

Decoding Democracy: The Imperative of News Media Literacy in Contemporary Digital Landscapes

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Abstract

Democracy faces a crucial challenge in balancing citizen engagement with the need for reliable information as information is a building block for the opinion formation process. This article explores the complexities of democracy, highlighting the importance of elected representatives and an informed populace within a trustworthy information ecosystem. The digital age has an information overload along with the threat of the hoaxes, conspiracy theories, false news, and confirmation bias, which has prompted questions over the reliability of information from various sources. Although news is essential for maintaining citizens' education, the study makes it important to identify the news sources, especially in the digital age that includes Facebook, Instagram, and other news websites. The primary concerns discussed are how news media literacy affects citizens' ability to make decisions, how news media literacy contributes to a healthy and dynamic democratic society, and how news media literacy and democracy are related. By delving into these questions, the study presents news media literacy as a new and essential field—particularly considering the digital age. In addition to addressing fake news, it clarifies how the media environment is changing and how business models are adapting, all while adhering to fundamental principles of media literacy. The paper investigates the need for the news media literacy in post-truth era and ways to curate news consumption in the digital world. One of the main points made is that people should look beyond superficial assessments of the news and investigate the organizations, structures, customs, and practices that exist within the news media landscape. It is believed that developing analytical abilities is essential to gathering reliable data and preserving the country's democratic foundation. To identify the underlying structures and institutions in the news media environment, the research emphasizes how important it is for people to have news media literacy abilities. It is believed that critical analysis skills are necessary for both maintaining a democratic process that is sustainable and for obtaining information in an authentic way. In its conclusion, the paper urges policy interventions that contemplate the measures required to guarantee that journalism satisfies its social responsibilities in the context of a vibrant democracy.

Keywords: News Media Literacy, Policy Framework, Civic Engagement, India, Political Participation, Democracy, Media Literacy

Introduction

“Media literacy is critical to the survival and perpetuation of a healthy democracy.”

– Janice Ellis

Public opinion plays a pivotal role in shaping the democratic landscape of a nation. Literature infused with democratic principles accentuates the empowerment of the people and underscores the government's reliance on the citizenry. A fundamental tenet of democracy is the rational and moral foundation of faith. The relationship between journalism and public opinion is of utmost importance in modern democracies. Public opinion theoretical frameworks and models highlight the media's critical role in educating the public, encouraging citizen interaction, and shaping and mobilizing popular opinions.

The word "post-truth" means a political world where people mostly discuss things based on feelings. This culture is not connected to details about rules or regulations, and facts don't change the claims made over and over again. In the media world, the time of big lies or false news is marked by spreading bad data through social and other online sources. This leads to a weakening impact on what is true in shaping people's views. Old media companies are struggling to keep trust, believe in them and stay original as the environment changes. This prompts crucial inquiries into the potential bias inherent in public opinion and its potential detriment to the democratic fabric of the nation. The perilous consequences of misinformation and hate speech have prompted a revaluation of democracy, citizen participation, and public opinion. The profit-driven nature of the commercialised media has drawn criticism due to its perceived failure to foster engaged and informed citizens within the context of democracy.

Addressing the deficiencies of such a media system necessitates the cultivation of media-literate citizens. Empowering individuals to be discerning consumers of commercial affairs and adeptly comprehend the workings of the media system is paramount. According to McChesney (2002), media literacy seeks to empower citizens to be both active participants in the democratic process and critical thinkers.

News: A Duality or Dilemma Between Reality and Representation

The role of news in a democratic society is central to informing citizens about current events and political affairs, thereby shaping their engagement in self-governing societies. In this context, the veracity and completeness of information disseminated through news media become crucial. There has been a widespread debate and dichotomy inherent in the perception of news as either a reflection of reality or a constructed representation of events.

Ashley (2020) has asserted that "News is Socially Constructed, News is not the actual events of daily life but rather a representation of those events." The agenda-setting theory, as posited by Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell McCombs (1972), illuminates the editorial role in selecting and presenting news, thereby influencing the political reality perceived by the audience. Using the mass

media to get information, like what happens with the agenda-setting theory shows how important it is to check what news we are given and who makes these decisions. This influences political choices too. But psychologists have suggested to watch out for understanding the world and its reality through news or media. It could be wrong.

There could be risks when automatically consuming news. This might mean that wrong information can spread, which can cause problems. As an additional framework, the framing theory was proposed. It explains how news stories are made to change people's opinions. Kurt Lewis's Gatekeeper theory focuses on how editors or those in charge of choosing what gets shared have their own likes and can decide what we see.

Considering the current environment characterised by an abundance of information, particularly in the realm of digital media, it is critical that news consumers possess high levels of media literacy. News in modern times is tailored to cater to niche audiences and disseminated through diverse channels. Scholars have advocated for enhanced news media literacy among consumers of the news.

Social Media Platforms and the Proliferation of Misinformation

Technological advancements have greatly increased the possibilities for user interaction on social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, X, Facebook. These platforms are being widely used, and because of their disruptive and democratic qualities, it is necessary to critically analyse how simple it is for false information to proliferate. Ireton and Posetti (2018) emphasised that news disseminated via social media platforms proliferate the echo chamber and filter bubble phenomena, which are fuelled by algorithmic processes and harm a country's democracy.

According to Silverman (2018), social media sites exacerbate hate speech, polarisation, and trolling, especially during election seasons. Information disorder is a result of the problems digital media confront, including convergent journalism, urgent deadlines, low levels of trust, and low earnings. Users' ability to discern between true information, fiction, advertising, and entertainment is weakened by the blending lines that separate journalism from fake news. The spread of fake news is a serious challenge to India, the largest democracy in the world and home to the second-largest population. The nation's lower literacy rates make a vibrant democracy's struggles even more difficult.

According to data from the Statista research department from 2019, 45% of Indians are exposed to news that has been completely made up for political or commercial purposes, and 39% come across poor journalism that includes factual errors, deceptive headlines, and clickbait. These results highlight how critical it is to address the widespread problem of false information on social media, especially in the context of democratic countries like India.

News Media Literacy: Understanding the Origins and Developments

The discernment of reliable information from misinformation has garnered considerable attention in contemporary discourse. While recent times have witnessed a surge in the prominence of literacy

and news concepts, it is noteworthy that the ancient Greeks advocated for the evaluation of information through critical thinking. During the 1970s and 80s, particularly in Europe, scholars and academics embraced media education as an essential component of citizenship including the evolving and well recognised idea of global and digital citizenship.

The crux of media education has been the critical analysis of media texts for some decades now. But, a different area has been created in the 21st century known as News Media Literacy. In simple terms, this area is more than what we usually call media literacy. That's the skill to look at, study and judge messages in media and also create them ourselves.

Defining and deciding the variables of the News Media Literacy and its goals are still being discussed and deliberated upon. In the past, being literate meant knowing how to read and write. But now in today's fast-moving world of 24*7 media, literacy has become a more complex idea. It goes from knowing a lot about topics like financial literacy, health management or legal literacy.

News Literacy means understanding what news messages are. On the other hand, a wider view includes many facets regarding how and where news is made. These include situations like politics, political economy, business considerations and also culture and society.

A common way to teach how to check information and sources is the CRAAP test. It was made by Sarah Blakeslee at California State University. This tool is very useful for students and people in checking the trustworthiness of sources of information.

The check of information quality uses something called the 'CRAAP' test. This is supported by a group in America named the American Library Association. This test checks content using standards connected to money, importance, power, correctness and goal. This way helps to look closely at content in a planned style, but it doesn't take into account the bigger factors and ideas that people already believe before they read the news.

The book "Blur: "How to Know What is True in the Age of Information Overload" gives a new look at understanding news media. The writers say that understanding news means reading it with care and skepticism. They also propose that middle and high schools should add news media understanding and civic knowledge in their lessons. In order to improve news literacy, the authors advance six questions as part of a “Skeptical Way of Knowing”:

- What am I encountering?
- Is this information complete or not?
- Who or what are my sources, and by what means do I believe them?
- What evidence is given and how was it confirmed?
- Can there be other explanations for this?
- Am I gaining knowledge?



Source: <https://blog.flocabulary.com/news-media-literacy/>

This way lets us check the news' content in more detail than just using 'CRAAP' test rules. So, it helps to encourage individuals to become critical thinkers especially teenagers in school set-up.

The six questions help foster an enlightened citizenry by serving as a tool for scrutinizing the provenance of information. They serve the function of identifying gaps and inaccuracies in information and at the same time provide an instructional framework for improving information literacy.

Daniel Russell, a research scientist at Google, posits a hypothesis suggesting that contemporary students have the capacity to access a volume of content through the internet that is exponentially greater, estimated at a million times more, than what earlier generations could access in a conventional university library. Consequently, Russell contends that readers in the present era necessitate a significantly more dynamic and sophisticated repertoire of reading skills for the consumption and analysis of both traditional and online media. Some of the key strategies advocated to initiate and spread middle and high school students for creating a sensitisation towards news media literacy are:

- Creating an understanding for key terms that includes credibility, reliability, prejudice, bias
- Finding and creating a database of age-appropriate media content for creating the awareness and explanation
- Cross verification of the media content being utilised
- Addressing the issue of clickbait in online news and other media content
- Teaching strategies and tactics for website evaluation for credibility and fake news or misinformation
- Imparting smart search strategies and cross verification of the content available online
- Encouraging lateral reading

Stony Brook University has developed a News Literacy curriculum that intends to inculcate critical thinking skills in students so that they can be able to determine the reliability and credibility of

information sources. The general objective is to contribute towards the establishment of a vibrant civil society with an informed population. This places emphasis on the need for individuals to be educated enough not to fall victims of misleading information, which can derail growth-pathways within nations.

It is essential that this approach emphasizes the development of critical thinking skills, such as recognizing journalism versus alternative sources, distinguishing between news and opinion, assertion versus verification, and evidence over inference. The curriculum promotes assessment and deconstruction of news reports so as to enable students distinguish between news content and audience biases.

However, Renee Hobbs (2010) offers a critique of the news literacy curriculum, asserting that it aligns with traditional journalism paradigms and is linked to propaganda. Hobbs contends that the curriculum overlooks the intricate economic and practical challenges faced by journalists in fulfilling their societal responsibility of facilitating an informed citizenry. This perspective underscores the complexity inherent in delivering news in a manner that aligns with the social obligation of fostering informed citizens.

News Media Literacy and critical functions in a democratic set-up

The life of a democracy depends on its people getting good information and news. People need to spot fake news, study the wider social and historical background around it. They also must get involved as in a big way when they see things on TV or read them online that affect society. Ashley (2020) explains this view and suggests important points to boost people's involvement with news in a way that supports democracy. He proposes the idea of teaching people how to understand what they read, known as news literacy.

1. Curate Your News Consumption

- a. Engage with news regularly.
- b. Find gatekeepers who control the information you see or hear.
- c. Choose carefully where you get your news from.
- d. Control the amount of news you take in and don't get overwhelmed with too much information.

2. Foster a Critical Mind

- a. Enhance critical thinking skills.
- b. Face new information with a willingness to listen to views that go against what you already believe.
- c. Use information that is proven by research.

3. Build a Knowledge Structure

- a. Learn about how the news media system works and is built.
- b. Learn how history and culture affect the news media.
- c. Learn to understand the mental boundaries that come with human seeing and thinking.

- d. Look into the disagreements between democratic values and money-based influences.

4. Social Imagination

- a. Ask why society is set up the way it is.
- b. Look at how social groups affect personal experiences.
- C. Check if socially made realities are true and correct.

5. Critical Awareness

- a. Tell others about what you have learned and explain how important it is.
- b. Help those who want to improve their knowledge more.
- c. Responsibly make and share information.

6. Civic Life Participation

- a. Know what's going on and take part in the democratic process, like voting.
- b. Take part in local activities and efforts of the community.
- c. Reject cynicism and apathy.
- d. Practice empathy and actively participate.
- e. Push for social systems that uphold values of democracy.

Getting involved in the news, politics and community life is very important for citizens in a democracy. Civic life is all about involvement and active participation in community activities on both local, state and national levels. This includes everything in our social world that helps shape our society together. It may involve basic act of voting to taking part in school, political and community activities and deliberations. Making people aware of important news is very important for helping citizens understand and comprehend things better in a democratic country.

News media literacy is very important for building a democratic and public service-oriented media system that caters the different sections of society. False news is like a virus that spreads and affects people who may not be aware or cautious enough. These individuals then make decisions without knowing, which may cause harm to the society and having long-term implications. News Media Literacy acts as a shield against fake news. It serves as a defence mechanism for citizens who can easily be fooled by wrong information.

Understanding news media literacy and talking about its goals and methods is still being discussed. The usual idea of knowing how to read and write has changed in today's world with 24*7 media. It now means more than just reading and writing skills. It covers knowing how to do things well in different areas like health, financial literacy and cultural sensitivity. Each one is focused on a certain area of skill.

Media Literacy: Deliberations over Policy Framework

Jack Balkin, an expert on law, gives a helpful summary that shows how the internet changed rules for talking. In many places around the world, a lot of rules have been made to deal with issues that

come from social media sites. Importantly, a new German law known as NetDG makes social media sites pay if they carry illegal content. Singapore has made rules that force websites to post corrections for incorrect facts. This is because they want to stop fake news from spreading. Many countries are making efforts to address issues with fake news and online information.

The book "The Misinformation Age: How False Belief Spreads" by Cailin O'Connor and James Weatherall advocates for regulatory measures targeting the deliberate creators and disseminators of fake news. In alignment with this perspective, Germany has implemented similar laws to regulate the proliferation of hate speech and misinformation. India, too, has been actively engaged in regulatory efforts, evidenced by notable revisions in the Information Technology Act of 2000.

“Without a Media and Information Literacy policy and strategy, disparities are likely to increase between those who have and those who do not have access to information and media and enjoy or not freedom of expression. Additional disparities will emerge between those who are able and unable to and, analyze and critically evaluate and apply information and media content for decision-making”

-UNESCO report (2013)

Media Education Strategy for Effective Governance, Democratic Stability, and National Development:

- **Facilitation of Informed Decision-Making:** Giving people chances to make smart decisions by teaching them about media thoroughly.
- **Promotion of Active Civil Society Engagement:** Promoting active involvement in community life with education about media.
- **Enhancement of Accountability and Transparency:** Setting up ways to be held responsible and making sure people understand through teaching about media education.
- **Encouragement of Social Inclusion and Participation Opportunities:** Boosting social involvement and giving chances for different participation through media learning programs.
- **Promotion of Equality, Peace, and Justice:** Teaching about fairness, peace and law through media literacy programmes.
- **Cultivation of Tolerance:** Building a culture that accepts differences by using media teaching methods.
- **Empowerment of Women and Promotion of Gender Equality:** Helping women and supporting fairness between genders by using special education in media programmes.
- **Advancement Towards Sustainable Development**

Conclusion

In India, learning about media and understanding information can help society get better, make the government work better, fight against poverty and low education, and create smart citizens. This learning can be very important in making different parts of people powerful, like farmers, women,

and citizens. It also helps to make democracy work well. Even though it could be helpful, the inclusion of media skills in school and after-school teaching plans in India has not been fully used yet. The National Council of Education Research and Training has started things by adding media as a topic in chosen schools. Another important project is the Gandhi Media Literacy Program, started by Gandhi Darshan Samiti in 2003. This program was launched to celebrate 100 years of Indian opinion. This program wants to teach the basics of media. It also helps people understand messages from media better, separate truth from lies, improve thinking skills and learn values from Gandhi. In places like Tamil Nadu and other parts of India, small efforts are helping people learn about media and information literacy. However, we need bigger programs that teach media and news literacy skills to many more people. This means making special lessons for kids in cities and countryside areas and younger folks, to deal with the changing way people use and share media.

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