcoming the abovementioned obstacles.

Media literacy will help people to understand how media filter perception and beliefs, how it shapes popular culture and how it affects personal decisions. It will help citizens to produce and consume knowledge consciously by equipping them critical thinking and problem solving skills. Due to these reasons media literacy education becomes more of an issue in terms of speech freedom, right to information and democracy. (Pekman, 2011: 40) Individuals who has undergone through media literacy education initially adopt "critical perspective" in the educational process open to dialog and participation, and recognise every kind of inequality relations in construction of social reality. Therefore, they may have access to information on what kind of structures lie behind the contents of media messages through which social life is established, and may reach a awareness and accountability level which will contribute to ensure democratic social order. Realization of social disparities which are produced and circulated through media representations only happen by receiving a media literacy education. For a more egalitarian social order, having a command of contextual knowledge of political economy lying behind the production processes of media means a huge step for the sake of being a conscious citizen. That is why, critical media literacy education provides an area of study full of opportunities in front of us.

Critical media literacy is a process nurturing educational environments which lead to ask questions and constitute social and political awareness. By the very reason it has the potential to prepare a ideational framework in the wake of being a conscious citizen. It bears much importance in the sense of enabling to be viewers / listeners / readers who are able to ask critical questions on what we watch, read, listen to. Because it is our responsibility to know with a critical point of view, as responsible individuals of civil society, to what we are exposed through media messages, what to filter, what to internalize, what to reject and what deductions we will make from the information we gathered in the face of intensive flow of information. (Treske, 2011: 34)

3. CONCLUSION:

Considering the ever-increasing effects of media, all the academic studies towards the field of media literacy present enormous contributions to both child development and raising "conscious, active and participant" citizens. Critical media literacy is one of the important opportunities for more democratic media and more democratic culture of society. As citizens who gain the information of the world in which we live from media, they may be building blocks and transformer of democratic civil society only when they have high level awareness and sensitivity. One of the important ways of eliciting that follows the road of a lifelong media education prevailing critical pedagogy insight and being media literate. Media education which can present multi-directional perspectives in the way of being conscious citizens who are capable of critical thinking and analyzing thousands of messages we are exposed everyday in the information age is an field of study which may provide with major contributions to constitution of stable democratic environments.
References


