Original Article

Media Literacy: Concept, Theoretical Explanation, and its Importance in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

The advent of new media technologies has brought drastic and dramatic changes in the media landscape globally. The digital media advancements (Multimedia, social media, and communication technologies) trigger change in all aspects of the human life (social, political, economic, and cultural). The cultural practices of doing things, learning and personal life domains receive a significant influence from the digital enhanced communities. The flow of fake news and misinformation has dramatically increased due to the rapid advancement of digital technologies. Media literacy skills are more important than ever. Media literacy enhances critical thinking skills that enable individuals to make independent choices on accessing, evaluating, analysing, and creating content when exposed to digital media space. The current study brings discusses media literacy as a concept, its theoretical explanation, and its importance in the society in the digital age. Drawing from literature, this study concludes that, at its core media literacy is about fostering knowledge, skills, and competence on the key facets of the mass media phenomenon, such as media industries, media messages, media audiences and media effects. From its theoretical lens, media literacy discourages protectionist approach to digital media exposure and recognizes and acknowledges the socio – cultural effect of media in our mass mediated society.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has exponentially changed the way humans communicate and learn. The educational landscape is dramatically changing; individuals in the society have more access to more information than ever before in history (Martens, 2022).

The society today have welcomed technology with open arms, but have not reflected on its implications or have actively educated citizens on how deconstruct the endless stream of messages (Metzgen-ohlswager, 2010). It is therefore a serious concern for the researchers, policy makers and leaders to focus attention on what it means to be literate in a densely mediated and technologized society of the digital age.

The conceptualization of media literacy is based on the understanding the role of media in the society. Media literacy therefore develops skills on critical thinking of inquiring and analysis for media consumers to function well in a society and participate fully in democratic processes (Ivanović, 2014; Livingstone, 2004). Media literacy challenges the dogmatic perspective propagated by mass media culture, such as class, race, and gender bias and over – consumption.

Scholars have recognized media literacy as a best practice. It enhances media consumers to critically inquire deep while utilizing multi – media. Media literacy provides individuals with important skills to navigate the current media saturated landscape (Ivanović, 2014; Livingstone, 2004). It is powerful tool for promoting critical thinking and fostering active consumers of the media content. Media literacy if well induced in the society creates lifelong habits of analytical thinking; reading, writing, and discussing that go beyond traditional clichés and search for deeper meanings. It forms individuals in the society that are able to use media as a tool instead of being used by media.

Digital technology permeates deeply in our society, yet little is done on media education even in the academia setting. Also, the research on media literacy is limited and has not been consolidated in the media studies. The current paper therefore aims at exploring the concept of media literacy, its theoretical explanations, and its importance in the digital age.

The concept of media literacy emerged in the beginning of 20th century in Europe as a way to acknowledge, the set of knowledge, skills and habits of mind required for full participation in a contemporary media-saturated society. Media literacy is widely understood as the knowledge, competencies and life skills needed to participate in contemporary society through accessing, analysing, evaluating, and creating media messages in a wide variety of forms (Mallon, 2018; Metzgen-ohlswager, 2010; Pérez Tornero & Tapio, 2010; Šuminas & Jastramskis, 2020).

Media literacy constitutes a set of skills that help consumers of media content to think critically by examining the source of the media content through evaluation and analysis to capture what is behind the production of such media content (Alvermann &

Hagood, 2000). ML seeks to understand how media content shapes behaviour and values of the society.

Media literacy transforms individuals in the society from being the passive consumers of the media into being the active, critical thinkers and independent citizens in the society (Vaeth, 2020). With media literacy individuals in the society are facilitated to understand what roles are important in shaping the society by being active, and critical thinkers on issues per taking the development of the society.

The most adopted definition of media literacy is that of Aufderheide (1992), for which media literacy is defined as the ability to access, evaluate, analyse, and create content in various forms. This skilled – based approach of understanding media literacy stand into four components of ML, access, evaluate, analyse and creation. These four components of ML according Aufderheide, (1992) are very key in enhancing individuals in the society to critically engage and creating communication content in any form (Livingstone, 2004). ML further fosters skills of media consumers to be able to well analyse and evaluate what the get from the media.

Previous studies on media literacy, associate ML with four important values, first is the defence of individual autonomy based on critical thinking, free examination of the media content and the right to information (Mallon, 2018; Pérez Tornero & Tapio, 2010; Sadovaya et al., 2017; Šuminas & Jastramskis, 2020). ML sets forth an equal access and egalitarian distribution of competencies and capacities on how media content should be utilized in the digital age.

The second of value is the constructive value of open, participatory dialogue. In this sense media literacy facilitates the capacity of individuals in the society to access quality information, evaluate, analyse, and critically choose to make use of the information in their decision – making processes (Martens, 2022; Sadovaya et al., 2017; Šuminas & Jastramskis, 2020).

The third value of media literacy focuses on the need of health communication or as some scholars call it constructive communication, in a sense ML discourages fake news and misinformation and encourages more of positive creativity in solving problems to attain social and economic development through a better utilization of the media content (Martens, 2022; Sadovaya et al., 2017; Šuminas & Jastramskis, 2020).

The Fourth value of media literacy is upholding the idea of an active and communicative democracy. Without a democratization of the possibilities for expressing oneself and finding information, without real equality in the possibilities for participating and sharing opinions, a democratic exercise of power cannot exist. And it must come hand in hand with a vigilant, alert, diligent attitude on the part of citizens that facilitates their participation and informed decision-making in all political processes (Mallon, 2018; Pérez Tornero & Tapio, 2010; Sadovaya et al., 2017; Šuminas & Jastramskis, 2020).

Lastly, media literacy has a value of recognizing the importance of culture diversity and dialogue amongst cultures. Media literacy respects the autonomy and uniqueness of each culture and it builds bridges in order to construct a universal dialogue and the spirit of understanding of each other without prejudices and stereotypes (Ivanović, 2014; Livingstone, 2004; Mallon, 2018)

MEDIA LITERACY: THE THEORETICAL EXPLANATION

Previous literature have indicated that, media literacy recognizes media as an aspect of social environment and a pushing factor towards media literacy movement in the globe. Media literacy strikes a balance between protection and empowerment approaches of the media.

The theoretical underpinnings of media literacy shy away protectionist approach and recognizes and acknowledges the socio – cultural effect of media in our mass mediated society (Alvermann & Hagood,

2000; Potter, 2004). The theoretical focus of media literacy bases on the three aims, first, facilitating democracy, participation, and active citizenship, second, knowledge economy, competitive and choice and last, lifelong learning, cultural expression, and personal fulfilment (Lin et al., 2013; Martens, 2022).

Due to the important role of media literacy in our society, it is essential to explore the content and theoretical underpinning of media literacy as it is indicated in the literature.

Media Literacy: A Cognitive Theory

Lin et al. (2013); Potter, (2004) argued that, the understanding of media literacy should not limit itself only into making the audience aware on evaluation and analysis of the media effects. He therefore expanded the understanding of media literacy by proposing a media literacy model to explain what constitutes media literacy.

Potter (2004) proposed, a cognitive theory of media literacy which introduces the three building blocks of media literacy. The cognitive theory of media literacy explains the nature of media content acquisition by individual intrinsically, it further broadens the concept of media literacy by transcending into individual's cognition process (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). The three media literacy building blocks are key in enhancing media consumers to be able to build of broader perspective on media and its effects. Three building blocks are, personal locus, knowledge, and skills. In his model Potter tries to explore the nature of media literacy acquisition through an intrinsic approach, by trying the concept of media literacy in the individual's cognition process (Potter, 2004).

The Three Building Blocks of Media Literacy

Personal Locus

In explaining what personal locus in media literacy is, Potter (2004) argues that personal locus is a composition of individual's goals and drives. According to him goals shape ways we process information by selecting and filtering information to for effective use. While drive is important in facilitating and determining the level of energy needed in attaining the goals.

It is important to note that, according to Potter' model of media literacy, when individuals are not aware of their personal locus can easily be controlled by the media. However, when individuals are aware of their personal locus can easily be able to manage and control what the individuals receive from the media.

Knowledge Structures

Potter (2004) defined knowledge structures as sets of organized information in an individual's memory. According to Potter's model there are five basic constitutes of knowledge structures in media literacy – knowledge on the content, knowledge on the media industries, knowledge on media effects and knowledge about what is in the real world, and lastly the personal interaction with oneself on his or her drives, needs and intellectual abilities (The Personal locus), that controls the process of processing information and constructing meaning from the information accessed.

The five knowledge structures enhance the audience to be more conscious at times information is processed and therefore be able to make better decisions when choosing to use the information obtained, and be more skilful in creating meaning from the messages to serve the purpose. The more aware we are on the knowledge structures the better we become in accessing, evaluating, analysing, and constructing meaning from the information we get from the media outlets.

Skills

Potter argues that knowledge structures derive themselves as one is exposed to media, the process into which information is accessed, evaluated,

analysed, and meaning is constructed during media exposure needs skills (Lin et al., 2013; Potter, 2004). The therefore proposes seven skills which he thinks are important to media literacy, such skills are, (i) analysis, which is the ability of a media consumer to break down information into meaningful elements (ii) evaluation, this is the ability to judge the value of the element analysed and compare it to other realities, (iii) grouping, this is being able to categorize the information elements and differentiate with those with similarity, (iv) induction, this being able to generalize patterns in a set of elements, (v) deduction, this is an ability of an individual to make use of the general principle and explain details constituting the information elements (vi) synthesis, the ability to be able of assembling the elements and creating a new structure and (vi) Abstracting, the ability of capturing and summarizing the importance of the message.

Potter's model of media literacy, suggests that, the broader knowledge one has on what is in the information, the situations under which the information might be produced, and at what extent such information can have impact to the audience, and a greater control and awareness on news consumption, will provide a good output on media literacy.

Media Literacy: A Learning Theory

The interpretive academic scholars such Levy Vygotsky and Paolo Freire conceptualized literacy as a socio – cultural practice that embodies and reflects the power relations. For example, Freire, (2000) opposes what he calls as the banking system of education, in which students are treated as empty bottles for knowledge to be simply be filled in. The teacher fills in knowledge and a student just receive. In this case a student is seen only as passive receiver of knowledge. Freire (2000) calls for critical change in the education pedagogy so that the receivers of education should be able to construct and change the

world to be a better place. Education should mean to create critical thinkers and inquirers.

Influenced by Freire, Levy Vygotsky offered a social theory of consciousness and of learning (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). In his work Vygotsky (1978) argues that, social and psychological processes are key in the formation and knowledge-based individuals. He sees the development of higher mental functions to be derived from social and historical facts. He sees education as more than the discovery of things or being at a state of passively receiving knowledge, for him, he describes learning as the zone of proximal development which is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers Vygotsky (1978). Media literacy involves itself in reflecting and working on these zones of proximal development' in guiding and unfolding truth behind the information received.

Media Literacy: A shift from Protection to Democratization

Media literacy scholars such as Buckingham (2007); Spector (2015) and Hobbs & Jensen (2022) argued that media literacy education is a paradigm shift towards the democratization of knowledge. The most prominent scholar of this movement is Len Masterman in his book *teaching the media.* (Masterman, 1985) argued that media literacy importantly has to introduce some new major pedagogic transformations in the teaching of media. Media literacy has to take a position of constructivism in creating a better society. For him media literacy hence should borrow insights from the constructivist approach of education.

The thriving and development of media literacy needs "non-hierarchical teaching modes and a methodology which will promote reflection and

critical thinking whilst being as lively, democratic, group-focused, and action-oriented as the teacher can make it (Masterman (1985).

Further with the Influence by Masterman (1985), Buckingham (2003) argued that media literacy is a facilitating tool as a shift from protection nature of education to education as preparation to face new challenges and be able to solve them. According to him, media literacy should be inclusive and enhance the democratization of knowledge Buckingham (2003). The changes of information technologies and the introduction of digital communication gives media literacy more power to education, as the goal of education. According to Buckingham (2003) and Masterman (1985) is not about mastering the content but rather to understanding the use of information in solving the real – world problems. This way of thinking on the utilization of information is actually the goal of media literacy. It is logical therefore, to converge media literacy, learning theories.

From the theoretical perspective, scholars seem to agree that, media literacy is a tool of facilitating a new democratic and constructivist approach to media diet, which is more of preparing citizen to be more prepared to face and deal with reality that protecting them from it.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA LITERACY

Scientific literature have broadly discussed the importance of media literacy in different perspectives and in various contexts. This is because the concept of media literacy is multidisciplinary, it permeates many dimensions, such as culture, technological advancements, social, political, and economic. Traditionally, media literacy has been only focusing on print and audio-visual media and skills on how to be able to exploit traditional communication channels.

The importance of media literacy is highly emphasized on the young generation. It is generally known that, the youth are more engaged into new media technologies easily, however most of them do not have ability to evaluate and analyse the media content (Ivanović, 2014; Šuminas & Jastramskis, 2020). Media literacy propels in helping the youth to be able access, evaluate, analyse and critically to understand media content correctly and hence benefit from the media content intelligently.

Recently, the concept of media literacy has been extended from its traditional focus on print and audio-visual to include digital media platforms. Due to the development of new media landscape, it is very essential now people need to develop new competencies and skills to make the able to be effective in the mass mediated society (Baker, 2018; Mallon, 2018; Sadovaya et al., 2017).

Media literacy educates people to become aware and more critical of the media they consume, for protecting themselves from destructive information, have a better understanding of media content and enjoy the media content. (Potter, 2008).

The concept of literacy today, involves getting the right knowledge and skills to read and do interpretations of various texts and artifacts and then use the skills and knowledge to deal with challenges, conflicts, and crises. Media literacy, is about understanding the media content, and use it as a source of information, growth and empowerment (Metzgen-ohlswager, 2010).

Media literacy incorporates three stages that lead to the empowerment of citizens of all ages: (a) becoming aware of the importance of making choices and managing the amount of time spent with various media forms; (b) learning specific skills of critical viewing and surfing — learning to analyse and question what is in the frame/on the screen, how it is constructed, and what may have been left out; and (c) exploring deeper issues of who produces the media that people experience and for what purposes (Grace, 2005; Pérez Tornero & Tapio, 2010)

The role of media in education is of great importance because with ageing the possibility of using everyday media grows, which enables the development of media literacy and effect of media culture. Media literacy represents an educational process which tends to enable members of the community to creatively and critically study (on the level of production, distribution, and monitoring) with usage of technological and traditional media of development and liberation of an individual and the society, for democratization of communication

CONCLUSION

The current paper has drawn from literature the conceptualization of medial literacy, its theoretical explanation and at what extend media literacy is important in digital age. The study reveals that, media literacy if well applied is key gateway to knowledge, competence, and skills. Through media literacy an individual is facilitated to know how best to acquire knowledge and skills of accessing, evaluating, analysing, and constructing content in a media outlet which is worthwhile for growth and human development.

Drawing from a theoretical perspective of media literacy, the study concludes that, media literacy is a tool to facilitate a better constructive approach to media diet – opens eyes to media consumers of what could be a health media diet to them. Further, media literacy enhances citizens to be more prepared to deal and face the digital age realities than being protected from it. Media literacy is an empowering tool of citizens. It helps citizens making choices and be able to manage amount of time spent in media platforms, learning specific skills for critical viewing and surfing, and exploring into deeper issues of who produces the media and of what purposes.

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