



The Most Important Thing Is to
Find a Way How to Teach Media
Education in an Appropriate Way
Interview with Jan Jiráček

ABSTRACT

The interview is focused on the key issues concerning the development of media literacy in the Czech Republic as well as the entire world. It focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of media education within the conditions of Czech education, while considering the limits as well as challenges, which teachers and academics trying to get students acquainted with the media world have to face. Important parts of media literacy policies are the conceptual, methodological and theoretical materials that can have a significant impact on the successful establishment of media education in both school and out-of-school education. The interview highlights that even such conceptual materials and tools are subject to rapid obsolescence and it is necessary to continuously innovate and complement them, so that they can reflect the very dynamic development of the media as well as constant changes in the preferences or behaviour of the audience members. These arguments should also be taken into account when preparing future journalists and other media professionals, as well as in dealing with the issue of hybrid threats and fake news.

KEY WORDS

Media education. Media literacy. Fake news. Journalism. Media studies.



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Branislav Oprala (B. O.): Media education in the Czech Republic (likewise in Slovakia) does not have a long tradition. We can only talk about its systematic development, concrete projects and activities since the 1990s. Although this issue is relatively short in the conditions of the Czech educational system, it has managed to establish itself in a form that can serve as an example of good practice in other countries as well. How do you see the strengths and weaknesses of the current introduction (or establishment) of media literacy in your country?

Ján Jiráček: Remember, that the reflections on media education in the Czech-Slovak environment are considerably older: in the world, Jan Amos Komenský is often remembered as the first thinker who realized the importance of media education. Also in the inter-war period, the magazine *Duch novin*, which had the column “*Noviny ve škole*”, was published. Otherwise, I think it is appropriate to divide this problem into two spheres.

One sphere is what place media education has in the education system, and the second sphere - how it is actually done. In the institutional sphere, the position of media education is quite good, it has the character of a cross-sectional theme, it is compulsory for elementary schools and grammar schools. It also appears in secondary education, although it does not act as a cross-sectional topic. As a cross-sectional topic it can be implemented as a separate subject or a set of topics that go through several areas or as a teaching project. In my opinion, the primary problem of media education in the Czech Republic is that there is no pedagogical or other university that would educate media education teachers. You can not simply meet a pedagogue who has an approbation for teaching, for example, history and media education. We know several postgraduate courses at pedagogical faculties that cover the teaching of similar media subjects, but it is not an approbation.

B. O.: Speaking about approbation, what kind of teacher is closest to teaching this area?

Ján Jiráček: If I can assume, based on my own experience, this issue is connected with civic education, Czech language or history. I have also met a teacher of art education, who is close to visual culture. As I said, a lot depends on the enthusiasm of a particular pedagogue.

Pavel Bielik (P. B.): Is that enough?

Ján Jiráček: Obviously, it has its pitfalls. I do not want to generalize, but the risk lies in the fact that the enthusiast is, in the best sense of word, in a certain way based and hardly let his attitudes to be taken. He often approaches the media as something harmful and wants to widen the distance of pupils. He may be an enthusiast, but he does not have the proper approbation to

know what the media is all about. The second risk is very similar. Various non-profit organizations are involved in courses of methodological material which have unbiased and edifying goals, but sometimes they offer their agenda which they promote. As I have mentioned, there is a lack of education, but also a unified educational media policy is missing.

P. B.: How does the Czech and Slovak Republic compare with foreign countries in media education?

Ján Jiráček: It is really different. If we want to look at examples of good practice, media education in Germany is probably well developed. Its systematic foundations were laid down during the postwar period as a part of the democratization process in western Germany. There it is already a part of mother tongue teaching and the traditional core is the critical reading of texts. Very interesting is also in Scandinavia, where there is a center that produces a number of expert methodical materials and is part of a certain tradition. Others are in France, where the activities are more fragmented, but at French schools there is a newspaper reading week once a year, but it gives the space for hidden propagation of publishers. We would find it difficult to find a single united element, but if we look for something that links these examples, media education is more successful where it has a certain research and academic background.

P. B.: Would it not be appropriate for teachers to learn in these more advanced countries?

Ján Jiráček: Some of them do. Perhaps it will sound old-fashioned, but media education is closely linked to culture and language. I can imagine a common learning platform for Czech and Slovak teachers, but inspiration would have to be drawn from Western countries like Germany or Great Britain. It is therefore necessary to create our own system with culture and language in the country in which we live. I'm convinced.

B. O.: At what stage is the preparation of media education today, or its teaching at elementary and secondary schools?

Ján Jiráček: There have been several attempts to teach this subject, but no one has ever done so. It is even now happening in our country that a large part of universities are re-accredited because of a new law. Apparently there are projects to open a media education program, but I do not know their phases.

B. O.: At traditional pedagogical faculties?

Ján Jiráček: Yes. I think that's where it belongs. The most important thing is to begin to develop a way how to teach it, and according to my observations, it is neither successful in our country nor in Slovakia so far. Didactics is simply lacking, even though its seeds appear in textbooks and workbooks.

B. O.: So this didactics should be developed by specific faculties.

Ján Jiráček: Yes, in cooperation with teachers. I assume that didactics should be created in this way.

P. B.: You were one of the leaders who stood at the beginning of the introduction of media education into the Czech educational environment. What was the initial motivation that led you to address the development of media literacy of Czech pupils, students, or other target groups of the population?

Ján Jiráček: The first motivation was that our experience from abroad taught us that it is simply missing here. After all, in the terms of freedom of speech and independent media, it is an entirely natural way to cultivate demand. By cultivating demand, you are educating users to be critical and you indirectly influence demand. In my opinion, media education is a way of improving the production of the media itself. Today, it is clear that we should also think of some other

groups, of children of pre-school age. They are already regular users of the media at an early age. A similar problem also arises in relation to the education of seniors.

B. O.: How should preparation at pre-school age look?

Ján Jiráček: Preschools are undeniably important in this. For example, we can educate them in the form of games that speak in the language of the media. Once upon a time there was also an experiment in Slovakia, a project of ovce.sk about Internet traps. An elegant solution that I always have been jealous of.

B. O.: Is there anything similar in the Czech Republic?

Ján Jiráček: I am not aware of anything similar.

P. B.: Together with other colleagues, you have been involved in the preparation of a number of conceptual, methodical and theoretical materials of media education in the context of the Czech education system. However, many of these materials are older, more specifically about 10 years ago, when the use of media by the audience had a significantly different character than today. We mean, in particular, that traditional media - such as radio, television, and print - play a much less dominant role in the lives of children and young people than in the recent past. Do you think that the legislative initiatives, projects and educational practices in the Czech Republic can adequately respond to these challenges?

Ján Jiráček: Initially, preparation was made with traditional mass media such as television, radio, or periodicals. It also relied on their internet equivalents, but it is still considered the most important model of communication that has a mass character and people are exposed to it.

P. B.: Did it not count with interactivity?

Ján Jiráček: Original media education was set to teach people to “live with the media”. Today, the situation has shifted, people have to learn to “live in the media”. There has also been a change in the concept of private and public, information and disinformation. As soon as it was set up, it became outdated. Now there is a fundamental debate on the future of all cross-cutting themes, including media education, so there is a chance to conceptually adjust it and adapt to the dramatic changes that have occurred. A good starting point for us is that in the meantime we have developed the so-called “recommended expected outcomes” of media education, which are, however, more contemporary and reflect the shift in communication technologies. In the meantime, an innovated Audiovisual Law has been formulated to suggest that the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting should monitor the level of media literacy of the population.

P. B.: So should it be the media literacy supervisor?

Ján Jiráček: We talk about research, reporting, and so on. However, this indirectly affects media education itself, because the reflection will get a message on media literacy and the public may ask: “And what next?”

P. B.: Do you perceive it negatively?

Ján Jiráček: From my point of view, it is a positive thing.

P. B.: What are the results?

Ján Jiráček: There were results in 2011 and 2016. They are not surprising, they only show a shift away from traditional and greater interest in Internet media. At the same time, they are talking about less awareness of the risks of using them.

B. O.: Have there been any changes in research?

Ján Jiráček: Of course, but they are not fatal. I can mention one major difference. In 2011, children were more literate than their parents in terms of media use. The year 2016 showed that children learn to control new media from their parents. It seems that the generation of digitally literate parents, who already have children and at the same time keep up with the development of the media is growing.

B. O.: Is the big impact of the Internet media only the problem of our generation?

Ján Jiráček: I am afraid that in this direction we cannot measure the impact, so I cannot answer your question. From a high degree of probability, it can be said that it has become a key organizing principle of everyday life.

B. O.: We assume they will still be transforming.

Ján Jiráček: There will probably be a growth of virtuality. If there is no significant breakthrough, development will go in that direction.

P. B.: As people from the academic world who are in the field of media and media studies, we strongly believe that the media (especially social media) are becoming the key factors of socialization of an individual, affecting his / her identity, lifestyle, patterns of behavior and quality of life in general. Do you think the solution is the effort of some colleagues to eliminate these factors and “protect” the population from the “malignant” media impact? Or is it a more efficient and effective way to teach young people and adolescents to better orient themselves in the Internet and mobile communications, to take advantage of the existing opportunities and opportunities they offer?

Ján Jiráček: I feel that media education should teach both of these things. Especially today, in a social networking environment, the user has to censor what he publishes to protect himself from possible criminal prosecution. People can show off a lot by regular publishing of private photos, which can be misused by the others. They need to learn how to communicate with the media and use the communication methods to fulfill their goals and enrich their lives.

P. B.: We know that the content and focus of the academic department of media studies is a relatively dynamic phenomenon. Academic research and educational activities at universities must promptly respond to current changes and trends in the media environment, in the nature of media communication or technological innovation that are associated with it. Do you think that Czech academics moving in this area can respond flexibly to these challenges?

Ján Jiráček: It is obvious that the media education department cannot ignore the transformations of media communication. At virtually all schools involved in this area we can find courses of new media. But what is more complicated - and James W. Carey has pointed out - we are obliged not to be fascinated by new media and try to interpret them as a result of a certain development. Once Mark Poster provocatively wrote the technooptimist publication *The Second Media Age*. He spoke about the fact that the old mass media, which usurped us so far, are now gone and new media are being launched in which we are all free. The book, however, comes from the 1990s, so it is time to get rid of it and to realize the continuity of development. And many Czech academics can respond to these challenges of new technologies. We have people like Petr Lupač or Jaroslav Švelch, who have been able to thematize this new field, but if we were to talk about the interpretation of continuity, I think that no one has found it yet. We move in old or new media, but we do not seek connections.



B. O.: Does the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic have a specialized media department?

Ján Jiráček: We know a number of projects that are being carried out at the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences.

B. O.: You have been active in university education throughout your life and have been involved in the upbringing of future journalists and media workers. If you compare job seekers in the media who have been preparing for their profession, for example, 20 years ago, and current students, where do you see the biggest differences?

Ján Jiráček: Changes in higher education have attracted people who want to study, whether or not they are employed in the field in the future. Students studying journalism, who do not want to be journalists. Students in media studies who do not want to work in the media or analyze them. In my opinion, Czech university education has become massive, virtually everyone gets into university, and so it becomes only a phase in the natural development of man. This is one of the main reasons why the link to the study department is very loose. I really hope this is still not the case in medicine. I do not want to be on the operating desk of a doctor who does not care how the operation will go.

P. B.: So is it counterproductive to accept tens or hundreds students within one year?

Ján Jiráček: Yes it is. The value of study, which was formerly a benefit, is lost - with a university degree you also had gained a certain social status. Success at university was not for granted, and one who successfully passed it knew, after graduation, that he had achieved something. If 70% of grade population graduate from a high school with a diploma, the value and also the motivation to get the title is lost. Moreover, the department of media studies is, to a large extent, a continuation of general education in terms of strategic subjects.

P. B.: Is the social value of the study of mass communication and related disciplines decreasing?

I would not have specified it for one department or group. The value of college studies is decreasing in general.

B. O.: Should students not find the motivation to reach better results in case of study sections with more general focus and thus greater competition by themselves?

Ján Jiráček: Sociologist Jan Keller from Ostrava has an interesting metaphor. He claims that formerly a university education was a social elevator. Middle-school layers let their children study, as education was a guarantee that they would improve in the future - they would move to a higher social class. Over time, as university education became more accessible and more massive, Keller found it to be a kind of social security layer in which students already had a place. Nowadays, according to him, university education is no longer a guarantee that the child will not fall into the lower layer, and the guarantee of social improvement that has been associated with college studies in the past no longer exists at all.

P. B.: Paradoxically, the European Union has recommendations for individual member states on how many people should be in the university-educated population. It defends a gradual increase in the number of university educated people and builds on the arguments of building values such as increasing general education or developing the principles of ethics and humanity. Do not you agree with that?

Ján Jiráček: I am not sure whether this is a wise politics from the European Union. I would call it the recognition of lowering the value of primary and secondary education. We are not able to prepare sufficiently viable, qualified and well-informed people at elementary and secondary schools and therefore we have to try to teach them. The real result is the degradation of university. I personally studied at a time when college-educated people in the population were 6,5%.

B. O.: Would you call the 6,5% of the population with a university diploma of your time an intellectual elite?

Ján Jiráček: In particular, one had a very clear idea of the high value of such a title. Not to study meant a very painful loss of life. A literally missed chance. Today, in both of our republics, the rule is that for many of today's students it is not a problem to finish studying for a more lucrative job offer. There is often a change of study programs or the aforementioned statement of students that they have no plans to apply for a job after graduating from their university. That value which my university studies had is different today, unfortunately, even postgraduate studies do not reach this value.

B. O.: Are you experiencing qualitative differences even in people who are studying directly at your faculty?

Ján Jiráček: I cannot objectively evaluate if they are worse or better. But I see some differences. One of the important differences is that I find it more and more difficult to find common experiences. I am a "victim" of a time when it was unimaginable not to know some social aspects. Even though I did not like it, once I found out that everyone was seeing a movie that I did not, I had to pretend I have seen it, and the first thing I did was that I watched it. The same was in the case of some book. The social pressure to know certain things was really strong. General education had a certain canon. Today I live in a time when my students have very little in common not only with me, but also with each other.

B. O.: Do you think it is because of greater ignorance towards general education or because of the large amount of available information that automatically leads to a much higher degree of subjective focus on the individual's preferred things?

Ján Jiráček: I think the second option is right. However, it has also contributed to a certain degree of disintegration in the overall concept of general education. With my classmates I could rely that they read *The Old Man and The Sea*, or *War and Peace*, whether they were interested in these books or not. Today, the variety is too big. For example, it is becoming increasingly difficult to cite something.

P. B.: In what sense?

Ján Jiráček: In my generation, it was obvious to know the novel of Jirotko The Saturnin or the short tales of Šimko and Grossman. If one was quoting some message from them, everyone knew it. It does not work today. For a long time I used to spend 10 minutes playing a game with my students in master degree. I told them to choose one movie, a song from a particular group or opera that they think is well known that also their classmates will choose the same, so something which we all know collectively. About eight years ago, I completely stopped it. Not only because they were regularly choosing different songs or movies from me, but then they could not agree on one between themselves. However, I repeat, it is not a question of the quality or poor quality of students, it demonstrates the release of certain claims to common knowledge, which were once much stricter. I still assume that although you are a Slovakian and I am a Czech, we both know Hamlet. But I do not realize that it is the same with my students which I think is a big problem. It is also related to the current extraordinary short-termism of cultural goods in the public space. I consider myself a very busy man, but I still like to go to the cinema. But many times, I do not have time to watch the movie in the first weeks after the release, so I will say that I will watch it later. But this is no longer possible today, because cinema movies are rotating for a very short time, and I still have not got used to it, that a movie I want to see, I cannot watch about a quarter of a year later like in the past.

P. B.: According to several surveys conducted both in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, public confidence in journalism has fallen. Journalists, especially those from traditional media, are accused of being biased, partial, unbalanced, preferring the interests of only some politicians, political parties, or interest groups. Do you agree with this view and if so, what are the main reasons for this?

Ján Jiráček: I will answer this question a little provocatively. In my opinion there is nothing wrong about decline of public confidence in the journalistic profession! We also teach critical thinking in media education. This means a trivial distance from journalistic content and a certain degree of distrust of the media that produces them. The decline in credibility, on the other hand, also relates to changes in the profession itself. Journalism is “to blast”. It has become a very problematic socially communicated profession. It involves too many people who are fighting for media space and trying to influence public opinion - from politicians, PR managers, to private subjects. At the turn of the eighties and nineties, David Altheide and Robert Snow wrote the book *Mass Media in the Post-Journalist Era*, where they explain that traditional journalism as we have known it, is virtually non-existent. PR pressure is so huge that journalists have stopped being able to evaluate the background, goals and quality of the information they receive because they do not even know how and where they are produced. Global development of the Internet has, of course, accelerated with the emergence of deprofessionalized journalism.

P. B.: The technical means today make it possible to make a journalist virtually from anyone. You can have a blog, an internet video channel, or a website to spread virtually anything.

Ján Jiráček: This aspect of the journalism is significantly complicated. The new media, where the Internet is currently ranked, has virtually eliminated some traditional journalist professions, such as foreign rapporteurs. Nowadays, anyone can write any information from the venue, for example, on Twitter, and if he is trustworthy enough, or if is the information verifiable from a number of sources, it is economically unprofitable to send reporters to the other end of the world from editorial point of view. However, I consider this to be a failure of journalism as a profession.

P. B.: Has the importance of journalism changed since the new media came?

Ján Jiráček: Certainly yes.



B. O.: What does the word journalist mean for today's society?

Ján Jiráček: The essence of journalism was two things. A journalist was my eyes and ears in places I could not physically get to. They guaranteed providing relevant and important information for me, to which I did not have a chance to get. The second was the analytical and interpretative intellect of the journalist himself, who gave me information in the way I understood it and thus I understood the world in which I lived and what was happening in it daily. The reporter and commentator are two basic positions in journalism. Thanks to new technologies we do not need journalists at all in places of the events. We have security cameras, the Internet, you can watch the accident in the same quality as if you really were in the place. Greater importance, therefore, acquired the interpretative and commentary position, but it hides a very high risk. A journalist may start to feel that the comment, ie his reaction to a particular event, is actually a presentation of his opinion. In other words, journalism has become highly subjective and, unfortunately, one of the victims of this process is the argument culture. In the journalist's profession, there is a seduction in which a journalist does not consider it necessary to substantiate the arguments that led him to the opinion he is submitting.

B. O.: The media phenomenon of recent years has been trivializing content for the reader. What is the reason for its massive application?

Ján Jiráček: The certain degree of content simplification has always occurred in the media. Carrying a complicated problem to an understandable level is one of the important arts of journalism. But it must not be to the detriment of correctness, the core must be preserved. This may be related to the development of blogging culture and the habit of writing what I feel here and now. This journalistic style begins to leak into traditional media as a certain style plane. In reviews or comments, first person usage is increasing in the text.

B. O.: Is this the wrong direction?

Ján Jiráček: In my opinion very wrong. For example, a commentary was in the past a text of opinion, and its writing was an honour for the journalist. But it was essential to treat it so that it was not a subjective and unsubstantiated distraction about his feelings.

P. B.: It was an opinion based on the arguments it puts to the reader.

Ján Jiráček: Yes and often in the third person. But the argumentation, whose culture has fallen, was essential. A person can often read that a politician is bad, but without any supporting arguments.

P. B.: Following the previous question, what are the main reasons or factors for the very significant increase of the so-called alternative media? Thus, media that often offers completely different views to geopolitical events or social phenomena and problems to their audience?

Ján Jiráček: I feel that the so-called mainstream media tends to have a relatively homogeneous attitude towards global events. As they do not differ much from each other, they open up an alternative space. In other words, mainstream media lack diversity and variety.

B. O.: We have already touched the issue of so-called fake news. However, from the point of view of academic discourse, this term is quite disputable. It may include a very wide range of angles and definitions of the media contents that are called by this term. There is also often flattening and labeling when journalists, non-governmental activists or politicians mark as a fake everything they do not internally identify with, which is inconsistent with their ideological focus, which, in their view, undermines public confidence in liberal democracy and the like. What is your opinion on this issue?

Ján Jiráček: Basically, I agree with your definition of the problem in question. Undoubtedly, there are fake reports, and I agree with the view that we are witnessing something that could be called-without exaggeration-a media propaganda war. In this context, it is not so important whether the messages we call fake news are really untrue, but that we consider reports to be fake when they are unpleasant to us and are out of our strict view of the world.

B. O.: In this case, there comes the process of dehonoring the news, its author and potential recipients and the inclusion of a blacklist, which will ensure that such reports no longer need to be further evaluated.

Ján Jiráček: You have described the mechanism very precisely. If we want to get rid of it and find a position where we can talk and think about it, we should stop dividing the news into “fake” and “true”. It is important for us to correctly identify the purpose of that news. So, for who is it going to be beneficial and who, on the contrary, would like to call it “fake”? Study of purpose, in other words, pragmatics, should go far further than measuring truth.

P. B.: Would not a return to a strong and respected public media be the right response to ever lower confidence in the society?

Ján Jiráček: I can speak for the Czech Republic, where public media in my opinion are in the strongest position since their inception in the early nineties. They are considered to be the last reliable source of information, and they are hoped to set up a quality of content that will also be relevant to other domestic media.

P. B.: Do you agree?

Ján Jiráček: Unfortunately yes. It's not very cheerful, but the other media are far worse. However, I do not want to go into the polemic about how much they are important for society. We live in a post-time period. In other words, much of the information, which can be interesting and important for understanding the world, is not usable for our decision-making.

B. O.: In connection with the phenomenon of so-called fighting against fake news, we also logically question whether such initiatives eventually become a two-sided weapon. So if attempts to silence some opinions (even if they are non-standard or anti-systemic) will not lead to a gradual limitation of one of the most important democratic principles of freedom of speech?

Ján Jiráček: Brutally, part of the principle of freedom of speech is also the right to deceive. Whatever we may not like, if freedom of speech is one of the fundamental principles of the functioning of democratic states and is guaranteed in their constitutions, we must admit that a certain degree of untruth is permissible and permitted in democracy. Of course, unless it violates specific laws.

B. O.: In this case, it should be the role of the media to point out lies and try to defy them.

Ján Jiráček: Especially! Again, however, we go back to argumentation, because the argument is not the statement that “they” are not right. Unfortunately, today it happens in the media space quite often.

P. B.: The argumentation based on verified true facts as a relevant way to fight real “fake news” could be an excellent journalistic school for journalists, do not you think?

Ján Jiráček: Yes, if the publisher does not promote the opinion that in that way the journalist discourages readers. The mentality of economization, which has been promoted in the media, does not bear the argument, on the contrary. It is in favor to the acquisition of people and the valuation of investments.

P. B.: Acquisition of people on the basis of opinion attitudes?

Ján Jiráček: Exactly.

B. O.: Do you select the media you read on the basis of personal trustworthiness?

Ján Jiráček: I have to be diverging in some way. Of course, I try to watch the media a little, no matter what I think about them. I list the Metro or the Blesk. In general, I look at all the newspapers once a week. Then there are periodicals I read as a regular reader. They are Právo and the Lidovky. On Thursday's there is an attachment the Salon in the Právo and on Saturday in the Lidovky there is The Orientace which I consider to be excellent from a content point of view.

Prepared by **Pavel Bielik** and **Branislav Oprala**