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MEDIA EDUCATION OF SENIORS AS A FORM OF ACTION AGAINST THE DIGITAL MARGINALIZATION OF PEOPLE OVER 65 YEARS OF AGE

Keywords: media education, digital marginalization, digital exclusion, seniors, University of the Third Age

Abstract

We live in an ageing society that is technologically characterized at the same time. In order to function well in it, one must have appropriate competences. Those can be acquired through media education. This is vital for older people who are exposed to digital marginalization. The exclusion occurs when some individuals or groups are not free to participate fully in the network society. The aim of this article is not only to prove that media education in practice affects the reduction of the digital divide but also that seniors can use media spaces to the same extent as younger generations. It is also intended to sensitize the society to the presence of seniors in the virtual space.

Introduction

Navigating our technological society freely is possible thanks to prior acquisition of appropriate skills. We can develop these competences through, for example, media education. However, we often forget about seniors in the context of lifelong education. The older generation grew up in analogue reality. The contemporary digital reality is becoming a challenge for older people. Acquiring or improving competences supports the senior citizens in avoiding social exclusion. We shall begin by focusing on the question of: Who is a senior?

According to the World Health Organization, which operates within the UN and focuses on health care, a senior is a person over 60 years of age. The organization also presents a more accurate tripartite of old

age: *pre-senescent* will be between the ages of 45 and 59. *Early old age* begins at the age of 60, while the old age, or late old age, begins at the age of 75. Over the age of 90 the term of (human) *longevity* comes up (Wolański, 1979, p. 79–80). We use the term *senior* in a colloquial manner for people who have retired or are the oldest in their family.

Theoretical knowledge in the field of new technologies combined with practical skills is essential for an individual to function in social life. (Woźniak-Chojnacka, 2015, p. 175). Modern education focuses on children and young adults. Now, one of the reasons why this happens is the difficulty of educating seniors. Most of them have not only completed their education decades ago, but also finished their careers. Due to the lack of motivation seniors do not undertake educational activities.

The modern digital and virtual world forces the elderly to adapt to activities that they did not have to, or did not want to, do before. This is a challenge for the education of the 21st century, which should take place at all stages of human life (Prazner, 2011; for: Kukier, 2018). Teaching process should also continue after completing school education. That implies an idea of *Lifelong Learning*. This concept means that education is diverse, adapted to the individual and available throughout life. Lifelong learning provides access to formal and non-formal forms of education. Combined learning throughout life. It supports continuous development and enables self-improvement and improvement of knowledge and skills (Laal, 2011, p. 472). As accurately noted by Korzan (2011; for: Kukier, 2018) acquisition and replenishment of competences seems necessary in order to be able to understand the surrounding reality. This is especially necessary in the age of knowledge. Universities of the Third Age integrate groups of older people, enable forms of spending free time adjusted to the capabilities of seniors that is in accordance with their interests; and provide a rich educational offer. One can find there, among other things, classes that will provide the elderly with theoretical and practical knowledge from the areas of new media and digital technologies. Modern society has made the old age not respected. This is the period of withdrawal, exclusion and anxiety. We rarely hear the opinion that late adulthood is a period of opportunities and benefits (Szpunar, 2013, p. 39).

The aim of the article is to attempt to answer the question of whether media education can be a form of action against the digital marginalization of seniors and the presentation of a part of research carried out at the University of the Third Age in Lublin. The research was focused on the competence and activity of older people attending courses related to media education at this institution.

Media education of seniors in the context of acquiring competences

Media education is an interdisciplinary field of education. This issue is defined by the National Broadcasting Council:

Media education is a process of shaping and disseminating the skills of conscious and critical use of social me-

dia in all social and age groups. The process of media education is activities that should last a lifetime, because the forms and technologies of communication are undergoing change, and society is also undergoing constant transformation (...) In the process of media education, media competence is acquired that characterizes the conscious and active recipient of media coverage, but also creatively use the media in everyday life (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, p. 7).

We have been developing and disseminating the skills of conscious and critical use of social media in all social and age groups. The media education process are actions that should last a lifetime, because the forms and technologies of communication are changing, and the society is also constantly changing.

This process allows you to acquire media skills that are necessary to consciously use technological tools, including the Internet. By gaining them, the user can understand the mechanisms that are present in the media, is able to select information and use the media in a safe and critical manner. According to the National Broadcasting Council:

In the process of media education, media competence is acquired that characterizes the conscious and active recipient of media coverage. This recipient, understanding the mechanisms of information creation and selection used in the media, can not only effectively and safely use the media, i.e. critically assess the received content, including advertising and other commercial communications, but also creatively use the means of communication in everyday life (Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji, p. 7).

Media competencies are the structures of intellectual activities that can influence and change education, professional work or participation in culture. It is the society and the surrounding environment that sets the applicable standards and influences the processes of their shaping and assessment (Nosal, 2014). Competence is, in other words, the form of cognitive abilities necessary to process knowledge through thinking.

Seniors can study and acquire competences in the field of media education at various types of training institutions. These include, but are not limited to: universities, non-governmental organizations, senior clubs or cultural centres. A popular method is also self-study at home with the help of virtual guides that are available. Media education is offered to us by institutions such as Universities of the Third Age (in short: UTW) or non-governmental organizations that deal with non-formal

education and the distribution of the so-called. "New media". UTWs are one of the leading institutions when it comes to programmes dedicated to seniors in Poland, as well as in the Lublin province. It is worth noting that the Lublin University of the Third Age represents good educational practices.

Aging is a complicated process. Each elderly person has different needs and ages differently. This puts new and difficult tasks to face by people, which are dominated by the need to adapt to old age (Hasińska and Tracz, 2013, p. 93). UTWs are becoming more and more popular. The activities of these universities are supposed to facilitate the adaptation to social, cultural or global changes, as well as adequate response to technological changes. Retirement is a period that allows seniors to be active in the non-family and non-professional spheres (Hasińska and Tracz, for: Kukier, 2018). The creator of the first UTW in Europe was Pierre Velas professor of international law at the University of Toulouse. The first UTW in Poland was established in Warsaw in 1975, only two years after the founding of the first institution of this kind (Czerniawska, 2009, p. 99–109). Its founder Halina Szwarc was a gerontologist and collaborated with Velas. As a result of this cooperation, the Third Age Study was created. It was one of the first institutions of this type in Europe, next to France and Belgium (Malec-Rewiński, 2018, p. 141). Today, there are two models of UTWs functioning: the British and the French model. The first of them is associated with the welfare state and mutual help. The second one, the French model is associated with the academic environment (Grzanka-Tykwińska, 2015, for: Kukier, 2018). This form is also present in our country. Currently, there are over 617 such centers and branches. One of the UTW's missions is to equalize opportunities between generations. This goal is also valid today and gains a deeper meaning in the case of education that is connected to new technologies (Kukier, 2018, p. 42). In the olden days retirement meant a state of rest and the need to rest after years of work.

The digital foreclosure of seniors

For an active person in the information society, the use of Internet resources through electronic devices comes natural. People use the broadly understood media at work, for studying or for entertainment. However, the lack of the ability to use modern technology is identi-

fied with digital marginalization. Skilful use of a computer and media tools is necessary in the modern world. This translates into compulsory IT education from primary school until the late adulthood (Kuchta, 2013, p. 165). New technologies that are developing in the information society have dominated all levels of everyday life. On one hand, they can facilitate the everyday life. On the other, they can create chaos in communication among people with low media competences. As T. Koban-Klas (1999, p. 302) explains:

The multitude of messages reaching the modern man from the old media, strengthened by the flow of messages and offers of new media, creates a huge information flood, which for the average recipient becomes almost a buzz. Two typical reactions are observed, especially in the elderly. The first one is a feverish shift from the message to the message (...) the second is persistent with its previous habits. New media strengthen this model of state by being rejected by some or enthusiastically chosen by others.

We talk about marginalization when some individuals or groups are deprived of total participation in the life of a digital society. The reason for this is lack of competence in servicing new media. We must not forget that the group of seniors is very diverse when it comes to their online activity. Over the last decades, the number of senior users has increased, as the ageing of the population has grown. Some of them have been using the Internet for many years for professional and entertainment purposes. This is the age group where there are the greatest disparities in the way the Internet, media skills and digital needs are used. J. Gacka (2017, p. 85) divides seniors into three groups: novice, hobbyist and professional Internet users. The first of them mastered the only basic skills of practising new media. They are therefore dependent on their surroundings. Lack of use of these tools does not cause discomfort in their lives. In this group there will be the oldest people. However, this is not a rule. The second group are Internet users who treat the Internet as a source of entertainment and spending free time. They can spend many hours online or use the Internet sporadically. They often discover the virtual world once they retire. According to Gacka, this is the largest group of contemporary seniors. The third group is professional internet users. They know the Internet and have been using it from the moment it became popular, when they used it for professional purposes. They have high digital competences, and their activity

is similar to people over 30 or 40 years of age. I added one more group to the above mentioned division. This group has a double specification. It's a group of people who do not use the Internet at all. They are the oldest seniors who only use the traditional media such as the radio or television. They do not know and do not need to acquire media competences. Here, too, there will be people who, for financial and geographical reasons, cannot afford to use the Internet. This group is pushed to the margin of the technological society. The reasons for this include, among others, the withdrawal of people over 60 from the labour market or running the everyday life in such a way that new technologies are not necessary to function normally. Low technological awareness and hard-to-reach programs for socially excluded people also contribute to the deepening of this marginalization. Older people with disabilities and those living in rural areas are particularly at risk. Digital exclusion is a component of general social exclusion. It affects the improvement or deterioration of everyday cultural activity. People who lack media competences are pushed to the margins of society.

Research on media education. Opinions of older people

The educational offer of the Lublin University of the Third Age contains several courses from the media sphere. There are computer classes, a radio seminar and a seminar on media knowledge. One of the objectives of the research undertaken among the students of the UTW in Lublin was, inter alia, to check how educational subjects related to the science of technology affected the use of them by seniors. The empirical material was qualitative, the focused group interview method was used. Seniors answered open questions. The questions were focused on why it seemed necessary for the seniors to be enrolled in such activities and their reflections on digital exclusion. Some of the interviews were recorded on the recorder and written down. 20 people aged 59-80 participated in the study. Research including two men. Rest of the respondents are women. The interviews were conducted in the academic year 2014/2015. Classes were held as part of the so-called "Initial Year" for the new listeners. They chose computer workshops as additional classes. They could choose the level of advancement for example beginners or intermediate.

Half of the seniors surveyed, i.e. 10 people, felt excluded digitally (understood the definition). Lack of technological knowledge made them feel ashamed: *Sometimes I have the impression that I lack knowledge. I'm ashamed to admit I do not know something. Especially to the young generation. My knowledge isn't enough anymore* (woman 61 years old, higher education). They also pointed out that intergenerational contacts are important for them and makes them feel like a part of the family: *Youth knows all these novelties. I would like to communicate with the younger part of the family. I have the impression that I miss out on a lot of things. I am the last one to hear their news* (68-year-old woman, university education). Seniors feel excluded due to lack of media competences. According to one of the women this negatively affects the relationship with the environment: *I wanted to improve my skills. After retiring I felt badly mentally. I did not have contact with other people* (60-year-old woman, post-secondary education). One senior woman pointed out that education is necessary to constantly update her knowledge. However, she needed someone who would introduce her to the world of new media and teach her how to use the computer fluently: *I wanted to expand my knowledge. My (knowledge) was not enough. I did not have anyone who could teach me* (woman, 67 years old, post-secondary education). Senior citizens also pointed to the fact that learning technology is necessary if they do not want to stay behind and keep in touch with people who are abroad: *I had no choice. I had to learn how to Skype. Otherwise I couldn't count on contact with my children who are abroad* (female, 67 years old, post-secondary education). One of the seniors pointed out that the younger generation does not help them come out of the shadow of digital exclusion. Sometimes they are ashamed to ask for help in learning and are afraid of rejection: *My daughter, she has no patience whatsoever. Whenever I asked for help we would end up arguing later. So I just stopped asking. And my friends were doing their banking on the computer* (female 63 years old, post-secondary education). Another senior woman was afraid to be ridiculed by the younger generation. She pointed out that younger people use the technology without much thought, they learn it in a natural way: *I feel stupid, my little grandchildren can do everything on their tiny computers, I feel that I cannot keep up with them* (female 62 years old). Another factor of exclusion are financial issues, unavailability of courses and lack of motivation to take appropriate steps: *I wanted to enrol in computer*

classes for a good while, but I was afraid of ridiculing myself. They also cost a lot compared to the low pension. At UTW the price was more accessible for me. I did not have a computer at home. I did not know what to buy. I was afraid of the costs and that I would not have anything to train on at home, which would make others perform better than me (a 64-year-old woman).

Seniors who participated in the interviews understood how important the educational process is and how much they can benefit from it. They enrolled consciously, despite the fact that it was not an easy decision for them. They want to go with the times – they understand that even knowing the basics will allow them to facilitate everyday life. The seniors were motivated however they needed the right teacher. The traits that such a person should have include: charisma, patience and openness. Seniors can be easily discouraged. They often have financial problems which prevents them from buying equipment. New media is not only a tool for entertainment, communication and work. Skilful use of media by seniors will allow for general technological assimilation and anchoring in the information society (Kukier, 2018, p. 45).

Summary

Today's seniors grew up in the analogue world. They could not get acquainted with technologies in the same way as current children, who naturally absorb technological novelties, do. Although seniors are more and more present online, the creators of educational programs often forget about the oldest group of our society. The percentage of old people in Poland is constantly growing. This is why media educators should take into account the needs of this particular group and prepare programs in line with their expectations (Gacka, 2017, p. 84). It so happens that old people live in unfavourable financial conditions, are affected by unfavourable social processes, their sense of security has been disturbed, they do not have access to educational institutions (Kuchta, 2013, p. 169). What is more, they are discriminated on grounds of age and misunderstanding by younger generations. This leads to an increasing digital divide. The results obtained indicate that educational growth of the elderly is needed. Classes, lectures, courses, training, as well as help from household members or friends pave the way to gaining media skills. Seniors themselves should voice their needs in

this area and we should hear them out. Participants of the group that was studied understand the vast possibilities that open to them with the use of computer and Internet. They observe how younger people use these media resources with passion. That is why they take up the challenge to learn new technologies or to expand their already acquired knowledge. Universities of the Third Age are the leading institutions that deal with the implementation of education systems for seniors. They enable meetings with peers, tailor the educational offer to their needs, and allow for the acquisition of competences that help seniors find their place in the information societies. All these activities eliminate or minimize the repression of seniors to the digital margin.

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