

# Satisfying the Communication Needs of Elementary School Students from Vojvodina<sup>1</sup>

**PhD. Dubravka Valić Nedeljković**

*Professor Faculty of Philosophy, Novi Sad  
Serbia*

**Stefan Janjić**

*PhD candidate  
Faculty of Philosophy, Novi Sad  
Serbia*

## Abstract

*The aim of the long-term project called "Children and Media", lasting for eight years now, is to notice the trends in the development of communication needs both in the public and private communication of elementary school students at the end of their early childhood (fourth grade, approximately 10 years old) and at the end of the elementary education (eighth grade, approximately 14 years old) in the cities of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in the Republic of Serbia. The basic instrument is a questionnaire that contains 35 questions distributed in four thematic groups (media, way of communication, informing on the Internet, ways to spend free time). The questions are semi-open or closed and, based on the answers, it can be concluded with high degree of certainty that children meet the communication needs. So far, more than 3,000 students have been interviewed in a total of 67 elementary schools from Vojvodina, and the survey was anonymous. The students have task to select one or more answers out of those offered, or to offer their own answers in the provided area. The results indicate that children and teenagers meet their information needs more often and more intensely with digital than traditional media, and that the field of interest for information in this population group is narrowed down to entertainment.*

**Keywords:** *media literacy, elementary school students, communication needs, Vojvodina, media, internet*

## 1. Theoretical framework

New digital media technologies have already largely led to socio-educational changes, although it has been no more than a quarter of a century since they have

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become part of everyday life of the millennials and their parents. Therefore, those who, at the end of the twentieth century (1997), entered the virtual space-time are already parents today, whose descendants also spend a large part of their free time in cyberspace as "digital natives", which "are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to 'serious' work" (Prensky 2001: 2).

Understanding their communication needs and the way in which they receive and send information in the private sphere (family, friends), as well the public one (school, extracurricular activities) can greatly help in creating modern, appropriate to their needs, curriculums at all levels of education, from pre-school to higher education.

The new communication culture – cyberculture – has been marked by still unexplored opportunities provided by digitization. Conversion of consumers (all ages) from the analog world to prosumers (millennials and rarely their parents) in digital space-time is a new way of meeting communication needs unknown to the world of traditional media. From the passive towards the active use of media, historically, there has been very little time in which today we have parallel worlds of digital natives (millennials, the so-called Z generation), digital migrants (parents of millennials) and analogue consumers (elderly members of the family), where the first ones use digital media (primarily social networks and video games) and analogue (most often television), and the last ones almost exclusively meet their communication needs by watching television and reading printed newspapers out of habit.

In recent decades, the world has paid great attention to research on how children use the media. It was noticed that uncritical media consumption in the long run affects not only the psychophysical development of children, but also the cognitive development, the formation of their opinion and attitudes about the world in which they live. Only the most basic review of the available literature, which we recommend to the academic community, indicates the field of interest of the scientific public at the beginning of the third millennium when this topic is at question. Television is still a favorite form of children's media around the world, so Dafna Lemisch (2008) offered to the expert and scientific auditorium an outstanding list of relevant papers dealing with children's attitude towards television. Katalin Lystik (2010) dealt with global television for children, and Michael Z. Newman (2010) with new digital media and already a historical series for children "Sesame Street" that changed the perspective of television production for youth. Bill Oskerby (2004) questioned the issue of youth media in the context of the third millennium. We also refer to an outstanding thematic collection of papers devoted to children, young people and media from various aspects of media use by Strasburger C. Victor, Barbara J. Wilson, Amy B. Jordan (2009). Valkenburg, P. M., and Van der Voort, T.H.A., were looking into positive influence of television on creativity. (1994). Mary Jane Kehily focused on the crisis of childhood and the influence of the media. The Internet, social networks and new media have been the focus of many authors since the beginning of the third millennium (Elias, Nelly and Dafna Lemish 2009). At the end of this reduced list pointing to different research areas that fall into the scientific field devoted to children and the media, it is worth mentioning that, precisely because of the results that the researchers achieved, the first serious work on the necessity of the media literacy of children emerged in the early nineties of the twentieth century (Glashoff 1992).

There is not much research in Serbian scientific literature that deals with children and media from different perspectives. We can highlight a few very relevant authors: from a communication viewpoint of children and the media, more precisely from the viewpoint of the presentation of children in the media, we have insight from Nada Korac (1992, 2000, 2002), on children and the advertising of products from Dejan Prnjat, the role of media in the development and fostering of creativity of young people from Vrhovac Pantovic (1998), realization of communication needs of children from Dubravka Valic Nedeljkovic (2001a, 2011b, 2012, 2013a, 2013 b, 2017), the influence of media display of violence on children from Ognjen Radovic. The *Code for Media Workers in Reporting on Children and for Children* was prepared by Prvoslav Plavsic in cooperation with the Friends of Children Association in 1993. Unfortunately, this rulebook did not come to life within the editorial offices as a set of general binding ethical behavior rules for children reporting and content creation for this target group.

## 2. Goal

The goal of this longitudinal study is primarily continuous monitoring of the development of communication needs of students in Vojvodina (fourth and eighth grade) in the long term (for now, eight years) to find out the extent to which new media technologies contribute to the socio-educational changes. The aim is also to enable students to master the entire process of media research from the questionnaire preparation, through questioning, data entry into the database, data analysis and writing of scientific research papers, which is also part of functional literacy. The aim of the research is to offer results that will be the basis for advocacy to civil society organizations (such as Novi Sad School of Journalism) and representatives of scientific and professional public for pressure on decision-makers to introduce media literacy as part of the functional literacy in the new digital age. The aim of this very paper is to present research data for 2017 and to put its interpretation into a wider context of public advocacy for introducing media literacy into the educational system in Serbia.

## 3. Method and corpus

A long-term research on ways of meeting the communication needs of children from Vojvodina, conducted by students of the Department of Media Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Novi Sad since 2010, within the elective course *Children and the Media* under the mentorship of prof. PhD Dubravka Valic Nedeljkovic, is unique in its scope, length and continuity in the territory of the Western Balkans.

The research is based on a questionnaire that is conducted by students of the Department of Media Studies with fourth graders and eighth graders in various elementary schools in Vojvodina.

The results of the research are a good basis for understanding the way children collect and send information during the time they spend at school and within their free time, that is, in private and public communication with peers, family and the wider environment, but also as a basis for developing a new strategy in education, i.e. new

media strategy that is planned for 2019. Just a reminder that for the first time in the *Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in Serbia until 2016* and the *Action Plan*, our practice clearly identifies the need for media literacy of children, teaching staff, media professionals and citizens. Projects of the Novi Sad School of Journalism (NNS) are the basis for achieving this goal.

The questionnaire was identical for every research year, as well as 2017, whose results are presented in this paper. It contains 35 questions distributed into four thematic groups (the media they use, the way of communication, entertainment, spending their free time). Two types of answers were offered:

(a) Closed (select one of the offered options).

Example: How often do you watch TV? Never/rarely, sometimes, often, no answer.

(b) Open

Example: What is your favorite TV channel: \_\_\_\_\_.

Students have individually entered the data into a common database (online interface for entering data into a common database, an online interface for result searching, an online interface for displaying results), created by the IT team from the Media Studies department for this research. The database contains data for the last six years that students used to while working on their scientific research papers.

The total corpus in the last five years consists of more than 70 primary schools in Vojvodina, 2870 students, of which 1445 were girls and 1425 boys; 1314 eighth graders and 1556 fourth graders. The corpus for 2017 is 708 subjects, out of which 356 are fourth grade students, and 352 are eighth grade students. The surveys were conducted in November and December of 2017 in elementary schools in Novi Sad, Backa Palanka, Becej, Begec, Beska, Kula, Sremska Kamenica, Sremski Karlovci, Srpski Miletic, Turija, Vrbas and Zrenjanin.

The target group (10 and 14 years old) has been selected so that it is cognitively fully capable of understanding media messages and at its own discretion to select the content and the way in which it will be consumed. At the same time, it is also the time of childhood independence building because the end of the early childhood ends and teen age starts (Piaget, 1977).

## 4. Hypotheses

Within this research we will set up two starting hypotheses.

h1: Children and teenagers meet their information needs more often and more intensely with digital than traditional media.

h2: The field of interest for information is narrowed down to entertainment.

## 5. Results

When we take into account the differences in media habits of children in the fourth and eighth grade, we must bear in mind several factors: (1) younger children are under the strictest control of their parents, which is reflected in both the control of their spending of free time and access to money; (2) younger children are not accustomed to long texts and feature-length audiovisual content; (3) children's interest, according to

their age, are different at the threshold of the teenage age and at the beginning of the adolescent age.

The results of the questionnaire show that the newspaper attracts the attention of a small number of subjects. Almost 63% of students said that they never read them or read them rarely, and only 8.9% chose answer "often". The causes of such results require a deeper analysis, but it can be assumed that children follow the general trend according to which print media is becoming less popular, in comparison to new, electronic ones.

Unlike digital content that is provided free of charge (chat applications, social networks, content on YouTube) or paid within a larger package (digital television), the newspapers are relatively more expensive and are not "at our fingertips". In addition, there is also a question of quality of the youth media in Serbia, since among the ten newspapers that most subjects usually list as favorites, only four were intended for children.

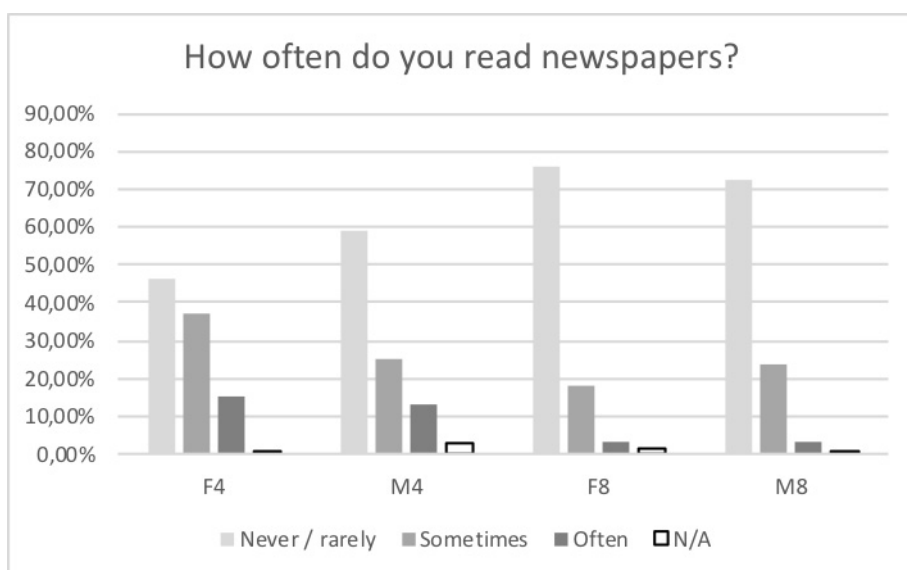


Chart 1. The letter indicates the gender; the number indicates the grade.

Judging by the results, the most read newspaper is "Mali Zabavnik" (109 subjects say it is their favorite), which is a biweekly magazine who has children aged six to twelve as its target group. Followed by daily newspapers of the tabloid type "Blic" (104) and "Kurir" (31), teen magazines "Hey" (27) and "Bravo" (23), infotainment weekly magazine with a long tradition "Zabavnik" (23), tabloids "Vecernje novosti" (21), "Informer" (20) and "Alo" (17), and in the 10th place is the regional daily magazine "Dnevnik" (15).

If we observe only fourth graders, out of 356 subjects, 100 of them read "Mali zabavnik", so that would make the next most popular newspaper - the daily "Blic" magazine, have only a third of that (33). If we observe only eighth graders, 352 subjects confirm that the tabloids are the most interesting ones - in the first place was "Blic" (71), and in the second one "Kurir" (26). The most popular teenage newspaper is "Hey", but even that one had only 5,7% of subjects reading it.

Particularly worrying is the fact that a large number of children read tabloids that violate professional standards daily ("Informer", "Alo", "Blic"). According to the Press Council, as well as according to research by the "Fake News Tragač" ([www.fakenews.rs](http://www.fakenews.rs)), website for the detection of fake news in Serbia, these media are wide spreading disinformation and hate speech on a daily basis, but sensational content and extremely low prices make them very popular. It can be assumed that children in this case adjust to the media habits of their parents, and read the newspapers they buy every day.

Subjects are more inclined to radio than the press - the radio program is often listened to by 29% of the subjects, while a third has never listened to it or listened to it rarely. However, while in printed media we can notice some thematic and qualitative diversity, the image is quite uniform in results for radio stations, indicating that children are almost exclusively listening to music radio stations. Channels devoted to speech programs, cultural and educational content were selected by less than 20 subjects, which is especially discouraging if we take into account public media services that invest in resources for the production of children's and youth programs, while Radio-Television of Vojvodina even launched an online youth radio called Oradio in 2015. Viewed separately, radio stations are more likely to be listened to by fourth graders: 41% of younger subjects say that they frequently listen to radio, while only 17% of students in the eighth grade gave the same answer.

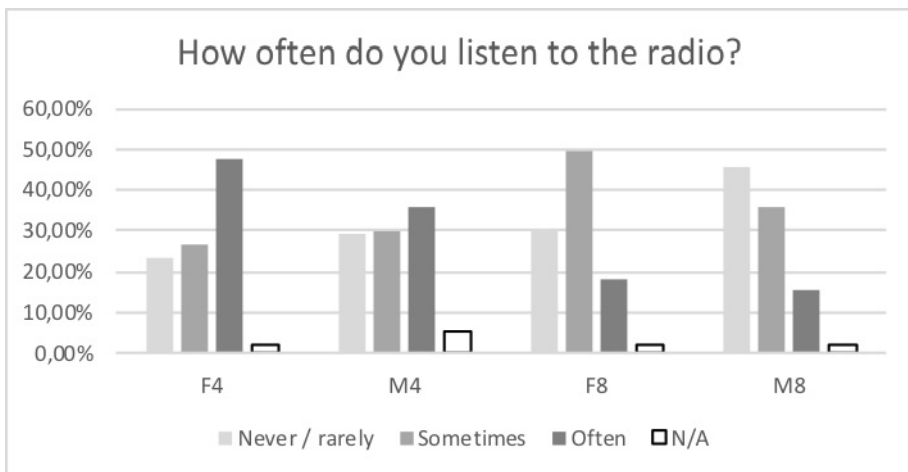
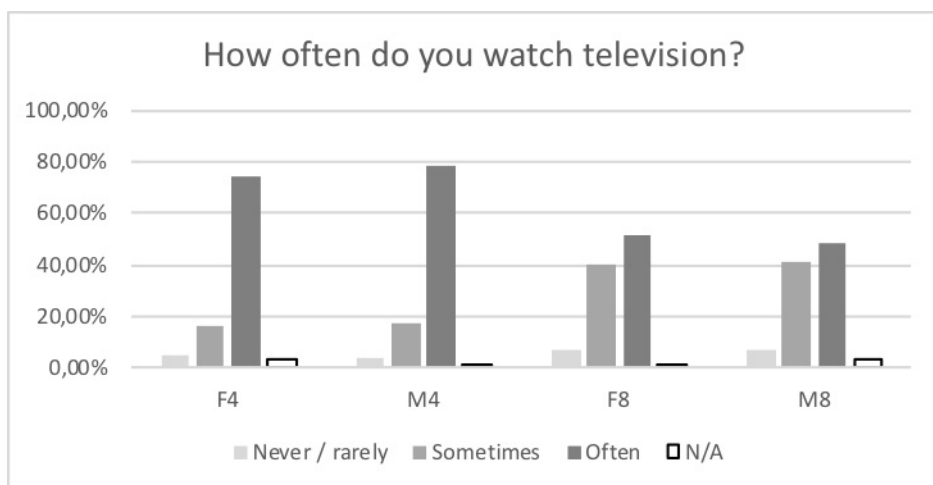


Chart 2. The letter indicates the gender; the number indicates the grade.

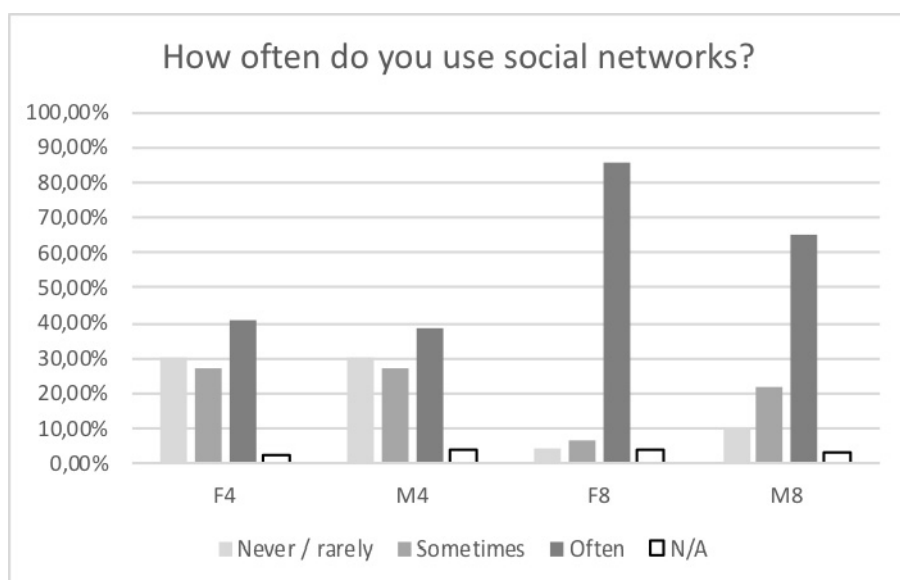
Although traditional television today has ubiquitous competition on various digital platforms, it remains popular among the younger population. Less than 6% of subjects state that they do not watch TV or rarely watch, and the answer "often" appears in slightly less than two thirds of cases (63%).



*Chart 3. The letter indicates the gender; the number indicates the grade.*

Overall, the most popular channels according to subjects' answers are Nickelodeon's children's channel (255 students listed it as their favorite), followed by two commercial television channels with mostly entertaining content "Prva" (117) and "O2" (61), sports channel "Sport Club" 46), TV Pink (37), whose program is largely based on reality shows, and only then the public service Radio-Television of Serbia (36). The list of ten most frequently mentioned TV stations is rounded off by another sports channel "Arena Sport" (30), a channel for children "Minimax" (29) and two satellite television channels - "Discovery" (24) and "Fox" (21). Again, same as in the case of newspapers, only two or three out of these ten media are intended for children and teenagers. Popular commercial stations, and especially Pink, based their content on controversial reality shows that include content which can harm the spiritual and mental development of the child. It is broadcasted late at night, or even throughout the day. Observed separately, students in the fourth grade most often watch "Nickelodeon" (212), and far behind are the commercial stations such as "O2" (29) and "Prva" (26). Eighth graders, who rarely watch television, are likely to replace it with video-content from other digital platforms, listed "Prva" (88), "Nickelodeon" (43) and "O2" (35) as their favorite channels.

A special segment of the analysis is dedicated to the use of social networks and applications for communication. Although the minimum age for registration to these networks is 13 years old (for WhatsApp 16, and for a YouTube channel as much as 18), the results show that fourth graders already have set up accounts on those sites.



*Chart 4. The letter indicates the gender; the number indicates the grade.*

In total, 18% of subjects state that they rarely or never visit social networks, but if we focus only on students of the eighth grade, this percentage drops to 6.8%. Until just a few years ago, Facebook was unbeatable in the social networking market, the results of this study show that Instagram is far more interesting to children - it is used by 371 subjects and Facebook by only 102. Twitter, Tumblr and Myspace were selected by less than ten subjects, and among applications for communication, Viber, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp are most commonly used. Observed individually, despite the age limit, a third of fourth graders and 3/4 of eighth graders have Instagram accounts. Facebook, as the second most popular social network, attracts 9% of students in the fourth and 20% of students in the eighth grade.

YouTube is often visited by as many as 82% of the subjects, with eight graders having a slight advantage, and where less than 2% of the subjects state that they never visit this website or visit it rarely. If we look at the type of channels most frequently visited by children, the most popular channels are musical (listed by 290 of them), then vlogs (232), gaming channels (94), and at the fourth place are educational ones (56). This information tells us to ask ourselves how often do children use the Internet to prepare their homework. That the Internet is primarily used for entertainment is confirmed by the fact that less than ten percent of subjects (9.2%) use the network for learning and homework. The most common online education resources for students in the fourth grade are YouTube (59) and Wikipedia (57), while for the eight grade students we got the same websites, only in the reverse order - Wikipedia (107) and YouTube (29).

## 6. Conclusion

As "digital natives", children feel more free and more natural in the digital world than in the world of traditional media. This is also reflected in the results of this



research, according to which, print media among children are far less popular than the Internet and television. Adapted to multimedia content, children can perceive newspapers as an anachronistic medium - more readily available and more expensive than digital content, which, in addition, has very limited feedback capabilities. The "letters to the editor" from children and teen magazines can not in any way compete with the speed of communication on the Internet, where messages and comments are sent within seconds. At the same time, children as prosumers want to participate in content creation. Inclusion is one of the basic preconditions of interest for certain media content, so it is therefore quite clear why YouTube vlogs are far more popular than newspapers and radio stations.

At the beginning of the paper, two hypotheses have been made and both could be considered confirmed. The first proposes that children and teenagers meet their information needs more often and more intensely with digital than traditional media, while the second one proposes that the field of interest for information in this population group is narrowed down to entertainment content. Indeed, if we look at the media that the subjects state as their favorite, we can see that there are very few of them to whom children and young people are the primary target group. It can be assumed that students follow the media habits of their parents, so they read newspapers purchased by their fathers or mothers, and watch television channels that were chosen by older people. Such trends can be considered negative for two reasons:

1) Children consume contents that are unsuitable for their age, and in a large number of cases they can be harmful. This particularly applies to tabloids in which fake news and disinformation spread every day, with unhindered discrimination against vulnerable groups and including hate speech. On the other hand, popular reality shows are broadcast throughout the day on national television stations, with uninterrupted transmission of curses, physical conflicts, sex scenes and other vulgarities. Since the Electronic Media Regulatory Authority does not sanction this type of violation of the Law on Public Information and Media (2014), the parents have to be their children's "gatekeepers" and influence the selection of content.

2) Quality media content remains hidden because they are difficult to access, expensive or insufficiently interesting. Public services are investing heavily in content production for children and teenagers, but only a negligible number of members of this target group states that they follow this type of content. A positive exception is the popularity of the byweekly "Mali Zabavnik" magazine, which is mainly read by younger students. The older ones, after they outgrow the "Mali Zabavnik", do not search for some kind of high-quality alternative, but use media with trivial content. Since with younger subjects, the parental control, when there is one, of their free time is more strict, the media that children are spending their free time on is of much better quality.

Considering the historical, socio-political and cultural context in which young people in Serbia are growing up, burdened by the legacy of the '90s, as well as post-transitional everyday life, media literacy is a necessary condition for the development of their identities through the overcoming of the methodology of critical thinking towards all the contents that surround them on a daily basis, whether they come from school, after-school activities, peer groups, families, media spheres, and entertainment world.

In the public advocacy campaign for the introduction of media literacy in the educational process at all levels as well as in the implementation of seminars for educators Media literacy has been especially engaged in the last ten years by the NSSJ

association who uses research data from the mentioned project of the Media Studies Department of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad as the basis for acting within a complex media literacy campaign in Serbia and the region.

At the same time, decision makers intensified their activities in 2017 contributing to public advocacy and pilot projects for the introduction of media literacy in secondary schools in Serbia. It should be noted that NSSJ is the leading Think Tank Organization in the Western Balkans region, which, besides mentioned, has other, different project activities that focus on media literacy. Of course, this is not enough: we believe that the cooperation of various organizations in the field of governmental and non-governmental sector in the implementation of media literacy at all levels in the educational system of Serbia should be much more extensive and tighter because it is the only effective model for implementing this type of functional literacy.

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