A competent participant in the new media landscape: Promoting an interdisciplinary perspective

Joanna Kędra, Anne Laajalahti, Mélodine Sommier and Panu Uotila

Abstract

Dynamic changes in media technology, society, media consumption and the economy affect the media landscape as well as the role and status of media users who are no longer passive receivers, but active media participants, and thus need to develop appropriate competence areas. We argue that using an interdisciplinary perspective within communication and journalism studies is necessary to address the scope of challenges that new media users are facing. Hence, we propose a palette of competence areas to be achieved, which would include intercultural communication, interpersonal communication and a basic knowledge of ethics, visual literacy, and source criticism abilities. While we understand these competence areas to be strongly intertwined, we elaborate each separately. Throughout this chapter, we raise issues related to (i) the pervasive and unproblematized use of the notion of culture, (ii) the increasingly interactive and interpersonal nature of the new media landscape, (iii) the importance of learning how to interpret visual content, and (iv) the ability to evaluate information accuracy and quality. We conclude that a holistic view, including, but not limited to, communication scholarship and journalism studies is required and needs to be further developed in order to define the characteristics of the new media participant. Directions for future research are suggested in the conclusion.

Keywords: intercultural communication competence; interpersonal communication competence; media participant; source criticism; visual literacy

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1 Introduction

Dynamic changes related to media technology, the economy, society, and media consumption have characterized the last two decades in the media landscape. Communication with and via media is increasingly visual and interactive, while the borders between professional and amateur news reporting are blurring. These changes influence the role and status of media users (Livingstone, 2004), who are no longer passive receivers, but instead are active participants who create and disseminate content in the global media environment. However, users may not always be fully prepared and competent to follow changes in the media landscape, which includes not only traditional media, but also social media, and digital incarnations of the press, radio, and television. Thus, it is important to determine the kinds of competence areas required to become conscious participants in the new, rapidly changing media environment.

Media education research has mostly focused on media literacy within formal education, as well as on the media usage of children and adolescents through new technologies (Buckingham, 2003). In this chapter, we argue that the new media landscape creates new challenges for all users regardless of their age. The ability to access, create, analyze, and evaluate media contents is a vital life skill for full participation in contemporary society. Thus, we argue that there is an essential need to understand the competence areas media users need to acquire during their lifespan, via either formal education or informal learning.

Interdisciplinary perspectives within communication studies are rarely applied to identify challenges dynamic changes pose in the new media environment. In this chapter, we attempt to bridge this gap by proposing a palette of competence areas that media participants should obtain. We base our argument on our expertise in particular fields of communication and journalism, where many competence areas are frequently discussed separately. We selected the following competence areas as the most crucial for participants in the contemporary media landscape: intercultural communication competence, interpersonal communication competence and a basic knowledge of ethics, visual literacy, and source criticism abilities. Furthermore, while understanding each of these competence areas as being tightly intertwined, we elaborate them individually. We conclude that any attempt to sketch the outlines of the new media participant requires a holistic view of communication scholarship (intercultural, interpersonal, and visual) and journalism studies.

2 New requirements for competent media participants

Research in communication competence has examined various life contexts such as working life, formal education, and close relationships (Greene and Burleson, 2003; Hargie, 2006). Previous studies have used different concepts, sometimes synonymously and interchangeably, but also with different meanings. In this chapter, we use the concept 'competence' to refer to (i) knowledge and understanding, (ii) skills, and (iii) motivation/attitudes that media participants need to operate in the new media landscape. Thus, following a common definition (see e.g., Spitzberg and Cupach, 2011), we consider that competence consists of (i) cognitive, (ii) behavioural, and (iii) affective dimensions which can be estimated by following two criteria of competence: effectiveness and appropriateness.

Constant dynamic changes characterize the aforementioned competence areas (i.e. intercultural communication competence, interpersonal communication competence, visual literacy, and source criticism abilities), which find a new relevance in the contemporary media environment. In light of changes in practices, novel aspects of these competence areas have emerged and created new competence requirements for media participants. Furthermore, it is no longer possible to distinguish or value one of these competence areas over any other. Instead, each should gain equal attention and be developed simultaneously with others. Thus, this chapter highlights the main features of each of these competence areas and the ways, in which they may complement one another.

2.1. Competence requirements in intercultural communication

The new media environment widens the scope of accessible content, increases opportunities for intercultural interaction, and alters communication practices (Shuter, 2012). Opportunities and challenges associated with such transformations highlight the relevance of developing intercultural communication competence. Media participants are encouraged to critically read representations in their surroundings that have been constructed as "normal" as well as reflect on their own practices and responsibility in either or both reproducing and contesting specific discourses.

The aim of intercultural communication competence is to raise awareness about categories commonly used to explain and classify people's practices. Particular attention is paid to cultural categories that increasingly punctuate discourses. In urging people to examine "*who makes culture relevant to whom in which context for which purposes*" (Piller, 2011, p. 72), intercultural communication highlights culture as constructed, performed, and permeated with

power. The unproblematized use of the term culture can be especially dangerous given the shift in discourses of racism where explicit mentions of "race" have often been replaced by cultural claims and an emphasis on cultural differences (Essed, 1991). Essentialist views presenting culture as a static attribute have contributed to these new discourses and remain popular across a variety of discourses, including those of media (Sommier, 2014). Professional media have often been criticized for providing biased representations of foreigners and minorities (Fürsich, 2010). Drawing on Edward Said's (1987) discussion of "*Orientalism*", numerous studies have explored the ways media represent certain groups as salient and different in ways that sharply contrast with the main normalized group. Urging people to be alert to the way cultural claims are used is an important initial step to acknowledge which particular stories are told and the role that people have in sustaining and revising these narratives.

Opportunities for individuals to create and select content have increased within the contemporary media environment. Intercultural communication competence encourages audiences to select texts that contrast with traditional leanings towards "*banal nationalism*" (Billig, 1995) or essentialist discourses of culture. The pervasive overlapping between the notions of culture and nation has been criticized for sustaining the status-quo concerning practices, discourses, and power structures. (Halualani, Mendoza, and Drzewiecka, 2009.) Questioning and moving past existing cultural categories is elemental to making the most of the varied content available online and to renewing the scope of "*imagined communities*" associated with professional media outlets (Anderson, 1991). The new media environment could offer more visibility to culturally-varied and culturally-sensitive content and thus contrast with one of the major pitfalls of professional media. Studies exploring the geography of news have, for instance, pointed out the overall absence of Africa from foreign news across countries (Wilke/Heimprecht/Cohen, 2012).

As promising as the new media landscape may be, it cannot translate into actual positive outcomes without developing intercultural communication competence holistically. People's attitudes and motivations are important aspects to consider given the frequent racist outbursts in social media. Occurrences of public shaming as well as explicit hate, race, homophobic, and sexist speech challenge theoretical assumptions about the post-racial or "*colour-blind*" era, and political correctness in the general public discourse (Cisneros/Nakayama, 2015). A key aspect of intercultural communication competence is the willingness to search for similarities. Most cross-cultural approaches emphasize differences between people from different backgrounds by providing causal explanations between culture and behaviour patterns that reinforce, rather than deconstruct, stereotypes. Such a solid approach constrains people into thinking of intercultural communication as communication between cultures rather than individuals. A liquid approach to intercultural communication urges people to

look for and construct similarities that mirror the complexity and diversity of their everyday experiences. (Dervin, 2011) Within the new media landscape, users can build bridges with more people than ever before by focusing on a variety of shared interests and practices. Developing one's motivation to look for commonalities can help build new de-territorialized "*imagined communities*" and counter online expressions of racism.

2.2. Competence requirements in interpersonal communication

In the new media landscape, and especially in social media, communication is increasingly "social" and interactive by definition. Opportunities for commenting on news and media user generated content and for interacting with journalists and other media participants necessitate a new kind of interpersonal communication competence between individuals, and also highlight the importance of interpersonal ethics. Media participants need to have a new kind of knowledge and understanding about possibilities and constraints of technologically-mediated interaction, a variety of interpersonal skills enabling their operation in digital platforms, the motivation to take part in new forms of online interaction, as well as positive attitudes towards new interactive technologies.

Media participants are required to possess interpersonal communication competence to be able to fully engage in the current media-saturated society and to participate in online discussions and various internet communities. Thus, interpersonal communication competence might affect their "*community integration*", which is a process through which individuals form, sustain, and join communities (Friedland, 2008). Being able to integrate in such communities is important since, according to the "*Theory of Peer Community Integration*" (Pörhölä, 2009), peer relationships and communities have an effect on an individual's psychological, physical, and social well-being. Besides spatially proximate and commonly tight internet communities, interpersonal communication competence is required when operating in more spatially dispersed and boundless networks on the internet, or persuading, and taking part in discussions in the digitalized public sphere and in relevant "*issue arenas*" (Vos, Schoemaker, and Luoma-aho, 2014), thus highlighting the importance of such competence in individuals' feelings of empowerment, equality, and democracy.

Castell (2009) contends new forms of online communication include aspects of "*mass self-communication*": communication is self-directed and personal but it may potentially be diffused throughout the world. Interpersonal communication competence is needed to understand these aspects of communication, including self-disclosure and self-presentation, both as a receiver and creator of content. Thus, media participants need to understand the blurred

lines between public and private and, for example, what they are about to share and with whom, how much personal information they are willing to reveal, and how to manage their privacy.

An ability to find and create content as well as to be present and interact with others in the new media environment also creates specific technical and practical requirements for media participants. Besides technology acceptance and technology-related interpersonal communication competence, taking part in online communication necessitates particular nonverbal communication competence. Since, as opposed to face-to-face communication, nonverbal clues are often missing or restricted in the new media environment, individuals need to have competence in expressing their own and interpreting others' emotions and intentions by using alternative means, such as emoticons. The absence or limitation of nonverbal communication and new substitutive, but not yet established, ways of communicating nonverbally online can lead to misunderstandings, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal communication competence.

Social interaction and the possibility to create as well as share contents in the new media environment also highlight the importance of understanding and the willingness to follow ethical principles, or, as Silvennoinen (2015, p. 163) phrases the idea, the desire to act as a good soul. Many researchers have emphasized the ethical aspects of interpersonal communication competence (e.g., Laajalahti, 2014; Spitzberg/Cupach, 2011). In the new media landscape, the ethical requirements include a specific 'netiquette', the correct and acceptable way of communicating on the internet, as well as an ability to plan, reflect, and estimate the ethicality of one's own conduct and communication behaviour. In addition, ethical principles include respecting others, moral responsibility, and a willingness to respect interpersonal trust. However, since hiding behind, stealing, or creating fake identities is quite easy to enact, it lays the ground for individuals to abuse netiquette. In addition, some people upset others by acting as trolls and submitting intentionally offensive and provocative posts with the aim of inciting hate responses. Also other phenomena, such as cyberbullying and harassment, highlight the importance of ethical aspects of interpersonal communication competence in the new media landscape.

2.3. Competence requirements in visual communication

The claim that we live in a visually stimulated environment is already a cliché. Contemporary learners are expected to demonstrate a high level of visual literacy, that enables them to "*understand (read), and to use (write) images, as well as to think and learn in terms of images*" (Avgerinou, 2001, p. 142). Brumberger (2011) demystifies this assumption when finding out that students

have a very poor ability to identify visual elements in photographs in an interpretation process. Furthermore, she points out that even when the interpretation's guideline was simplified, students were still unable to perform at a high level of visual literacy.

The lack of competence in visual literacy was identified in the late 1960s (Fransecky/Debes, 1972), at which time the visual literacy movement emerged. Since then, visual literacy has been addressed by scholars and educators, who wish to introduce teaching about visuals and their interpretation into the curriculum at different educational levels. Bleed (2005) indicates that because visual media have taken over our daily routines and communication, both at work and while socializing, competence in visual literacy has become essential. However, skills of reading, understanding, and using images are still taken for granted, and do not gain much attention in formal education.

Fostering visual education is also challenged by the difficulty, even impossibility, of measuring visual literacy (Avgerinou, 2001). Nevertheless, the most basic of visual literacy skills, such as the reading, interpretation, and use of images should be included in the curriculum. Visual literacy skills can be developed by a conscious creation and reflective interpretation of both still and moving images. Courses that are not entirely dedicated to working with pictures may, where pertinent, include visual analysis. In addition, informal learning can occur through more conscious everyday interaction with images, such as by attending photographic exhibitions, taking photographs, and evaluating them.

However, contemporary education should be neither purely textual nor solely visual, because as Mitchell (2005, p. 260) argues "*there are no visual media*", and thus, "*all media are mixed media*". Indeed, there are media, such as photography, which mostly involve vision. Photographs appear in a certain context, which is either textual-visual in the press or more interactive on the website. This feature of the new media environment imposes additional challenges to media participants, who should learn to identify all possible modes in media communication. Meanwhile, educators also need to adjust their teaching methods to incorporate these new dimensions.

Nowadays, images travel easily between the various platforms and through different contexts. They often gain political overtones as in the recent case of a photograph of the migrant Syrian child Aylan Al-Kurdi, who drowned in the eastern Mediterranean. Since publication, the photograph has appeared amongst a plethora of media, such as drawings, collages, and posters displayed at mass refugee crisis gatherings. The photograph gained intertextual meaning, which has not only referred to its actual content, but also earned it the status of an icon of the refugee crisis. This example shows the need for media participants not only to view, but also critically approach images, or even create related content (as in the case of drawing competitions based on the photo-

graph of the drowned child). Interpreting and creating visual (or multimodal) media artefacts, and thinking in terms of images requires competence in visual literacy. This need should receive more attention in contemporary education, because "*if we accept that visual literacy is an essential ability for the 21st century, we must teach our students to be visually literate, just as we teach them to be verbally literate*" (Brumberger, 2011, p. 46).

2.4 Competence requirements in source criticism

The internet, and social media in particular, contains fewer control guidelines, information assessments, and verification methods than traditional media. The amount of information and the speed of its diffusion have increased substantially. Everybody can be a producer of the information, and also deliberate or accidental disseminator of false information and rumours. The absence of filters and control mechanisms on the internet leaves the responsibility of source criticism and evaluation with the media consumer. Social media and user generated content does not necessarily increase our understanding of the surrounding world, because social media platforms, like Twitter and Facebook, favour the short format and strong opinions without context and proper argumentation.

Apart from social media, another changing element in the new media landscape is the way advertising and content marketing adapts the formats and trustworthiness of professional journalistic content. Traditional journalistic normative values like accuracy, balance, authenticity, accountability, and autonomy are now blurring with new kinds of media content as content marketing, brand journalism, and native advertising are becoming increasingly popular both in media production and media usage (Zerfass et al., 2015). The ability to evaluate information accuracy and balance has gained importance, because commercial companies as well as nations and governments involved in media and propaganda wars are trying to win over users to their side (Silvennoinen, 2015).

Due to the risk of inaccurate or biased information available online, competence in evaluating online information quality and the ability to practice source criticism are core skills for every media user (Metzger et al., 2003). Source criticism is an essential part of both the journalistic work process and journalists' education. However, the audience also need to be capable of asking the essential question of source criticism for every media content: What is this claim based on and how is it argued? (McKane, 2014). Hence, we argue that to be able to participate and communicate as a well-informed member of the information society one must have the ability and motivation to conduct source criticism.

A key competence in source criticism is the ability to evaluate the objectivity of certain information. Westerståhl (1983, p. 403) defines objectivity as "*adherence to certain norms and standards*". Westerståhl's understanding of objectivity includes four basic concepts: truth, relevance, balance/non-partisanship, and neutral presentation. Measuring truth and relevance enables an estimate of the factuality of the information, and by measuring balance and neutral presentation it is possible to estimate the impartiality of the information. Objectivity consists of factuality and impartiality.

Hayes, Singer, and Ceppos (2007, pp. 264-275) present ten key questions that can help citizens determine the trustworthiness and usefulness of the information available to them:

> 1) Do I want news and opinion that exclusively agree with my views? 2) Do I want news mixed with opinion? 3) Do I care whether news and opinion are clearly distinguished from one another? 4) Does my source of information facilitate public discourse? 5) Does this source break news itself or merely aggregate? 6) Are some articles based on first-hand observation rather than secondary sourcing? 7) Is my source of news transparent? 8) Are the sources used in articles clearly identified? 9) Are all sides asked to comment within an article? 10) Are errors corrected promptly and prominently?

One aspect of journalism is to unequivocally distinguish between facts and opinions. Since the journalist must undertake a choice of context in which to place the facts, the choice of how to frame the story cannot be anything but subjective (Wien, 2005). We argue that objectivity is a goal that journalists should try to achieve, but can never wholly attain. Source criticism is a technique to evaluate the proximity of content to objectivity. The new media landscape is blurring the lines between journalists and other content producers, which makes source criticism more difficult and more important.

3 Conclusion

In this chapter, we mapped the competence areas that are crucial in the new media environment. By combining various communication perspectives (intercultural, interpersonal, visual) and journalism studies, this chapter aimed at enhancing our understanding of new competence requirements brought about by dynamic changes in the new media landscape. However, further interdisciplinary research, including other fields such as education or information and communication technologies, is still needed to better understand these requirements. Such a holistic view could help (i) describe and evaluate recent developments in media usage, (ii) identify users' practices and needs, and (iii) provide concrete tools to respond to emerging challenges in the new media environment.

In this chapter, our focus was solely on competence areas that individual media participants need. Future research should also explore competence areas that journalists and other communication experts need to successfully operate in the new media landscape. However, communication competence should also be approached as a shared and networked area that is co-created in the relationships between individuals, groups, communities, and nations (Laajalahti, 2014).

Future studies could add more depth to this topic by looking beyond what competence areas need to be acquired and explore how to teach and learn them. Studies should aim at developing concrete strategies for participants of different age groups to build relevant competence areas through both formal and informal learning. Differences between generations are important since the phase of life in which individuals start to use new media forms and devices also shape their attitudes towards them. Thus, it is necessary to also elaborate what kind of media education adults need and who teaches them. (See e.g., Matikainen, 2015.) Since the media landscape keeps evolving, research needs to constantly address emerging challenges and related competence requirements.

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