

Core knowledge and skills of communication competence in the digital era

Dr. Thanh Van VU

Abstract: *Communication competence in the digital era is of particular interest in the new media environment and digital transformation. The trends of media convergence, integrated media, multimedia and rapid technological development emphasize the importance of technological knowledge and skills. Based on a survey conducted among students majoring in journalism - communication, this article systematizes important knowledge and skills constituting communication competence in the digital era.*

Keywords: *communication competence; knowledge; skills; digital era.*

1. Introduction

Communication competence in the digital era is a topic of theoretical and practical significance. Communication competence is usually defined in three aspects: the capacity of the media, the technical capacity of the media and the capacity of the media public. In this article, communication competence is understood as the ability of the media subject to collect, verify, organize, present and visualize information to convey a complete message to the public to achieve a particular goal.

Communication competence is the essence of different knowledge, skills, attitudes and qualities. The list of knowledge and skills constituting media competencies may be unlimited and depends on the political, economic, cultural and social contexts of each country. Some knowledge or skills that are considered important in one cultural context or institution may not be considered important in another cultural context or institution.

In order to train professional communicators who are capable of working in the digital media environment, training institutions need to identify a system of knowledge and skills constituting communication competence. After graduating, students need to achieve the necessary knowledge and skills to be able to complete specific tasks at work and meet the requirements of the profession. On the basis of presenting a manipulative concept of communication competence, this article aims to answer the question: What core knowledge and skills makeup communication competence?

2. Research Methods

In order to identify the core knowledge and skills constituting communication competence, the author conducted a survey among students majoring in journalism, communication, public relations and advertising at the Academy of Journalism and Communication, Ha Noi University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hue University, Van Lang University...

A questionnaire was built on the Survey Monkey platform to reach a wide range of audiences and save data entry time. Participants were asked to rate the importance of knowledge and skills constituting communication competence on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being very unimportant; 2 - not important; 3 - normal; 4 - important and 5 - very important. Knowledge consists of three groups: general knowledge; theoretical and professional knowledge and other knowledge and understanding. Skills include three groups of soft skills; professional skills; technology skills and supplementary skills.

Of 657 students, there were 114 male students (17.4%) and 543 female students (82.6%). The number of students studying journalism-oriented programs was 262 people (39.9%) and the number of students studying media-oriented programs was 395 people (60.1%). Journalism-oriented programs include print newspapers, radio, television, online newspapers, etc. Media-oriented programs include advertising, public relations, branding, multimedia communication... Samples were imported to SPSS 26 software for analysis. The mean and standard deviation (SD) were calculated to determine the rank of importance of knowledge and skills.

3. Core knowledge of communication competence

General knowledge

All professions require a system of general knowledge or basic knowledge. In one article, Nguyen Thi Truong Giang stated that a good journalist should have a vast background knowledge and specialized knowledge⁽¹⁾. The more diverse and solid this knowledge base, the more advantages journalists and communicators have in working on different issues and topics of news flow. General knowledge is not only accumulated during high school and university, but also in the process of lifelong learning.

This general knowledge base includes knowledge of politics, economics, culture and history so that journalists and communicators can understand the nature and mission of journalism and communication. UNESCO believes that

communication competence includes essential knowledge about the functions of communication; the conditions under which the media effectively carry out their functions and the way these functions performance is assessed by means of media content⁽²⁾.

The survey results show that knowledge about journalism - communication ethics to analyze, evaluate, create, media content is considered the most important ($M = 4.5312$, $SD = 0.69142$), followed by knowledge of laws on journalism and communication ($M = 4.4323$, $SD = 0.71486$). Knowledge of the system and types of journalism - media in Vietnam to use, access and evaluate media content is considered to be the least important ($M = 4.2496$, $SD = 0.73983$).

Theoretical and professional knowledge

While general knowledge plays a fundamental role, theoretical and professional knowledge directly serves the work of communicators. This theoretical and professional knowledge are accumulated through the process of training, fostering and self-study. The more firmly grasped the system of theoretical and professional knowledge, the more confident and adept the communicator is in his work. This is also the reason why journalism - communication is trained as a profession often at graduate and postgraduate levels in many countries around the world.

There are two main way in which communicators often cultivate theoretical and professional knowledge. *First*, they attend journalism-media training programs at the undergraduate or graduate level, then accumulate professional knowledge by studying on the job or studying a second university degree in business, economy, culture, sports... *Second*, they attend a professional training program such as economics, then go on to a second university course or participate in theoretical and professional training courses on journalism - communication.

The survey results show that the study participants rated their theoretical and professional knowledge at an important level ($M = 4.2283$, $SD = 0.61744$). Knowledge of traditional and digital media is rated as the most important ($M = 4.2998$, $SD = 0.73036$), followed by knowledge of the value of news for analysis, media content evaluation ($M = 4.2953$, $SD = 0.71217$). Meanwhile, knowledge of theories, models, history and development trends of journalism - media is rated as the least important ($M = 4.0594$, $SD = 0.81589$).

Knowledge of the public and other understanding

In addition to general knowledge, theoretical and professional knowledge, journalists and communicators also need to have knowledge and understanding of the public. This knowledge and understanding should be accumulated and cultivated in the process of formal education and in practical work. One of the essential insights for communicators is the understanding about the public such as the characteristics, needs, and psychology of the public, then they are able to appropriate approach and influence the public. The more clearly understand the needs and behavior of the public, the more journalists and communicators improve their professional performance.

The survey results show that the study participants rated the knowledge, public knowledge and other understanding above “important” and below “very important” ($M = 4.3011$, $SD = 0.58386$). Understanding the characteristics and needs of the public was assessed as the most important ($M = 4.4886$, $SD = 0.66736$) while understanding the economic activities of press - media agencies was rated as the least important ($M = 4.0609$, $SD = 0.82784$).

In addition to assessing the importance of three aforementioned groups of knowledge, students participating in the survey also proposed some other kinds of knowledge and understanding such as knowledge of international journalism and communication; knowledge of culture; knowledge of technology; knowledge of politics; knowledge of science; professional knowledge and knowledge of ethics, law and psychology. This partly shows that the list of knowledge and understanding constituting communication competence can be unlimited. The problem is to identify the really important knowledge to foster and develop within the limited training time.

In the current international integration context, understanding foreign press - media plays an important role. Thus, journalists and communicators need to have good foreign language skills. A student participating in the survey said that, “students need to have more knowledge of foreign languages because we live in a global era, we need to study communication both domestically and internationally”.

Knowledge of politics was also highly appreciated by survey respondents. This knowledge is necessary to build a strong political stance and clear information orientation. A participant in the survey said that journalism and communication students need to have “knowledge of the history, politics, culture of their home country and humanity to create products of humanistic and epochal values”.

4. Core skills of communication competence

Soft skills

Soft skills are transferable skills that can be applied in different occupations and contexts. Soft skills play an important role in shaping the perception and behaviors of individuals in social and occupational contexts. Training institutions are increasingly interested in fostering and developing soft skills for learners. Soft skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills, search skills, self-help skill, teamwork skills and independent work... are considered essential.

The survey results show that the study participants rated soft skills above “important” and below “very important” ($M = 4.4191$, $SD = 0.51527$). Problem-solving and decision-making skills were rated as the most important ($M = 4.5297$, $SD = 0.81681$), followed by cooperation and teamwork skills ($M = 4.4779$, $SD = 0.76303$). Independent working skills were rated as the least important ($M = 4.2527$, $SD = 0.74904$).

Professional skills

If soft skills can be transferred from one job to another, from one occupation to another, occupational skills are specific and specialized. Training programs aim to equip learners with these professional skills so that learners can perform duties and solve specific tasks at work. In journalism and communication, professional skills are acquired through hands on learning.

The training and equipping of professional skills not only need to be done in schools but also need to be associated with the professional environment. The closer the practice and internship conditions to the actual working environment, the higher chances students stand to get a job relevant with the training program. Vocational skills trainers need to be lecturers with practical experience or people working in the field of journalism - communication. For example, in order to teach students how to write a review, instructors need to have practical experience and products, rather than mere instructions in theory.

The survey results show that the study participants rated professional skills above “important” and below “very important” ($M = 4.4060$, $SD = 0.47947$). The skill to distinguish real from fake news was assessed as the most important skill ($M = 4.7549$, $SD = 0.57851$), close to reaching a scale of 5 as “very important”, followed by skills of information access, evaluation and verification ($M = 4.5921$, $SD = 0.64708$). The skill of creating journalistic - media works of different genres was assessed as the least important ($M = 4.2070$, $SD = 0.78462$).

Technology skills

In the digital age, technology skills are of great importance. If other knowledge and skills are fundamental and stable, technology skills are flexible and change frequently along with technological advances. According to the study *The State of Technology in Global Newsrooms*, journalists use a limited number of digital and technology skills. Four key technology skills include: posting/commenting on social media (72%); digital photography (61%); interacting with the public on social networks (58%) and disseminating content on different platforms (56%).

Research results show that survey participants rated technology skills between “important” and “very important” ($M = 4.3263$, $SD = 0.53024$), at a low level of importance, they were more important than occupational skills ($M = 4.4060$, $SD = 0.47947$). The skill of using social networks to access, evaluate and share information was assessed as the most important skill ($M = 4.3881$, $SD = 0.69846$), followed by the skills of collecting and processing information, data management and visualization ($M = 4.3409$, $SD = 0.65986$). Skills to work in the online environment were rated as the least important ($M = 4.2709$, $SD = 0.71330$).

Supplementary skills

Besides soft skills, professional skills and technology skills, people working in journalism and communication also need a system of complementary skills. Some complementary skills such as observation skills, interview skills can also be classified as professional skills. Therefore, it should be emphasized that the above categorization of knowledge and skills is also relative. In journalism-communication training institutions, supplementary skills are usually taught in the introduction section while professional skills are trained in the specialization section.

Research results show that survey participants rated complementary skills above “important” and below “very important” ($M = 4.3476$, $SD = 0.52632$). Observation skills were assessed as the most important ($M = 4.5145$, $SD = 0.65810$), followed by computer and Internet skills ($M = 4.5084$, $SD = 0.67196$). Skills in conducting primary and secondary research were rated as the least important ($M = 4.0152$, $SD = 0.76892$).

Other skills

In addition to the mentioned skills, the survey respondents also suggested many other skills, mainly soft skills. Communication skills, listening skills and

relationship building skills were three soft skills mentioned by many students. One student said, “Students need to have more communication, behavioral and language skills. For a journalism - communication person, communicating, conversing and interacting with many people is a part of the job, having right vocabulary and ability to use the right language in each situation will be useful for the job.” In the group of professional skills, creative thinking, critical thinking, multi-dimensional thinking, systematic thinking, logical thinking were the most mentioned skills. In the context of the current information explosion, critical thinking skills are essential for journalists to be able to access, analyze, verify, select and present relevant information which is reliable and suitable to the receiving needs of the public. These professional skills are closely related to technology skills.

5. Conclusion

Communication competence in the digital era are the necessary knowledge and skills to help communicators adapt to the new media environment. The new media environment is characterized by the rapid development of technology; the rise of integrated media and multimedia trends; changes in needs and behavior of the public... In that context, media training institutions also need to quickly grasp new trends and train capable communicators to meet the changing needs of the media. This study initially identifies the really important knowledge and skills constituting communication competence in the digital era with an emphasis on technology knowledge and skills. This list may not be exhaustive and each training institution or individual may add other important knowledge and skills. However, with a defined training time duration, educational institutions need to identify the core knowledge and skills to focus on, and at the same time to train and develop self-training and self-study capabilities for students. These knowledge and skills need to be transformed into specific output standards to ensure that, after the training process, students achieve specific competencies that are professionally required in practice.

(1) <https://lyluanchinhtrivatruyenthong.vn/nang-cao-tinh-chuyen-nghiep-cua-nen-bao-chi-cach-mang-p24799.html>.

(2) Wilson C., Grizzle A (2011), Media and Information Literacy: Curriculum for Teachers, UNESCO, p.16.