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The state of media literacy in Turkey

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Abstract

Critical media literacy embodies the issues of participation and critical analysis. Unlike many countries, media literacy education in Turkey has emerged as a state effort rather than a local grassroots movement. This study provides a discursive analysis of ‘media literacy’ as represented on the official web site of the project. We argue that media literacy efforts in Turkey follow “a traditionalist ‘protectionist’ approach”, by aiming to protect children from the negative effects of media, and mainly focusing on the decoding of media texts. We point out that such a narrow definition of media literacy hinders its potential for building a transformative media education.

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Keywords: Media literacy education; critical pedagogy; protectionist approach; participation

1. Introduction

There is a socially increasing consciousness about the power of media representations in constructing images and establishing an understanding of the surrounding world. The practice of media literacy is generally perceived as an extension of this consciousness and a response to the dominating presence of media cultures. The concept of literacy includes “gaining skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artifacts and to gain intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one’s culture and society” (Kellner & Share, 2005, p.369). In line with this definition, media literacy should ideally involve critical analysis of media texts but also the knowledge and tools for participating in the process of production. However, different definitions emerge depending on what aspects of media literacy are taken into consideration. While the approach specifically focusing on the analysis and reading of the media texts is defined as “media literacy”, the “critical media literacy” approach consists of critical analysis of media representations but also stresses “the importance of learning to use media as modes of self-expression and social activism” (Kellner, 1998, p.113). By incorporating the terms of empowerment, participation, multiculturalism, multiple literacy, and partnership into its agenda, critical media literacy takes media education beyond analysis and production of meaning. It promotes the idea of opening up spaces and creating opportunities for a diversity of voices and opinions.

The critical media literacy approach breaks the traditional understanding of pedagogy whereby the teacher is the sole knowledge provider; it integrates various production activities within the process of critical inquiry. The potential of critical analysis is truly realized only when questioning is conducted through production activities that encourage students to create and disseminate their own alternative representations (Share, 2009). In this process,
students are defined as the subject of every action; a student-centered approach where students’ thoughts and ideas are critical in understanding their needs, problems, and interests, forms the basis of critical media literacy (de los Angeles-Bautista, 1999; von Feilitzen, 1999).

It is observed that media literacy education generally emerges out of grassroots movements to meet the needs of local communities (von Feilitzen, 1999). For the continuity and sustainability of media literacy efforts, its integration into national media policies, and the involvement of the state in the process are necessary steps; however such involvement should be accomplished later in the process under the local communities’ own terms (von Feilitzen, 1999; Morduchowicz, 2009). Unlike the general practices of many countries, media literacy education in Turkey has emerged as a state effort rather than a local grassroots movement. In this paper, we provide a discursive analysis of ‘media literacy’ as defined by the official governmental institutions of Turkey. The paper, methodologically, relies on the official media literacy web site formed by the National Education Ministry and Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK; http://www.medyaokuryazarligi.org.tr/) to examine how the media literacy project is grasped and operated by the state. We argue that media literacy efforts in Turkey follow “a traditionalist ‘protectionist’ approach” which attempts to protect children from the negative “effects of media addiction and manipulation” (Kellner, 1998, p.113), and mainly focus on teaching students to read, analyze, and critically decode media texts. By bringing attention to missing dimensions of critical media literacy in Turkey, we point out that the continuity of such a narrow definition of media literacy hinders its potential for the development of a transformative and empowering media education.

2. Media literacy in Turkey

Media literacy education in Turkey started as a collaborative effort by the Ministry of National Education and the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) to start an elective media literacy course for the 6th, 7th and 8th grade students. The regulatory body of the Supreme Council has played a crucial role in the process with its history of research in the areas of media effects, public opinion, and the television watching habits of various groups. Starting from the year 2000, RTÜK introduced “smart signs” for television programs for the purpose of protecting children from the side effects of television. On the “media literacy” home page there are messages from the Head of RTÜK and the Minister of Education, identifying those institutions as the key actors responsible for promoting media literacy in Turkey. By addressing children, parents, and students, both messages recognize television as the primary medium influencing children and emphasize its manipulating power in encouraging violence. The messages perceive elective media literacy courses as a way of protecting children from these effects, and make a specific call to parents and teachers to support the project. Parents are recognized as those who should encourage their children to select the elective media literacy course, while teachers are defined as those who should teach students about the negative influences of media, specifically television, without dismissing its significant contributions to democracy. The web site consists of links to the key terms and publications of media literacy, researches supporting the actions of the project, guidelines for children’s education, the fundamentals of children’s rights, and a visual gallery including pictures, poetry and stories by children sent to various competitions organized as a part of the project. There are also four main links for the main actors in the process: “adults”, “teachers”, “students”, and “media practitioners”. Each main link presents various sublinks about the key principles of the project; handbooks and guidelines about the responsibilities of the related actors.

Scholars, such as Douglas Kellner and Henry Giroux emphasize the necessity of a student-centered approach in the development of a transformative and empowering teaching ethos which identifies children as the agents of the learning process. However, false assumptions about the abilities of student and their interaction with society and media keep many educators from exploring new pedagogy (Share, 2009). Common understanding of teaching as a neutral, unproblematic, and apolitical activity result in the continuity of traditional teaching methods which consider children “too young to think well” (Share, 2009, p.128). Another factor that prevents educators and parents from engaging children in questioning and creating their own media is the “protectionist attitude” toward young children that “overvalues the power of media and undervalues children’s abilities” (Share, 2009, p.131). It is within this protectionist and traditional framework that the parameters of media literacy education in Turkey are defined. The
voices of the children are systematically excluded from the process, and participation in the media production is dismissed with a claim that critical reading of media messages is more crucial for the protection of the children.

2.1. Negative effects of television

RTÜK was established in 1994 as a state effort to reestablish and maintain control over the changes introduced by commercialization and deregulation in the media environment. It functions to make organizational interventions (e.g. allocating frequencies), to set broadcasting rules and regulations, and to monitor programs and impose appropriate sanctions in the case of violations of rules and regulations. Conducting researches on media effects and public opinions outlines a significant part of RTÜK’s activities and in many cases, the effects of television is defined as a primary research area. The television viewing patterns of various groups including children, disabled people, women and Turkish immigrants living in Germany, and negative effects of violence and obscenity on viewers’ spiritual health are among the research areas. Media literacy attempts in Turkey emerged as a response to the results of these ‘effect’ researches. Thus the starting point of media literacy education was an attempt to prevent the identified influences of television perpetuating violence in society.

On the media literacy web site, research documents on the viewing habits of children of school age present a scientific justification for the protectionist approach, while RTÜK and the Ministry of Education are identified as primary state institutions concerned with the psychological and social influences of media over children. Within the general discourse of the site children are located as innocent victims of television who should be protected first by the state, and then by their teachers and parents. In the opening message of the web site, the Head of RTÜK identifies children as a group who are most susceptible to the negative effects of television. With a reference to the results of various researches carried out by RTÜK, the Head tries to show the potential danger of television to society. It is pointed out that “average television viewing time in Turkey is five hours with a significant number of child viewers”. In a similar manner, the Minister of Education indicates that “our children are exposed to various negative images and programs approximately 4 to 5 hours everyday. Considering children spend approximately 900 hours a year at school but 1200 hours watching television, learning patterns are expected to diminish in time”. The Minister identifies educators, media professionals, and any other related individuals and institutions as those who are responsible for generating solutions to this problem.

2.2. Media literacy for protecting children

Media literacy courses are perceived as an effective possible solution for the protection of children from the effects of the media. The definition of media literacy on the web site is presented from different angles with documents discussing international applications, and general definitions and practices in Turkey. Translated handbooks and guidelines of UNESCO publications represent the ideal fundamental characteristics of media literacy such as the ability to use media technology along with understanding and evaluating media content. It is also emphasized that in many countries, application aspects and participation in media production form a crucial part of media literacy education. However media literacy in Turkey is especially defined as “the ability, which must be gained by students, to comprehend and evaluate the messages that are potentially harmful”. It is clearly articulated that the perception of media literacy in Turkey is different than the rest of the world; it mainly focuses on readings of media texts, especially television programs. With an emphasis on the importance of separating the “fictitious” from “reality”, the purpose of media literacy is identified as “to realize the power of media in manipulating, directing and imposing certain ideas”. In other words, media literacy in Turkey aims to teach individuals to be conscious of the negative influences of media so as to be able to avoid these influences; and media literacy courses are perceived as one way of realizing this purpose.

In describing the function of the course it is clearly stated that children are vulnerable receivers of the visual, aural and written media; therefore they need to become conscious of media images at early age. It is pointed out that a student should act as an individual who is able to decode media messages and actively participate in the communication process between media and oneself. However the definition of an “active” individual is limited to
watching television. That is clearly a reflection of the protectionist approach which reduces the role of children to an “active” viewer of media texts rather than defining them as “active participants” of social life who are able to use media to create their own messages. In line with this limited conceptualization of media literacy education, the teaching program of the elective media literacy course for 6th, 7th and 8th graders is structured with a didactic and medium-centered approach. The content of the course simply consists of defining elements of various media, from radio to television and the internet. The outcomes of media literacy courses for students are identified as “respect for privacy; aesthetic sensitivity; honesty; responsibility; loyalty to ethics; respect for diversity; maintenance of cultural heritage; appreciation of family communication; active participation in social life; scientific; collaboration/cooperation; equality; sharing, and solidarity”, which are all significant virtues to be gained from social life. However for these virtues to become meaningful for media literacy education, they need to be associated with the issues of representation, participation, production and citizenship. As it is reflected in the outcomes of the course, there is no expectation for the student to become an active participant in the production process.

2.3. Children as those who need protection

The main problematic issue emerging from the state definition of media literacy in Turkey is not only due to a text-based analytical reading approach to media but also to the identification of children as incapable “passive” viewers those who are in need of protection. The needy position of children is justified with the letters published on the web site supposedly written by them. A letter starting “my dear mother and father” addresses parents and creates the false impression that it is written by a child. However the letter is written by Atalay Yörükoğlu, an expert in the area of Children’s Spiritual Health. In the letter, the “child” expresses her/his expectations of the parents such as showing respect; keeping promises; allowing for exploration; and the right to make mistakes. The “child” also articulates her/his need for limits: “When you see me moving from the right path, remind me of my limitations. I would not say that I like all of the rules you set for me, however if my limitations are not well drawn I would not know what to do”. The publication of such a letter written by a can be seen as a reflection of the protectionist approach that perceives children as incapable of even expressing themselves in a letter. The letters and slogans such as “with the media literacy course, I will become a conscious viewer” written in the name of children creates the false picture that children are included in the process. The original version of the media education guide book by UNESCO, and its Turkish translation, are also included on the web site. However, the parts of the book emphasizing the participation of children as agents in the media production process are not included in the Turkish version of the document; which can be metaphorically defined as a state of “lost in translation”.

2.4. Parents as protectors and educators as preventive mentors

The role of parents is defined by the actions of ‘protection’ and ‘reporting” the programs and issues they perceive as harmful to the official state institutions of media literacy. In other words, parents are perceived as the mediators between society and media literacy attempts by maintaining the power of the state in the process. They mediate the process by calling the communication line established by RTÜK, encouraging children to elect the media literacy course, and teaching children how to use the smart signs and the RTÜK web site as a useful source.

A letter on the site by Prof. Dr. Ferhunde Ökten also exemplifies the role attributed to parents. As a mother, Ökten addresses her child in the name of those “who would express or would like to express similar feelings” and writes about her perception of the current media situation as harmful to the health of her child and warns her about the potential consequences of unconscious television viewing. The letter is also an example of the problematic reproduction of gender roles where the father is defined as the sole authority figure in the household; the father is given the responsibility of deciding the content the children are allowed to watch. Educators, as preventive mentors, take on the role of teaching the side effects of the media so as to create awareness of those side effects. They are identified as the primary actors for the continuity of the media literacy project: “The essential duty of the teachers is to teach the students how to use the media correctly”. This instrumental approach dismisses the role of the educators in bridging theory and practice, and introducing a context based understanding of the media.
3. Concluding remarks

The process of empowerment is a major aspect of transformative education and it can take many forms, from building self-esteem to creating individual forms of expression that voice opposition to the issues that are identified as problems (Kellner & Share, 2005). Active participation in the process of media production is an essential part of that empowerment, and for true realization of critical analysis and reading. Within the context of Turkey, media literacy efforts represent a protectionist approach with an attempt to protect children from the negative aspects of media. Therefore these efforts heavily focus on only one aspect of media literacy to provide critical readings of the media messages, while the issues of participation and involvement of children in the process of media production are widely dismissed from the process. As reflected in the discursive space of the official media literacy site, children are defined as the passive receivers and active consumers of the media messages; yet they are not provided with the opportunity to raise their voice about their concerns and opinions. Parents or teachers are identified as the primary protectors of children and they are voiced to talk about children in the name of children. While current media literacy project in Turkey can be perceived as an attempt to bring attention to the role of media in society, the general framework of the project fails to utilize the potential of critical media literacy for encouraging a transformative and participatory education. Instrumental thinking and a medium based approach which defines television as the primary influential medium in society dismiss the issues of convergence and multiliteracy and cannot provide the wide perspective and interdisciplinary approach required by the rapid progress of technology and the globalization of knowledge.

Recent critical studies address the significance of education in creating awareness about the role of mainstream media in exacerbating gender, race, and class inequalities and discrimination in society (Kellner & Share, 2005). Media education through participation in the process carries potential to promote ideas of multiculturalism and diversity; therefore media literacy is not only a matter of perceiving media messages, but also an opportunity for transforming the state of the media. In the context of Turkey; the dismissal of multiculturalism and social difference from the curriculum of media literacy narrows its scope to watching television within the domestic space of the house, rather than perceiving it as a social phenomenon. For the extension of this scope; knowledge on the economy politics of media; and the oppositional positions of media workers and media owners should be discussed within the curriculum. To create a better future for media literacy education and benefit from the process of critical media literacy education in Turkey, there is an urgent need for the involvement of various partners on the national and transnational level, specifically collaborations with universities, NGOs, and media practitioners. A child-centered approach and the participation of children in the production process should be given priority. This process needs to be aligned with daily knowledge and the progress of technology. Globalization and transnational partnerships should be emphasized and universities should naturally be included in this process.

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