New Media Literacy Education for Children in the Context of Participatory Culture: Deficiency and Construction

YIN Guoqiang[a],*; ZHOU Anping[a]

[a]School of Journalism and Communication of Southwest University, Chongqing, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

Rapid development of new media has given birth to the so-called participatory culture. However, as an active group, children are swept along in this trend and moreover, they are thrown to the edge of danger of over-entertainment and over-consumption. This paper sorts out and defines the meaning of new media literacy of children, suggesting that all manner of effort should be made to safeguard childhood in experiencing children new media with the objective of fostering proactive target audience and the kernel of reconstructing the subject of children.

Key words: New media literacy; Education of new media literacy; Children development; Participatory culture

INTRODUCTION

With the accelerating development of science and technology of communication, new media equipped with powerful digital handling technology and internet interaction technique now have generated new type of media culture, namely "participatory culture". Such fashion featured by liberty, equality, inclusiveness and sharing is gaining great popularity among children. Given this background, traditional education of media literacy aiming to teach children to resist temptation critically has found it unfit the current cultural transition and real demands. Therefore, literacy education of new media then is supposed to shoulder the heavy responsibility of leading the way for children to interact independently with new media.

1. INTERPRETATION OF CONNOTATION OF NEW MEDIA LITERACY OF CHILDREN

1.1 Focus of Debate

A hot topic recently in the field of new media literacy revolves around the issue of definition of new media literacy without reaching any unanimous conclusion due to the identification of core capability of new media literacy.

It is proposed by American New Media Consortium that "new media literacy is about a set of capabilities and skills constituted by overlapping auditory, vision and digital literacy, which include comprehension abilities of vision and auditory power, the ability to identify and utilize such power, the ability to control and transform digital medium, the ability of universal communication of digital contents as well as the ability to easily re-produce digital contents" (Li, 2007). This definition values personal capacity of understanding, producing and disseminating media texts while overlooking the important characteristics of cyberspace—collective and interactive. Jenkins points out that "new media literacy should be regarded as a way to interact in a large community instead of simply as some skills for individual expression." He

then summaries new media literacy into 11 core abilities as follows: games ability, imitation ability, performance ability, reallocation ability, ability to handle multi-tasks, ability of distribution cognition, ability of collective wisdom, ability of trans-media navigation, cyber-ability and negotiation ability (Li, 2007). His definition concerns more than the individual, it also keeps an eye on children activities in virtual space. However, it has to be grouped into "skill mode" when attentions are paid to practice ability alone. Relevant knowledge, awareness, quality, spirit and so on should be given certain credits no matter what kind of literacy we are talking about. Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman put forward in their new book Networked: The New Social Operating System that man should possess such new media literacy in this networking society: (a) image processing ability-understand this e-time or image-reading era, in online working manners that mainly deal with processing pictures; (b) navigating ability- to search, exchange and share online information; (c) ability of organizing and connecting information-to fast understand and give reasonable explanation to information; (d) concentration-the ability that strictly distinguishes online and offline life as well as the ability to automatically diminish the distraction from internet; (e) the ability to handle multi-tasks-take care of various missions of family, job, friends and public institutions simultaneously; (f) skepticism-consciousness and ability to effectively evaluate and examine information; (g) moral literacy-cultural morality and social norms that can support the use, creation and spread of the media (Lee, 2012). It can be said that this definition almost embraces the connotation of new media literacy which clarifies the personality as it cares for the collective feature and which accentuates practice while highlighting cultural accomplishment.

1.2 Comprehensive Consideration

Regarding the four traditional medium, newspaper, magazine, broadcast and television, new media is an idea of culture as well as history with different dimensions of dynamic development system of inclusive manner. It extends far from a fixed domain and puts forward different demands according to varying subject at different times.

According to the first Article of Convention on the Rights of the Child, "children are those who are under 18 years old". This idea covers what we usually refer to infants, children, teenagers and adolescents that beyond the so-called "juveniles". Children have to face different growth problems and development levels at different stages during their growth, which therefore posts varied needs for education of new media literacy. Nevertheless, education of new media literacy for children should, as a whole, contains the following four aspects: (a) the aspect of cultural morality, such as cultural accomplishment of science and humanities, ethics, moral principles and consciousness of social norms; (b) the aspect of

perception, namely, understanding of key concepts, knowing media contents and how they come into existence; (c) the aspect of comprehension and reflection, for example, judgment of information impacts, grasps of public opinions and so on; (d) the aspect of operation, such as the ability to process information technology, the participatory capability in virtual environment and public decision-making. Every part of the four facets is interrelated to constitute a completed and dynamic meaning system for children's new media literacy.

2. ACTUAL TOKENS SIGNING THE DEFICIENCY OF CHILDREN'S NEW MEDIA LITERACY

2.1 Crisis of Mass Carnival

The number of Chinese teen-netizen has registered 256 million, accounting for 71.8% of all teenagers in China that surpasses the average level of 45.8% of internet popularity rate nationwide by 26 percentages with an increasing trend year after year. Net citizens at the range of 6-11 years old hold 11.6% of all teen-netizen and this figure are also on the rise with each passing year. There is also a growing trend among children and the younger group in particular using internet to reach for new media.

By no means can be children alone shoulder the responsibility of the subject of media. Compared with traditional community surroundings such as school and family, WeChat, micro-blog, QQ-zone, Renren website and other forms of new media diminish the time and space obstacles for communication, and wipe off divergence of social class, gender, age, race and culture to establish common communication among people. Children who belong to disadvantaged groups at home and at school are likely to break the discourse monopoly of adults in virtual world and voice for them audaciously to gain a great sense of satisfaction. However, due to the unsound knowledge system and incomplete culture accomplishment of children, which is worsened by defective supervision mechanism, there is less possibility for children to seek after information they disseminate compared with adults while unreal, unreliable and even insulting and defamatory information is not rarely detected.

It is beyond their reach for children to digest complex media contents. Coding means of new media characterized by windows and unrestricted panorama prove to be more complicated with sound, video, pictures and words more often than not now are expanding the vision of children to a greater extend. Despite of any conformity with children and its reliability, sight of all kind can be exposed to them totally. Inundated in the information ocean, children "have spent several lifetimes compared with their forefathers" (Mcluhan, 2000). Children nowadays are found exceedingly sophisticated and even behave queerly given

the fact that they are overexposed prematurely to some social problems and phenomenon which go beyond their physiological age and mental endurance.

2.2 Bewitchment of Amusing to Death

Top three activities kids participate when they are surfing the internet are playing online games, listening to music and chatting in QQ. Children from both urban and rural areas show no marked discrepancy concerning this issue. The reason why kids get in touch with new media lies in more entertainment and recreation than study as adults expect.

There is a growing dependence of children on new media. Currently, public forums, websites and game communities in particular made for children are springing up on online platforms. An indispensable part of after-school life for numerous children is about "going home after school to play games". Since internet is tailored for children by grow-ups in the light of their physiological and mental features, it is inevitable that such online world is stamped with culture industry and modern values. As a result, kids of weak self-control tend to indulge themselves into internet and exhibit the sick "dependence on new media". The number of Chinese children of net addiction reaches over 24.04 million, 14.1% of all internet-surfing kids, and the number of those who show such addiction tendency soars around 18 million in 12.7%.

The children coerced in the new media are confronted with changing mentality. These with net addiction show a higher rate of vulnerable pressure-resistance, paranoia, indifference, poor self-control, autism and such than other children. The amusing-to-death era fails to see kids as the object of respect and care in the context of new media but succeeds in witnessing falling adults' enlightening aspiration of kids in an uproar. As for the child themselves, however, it is unlikely for them to sense the secret worry against the background of new media. Actually, they are strange to local childhood and most of them are the only child in their family. Therefore, new media can bring their friends, knowledge and something more. These kids may not be able to realize proactively that new media are attempting to carry away their spirits., on the contrary, worries are just around the corner when they are unfamiliar with "the Voice of China", when they can not dance" Little Apples" and when they can not play SEER (Space Energy Robot) so that they might be mocked, isolated and marginalized by their peers.

2.3 Trap of Consumption-ism

The modern media environment is set up upon the mode of consumption-driving society, which takes commercialization of culture as its basic attribute. Chinese young online-games players are rocketing in size in recent years from 30.93 million in 2008 to 50.55 million in 2012 and this figure will be projected to hit 69.39 million in 2016. Minor netizen are prospering on the quiet into an internet troop of unyielding strength and formidable

superiority. Chinese children online consumption has jumped to 1.09 billion in 2012 alone compared with the figure of 120 million in 2008, maintaining the annual growth rate of 25.7%, besides, the total amount of online consumption about the child is predicted to reach 2.09 billion in 2016. It is universally believed that children entertainment is developing into a new hot-spot to seek fortune on the Internet.

There is an increasing trend of blind children consumption. Consumption about new media for children is a symbolic consumption culture in that the children choose to spend on which new media in the light of use value of goods, still more, of attempting to showcase personality, taste, lifestyle, social status and social recognition. Since children have not been developed fully in intelligence and mind, they are relatively weak in the ability of differentiation and self-control, henceforth, their way to run after fashion may also lead to the trap of consumption-ism. To make it worse, most of the children nowadays are the only kid in their family; quite a number of Chinese parents in cities are willing to spend their disposable income on offspring. Given parents' own limited understanding of new media, they may even mistake kids' premature exposure to new media as sign of genius, which then indirectly intensifies the blindness of children consumption.

New media consumption may mislead children's appreciation and aesthetic judge. Currently, new media enable the reading environment for kids to enter "reading era" from "scanning era". Online and offline media join hands to turn cultural products, which are available to children and profit-generating, into "spiritual partners" for children and exhibit before them "the feast for the eyes". However, kids dazzled by so many varieties can no longer absorb the true artistic expression by shallowly reading and they may not be able to appreciate the implications of beauty. They are, just on the opposite, likely to become impetuous and follow the trend so that they then get stamped with the brand of consumption-ism in terms of appreciative taste, value orientation, morals and ethics.

3. WHAT OUGHT TO BE DONE FOR CONSTRUCTION OF NEW MEDIA EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN

3.1 The Object: To Construct "Proactive Target Audience"

The participatory culture of media information has come into existence and "salvation" of "protectionism" is bound to divorce aspiration from the reality. It is necessary to set the goal on constructing "proactive target audience" to cultivate new media literacy for children, which means one should employ specific media and specific media contents in specific ways to meet specific demands

and one should be able to become accountable media consumer with the help of media to serve one's purpose worthy of pursuit (Tessa, 2005). Target audience of this kind never receives information passively but seeks actively and avail themselves of information. In this sense, they are participants, interpreters and leaders of media information, besides, they personify themselves as active subjects of information demands and become the factual masters of cultural market.

What has been discussed above can be ascribed to more awakened awareness of adults on childhood. Views of children in new media environment are supposed to base on the respect of the subject status of children, and one should learn about and care for children' s inborn interests and appreciation, understand and protect kids' s nature of courage to experience and showcase, expand their built-in creation and imagination, and guide them to integrate into exact era of new media they are born into so that the child can develop for themselves the ability to choose and interact with the entire world. Adults therefore have every reason to shoulder the responsibility of providing resources, guidance, inspiration, supervision and correction.

Proactive target audience is of gradation. Children are varied in age yet new media literacy education always pays attention to psychological characters of different age. The younger children are, the weaker their self-consciousness is. As a result, new media literacy education for younger children should attach greater importance to protection and selection of information the child can get, what is more, this education ought to help children to cultivate fine habits to contact media and primary abilities to interpret media. As children are growing up, adults should learn to guide and enlighten rather than control and isolate them in order to gradually help children build up self-protection ability that is more inner and more sustainable for better survival in this media-dominated society. It can be said that the whole process is to deepen step by step and create atmosphere for all.

3.2 The Core: Remodeling Children's Subject

Children's subject is about the self-decision, self-control and autonomy they demonstrate during childhood. The subject is constructed by power and where there is objective power, there is man's subject that is constantly objectifying and even changing into an objectified subject. New media bring us to information explosion and penetrating participatory culture so that children are trapped into fast reading without enough time to digest and reflect, which then leads to the condition that children' s subject as man is in imminent danger.

One of significant expressions of the subject is critical awareness which highlights the active consciousness when people contact media and communicate and which focuses on fostering the initiative right. Critical awareness and thinking plays an important role in maintaining habits

of independent thinking when the child is "bombarded" with media information. In order to foster children's critical awareness, adults should give power to the child so that children can think and regulate the time and space of culture they are put into. Accordingly, media practice should constantly intensify its interaction and participation so that children are capable of experiencing the active influence media technology can exert on life and gradually acquire non-linear strategy to search information and utilize the same method to construct knowledge from seemingly-irrelevant fragmentary information.

When it comes to specific operations, the Center for Media Literacy of the United States used to summarize media information from five basic aspects: all information is constructed; media information is constructed by a created language abiding of its own rules; different people gain different experience from the same information; media information possesses its built-in values and views; media is made use of by organizations for profits and power. Based on the five elementary presumptions, five basic questions that children need to think about when facing media information then come into being, namely, (a) Who made this information? (b) Which creative technique has been used to draw my attention? (c) What is the possible difference compared with me when others get this information ? (d) Is there any value, lifestyle and point of view have been expressed and omitted in this information? (e) Why is this information sent? In one word, it is needed to guide children to ask questions and think when faced with media information. During the process of critically looking into media information, children are no longer absorbing information and echoing others passively, instead, they are active to exchange information and conduct dialogues towards a colorful world and multidimensional ways of surviving.

3.3 How to Do: To Value Children Experience of Media

Intense curiosity and thirsts for knowledge of children coincide with the inborn features of new media such as unlimited and open manner. Regardless of moral unbalance and behavior disobedience the child conduct when they usher into new media environment, they should not be distant from involving into this culture. Be it government, academic circle, enterprise, school, family or media, no matter from which perspective, the point of moral education or of social responsibility, adequate attention should be attached to new media experience of children and the stakeholders mentioned above have every responsibility to offer timely guidance and teach them how to voluntarily distinguish and choose step by step when the child are reaching for this "Pandora's box".

Children' s participation in new media is but not scattered in that they usually rely on cell phones and computers to establish a network to build up their own social circle, communication platform and culture display-

counter, at which they are able to create their constant media surroundings with a "children community" based on new media environment. Communities of this type can range from as big as a children forum covering internet-accessible kids nationwide, to as small as a class, or a WeChat "Circle of Friends" of several friends and QQ "friends group". With the help of such self-communication circles, the child then can relieve the gap anxiety with their parents as well as teachers and disperse negative impact brought by unequal communication with adults. It is natural that the children turn to a new way to fulfill their emotional emptiness by listening to and sharing with peers in virtual space and regain free experience by means of equal and unnoticed exchanges. This is how the child experiences and defines childhood and construct their fragmentary self-image. As for adults, they can help to provide experience freedom of new media for children on one hand, and offer some guidance and dialogues on the other, so that children are able to gain sense experience of new media and understand how they work and create. Therefore, adults can give a helping hand to make children's life all the more interesting and meaningful with a stronger sense of purpose.

CONCLUSION

New media literacy education is never a minor research topic. What is more, as information and technology is developing by leaps and bounds, evolving and improving nonstop. Form the point of man's overall development, new media literacy education is part of lifetime education and lifetime learning. As an overlapping field of basic education and media education, however, new media literacy education for children ought to maintain the consistent unity of its spirits kernel and basic ideas, that is, on the premise of holding on to laws for new media to develop and children to grow their intelligence and mind,

efforts should be made to locate the junction of the two to change "passive correction" into "active activation", and think hard when the child are experiencing new media. Besides, it is also important to stress the guide for children to critically learn new media, construct the subject to gradually grow into "proactive target audience" for the enlightening purpose of "safeguarding" childhood.

REFERENCES

Baran, S. J., & Davis, D. (2004). *Mass communication theory: Foundation, ferment, and future* (p.8). In S. L. Cao (Trans.). Beijing: Tsinghua University Press.

China Internet Network Information Center. (2014). *The 33rd Statistical Report on Development of Chinese Internet Network.*

China Internet Network Information Center. (2014) *Research Report on Online Behaviors of Chinese Teenagers in 2013*. (6).

China Youth Association for Network Development. (2013). The Third Research Report on Net Addiction. (5).

Chinese Young Pioneers Business Development Center. (2014). The 7th Research Report on Minors' Use of Internet. (7).

iResearch. (2013). Research Report on Online Game Industry for Chinese Children.

Lee, R., & Barry, W. (2012). *Networked: The new social operating system* (pp.272-274). London, England: The MIT Press.

Li, D. G. (2007). *New media literacy: New orientation of education for media literacy in the context of participatory culture* (pp.479-481). "Communication and China" Fudan Forum: Collection of Papers on Media Literacy and Citizens Literacy.

Mcluhan, E., & Zingrone, F. (2000). *Marshall McLuhan* (p.372). In D. K. He (Trans.). Nanjing: Nanjing University Press.

Tessa, J., & Denise, G. (2005). Project SMART art: A case study in elementary school media literacy and arts education. *Arts Education Policy Review, 107*(1), 25-30.