

A person wearing a VR headset is sitting on a bench in a blurred city street, suggesting a focus on digital immersion and technology.

DISCUSSION PAPER

Media and Information Literacy in the Digital Age

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Introduction

Written, visual, and audio media tools pervading our information environment constantly bombard audiences with messages.

We almost always interact with different kinds of content, such as news, advertising, entertainment, educational material, drama, documentary, politics, or ideological messaging. Meanwhile, sweeping changes have affected the frequency and style of interacting with media content. Moreover, our relationship with knowledge today has exponentially increased compared to previous eras. Today, human interaction with information takes a different dimension, from consumption to production and sharing of information. The data produced in just a few years in our time equals the total amount produced throughout human history.

Moreover, the amount of data produced is increasing ascendingly every day. We regularly produce data through all the electronic tools we use that are connected to the internet. All the data produced as a mass of information plays a role in influencing and shaping our digital world first and then our real life. Presently, the flow of information occurs at the speed of light thanks to digital technologies. While technology has made this possible, it has also reshaped the value and impact of knowledge. Different sectors, such as education, mass production, agriculture, industry, health, security, transportation, communication, and media, are on the verge of a major shift. Even though knowledge has been considered a source of power since ancient times, it is even more so currently, as it is used as the main element of domination, control, and direction.

Producing eloquent speeches was a sign of being erudite in ancient times. The power of verbal communication resonated in early societies and was essential to maintain a common understanding. The invention of writing served

as a new source of power and a vital privilege enjoyed by a minority in society. The printing press provided another and more effective way of influencing, governing, and directing societies while helping to reproduce information relatively quickly and in a much shorter time. Then came the era of the newspaper, radio, cinema, and television as mass media. While they served for education and entertainment purposes, they also gave the power centres, which controlled these tools, a power of influence on a scale never seen before. These technological advances, each of which has made numerous contributions to societies, have paved the way for more dominance, influence, and direction over the masses, confirming the adage “knowledge is power.” Today, thanks to internet-based, interactive, and digital environments, new media offer an experience on a different level. We communicate, obtain information, receive the news, be entertained, and produce and consume content. We are more intertwined with information and open to its influence than ever before. The extent of this influence, with its adverse effects, highlights the importance of digital media literacy.

Media literacy, in general, characterises the efforts to prevent individuals and societies from being passive towards all these information transfer tools with which they interact. In addition, maximising individual and social benefits by using these tools most effectively is one of the main goals of literacy skills. This paper discusses the interaction of individuals and societies with information in the context of digital media and information literacy.



(Kadir Şengün - Anadolu Agency)

What is Media Literacy?

The concept of media literacy is a significant issue that has been on the agenda of societies for nearly a century. With the widespread use of mass media, the social effects of these tools have started to be noticed. It became necessary for the user to be mindful of the various fallacies, innuendo, and nefarious propaganda that pervades the mass media environments. Subsequently, media literacy emerged because of this necessity. Media literacy describes the skills required to display a critical approach to the content interacted with through the media (Lemish, 2015). It is "active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create" (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Silverblatt and Eliceiri (1997), on the other hand, defined the concept in their media literacy dictionary as a critical thinking skill that makes it possible to analyse the information received through mass communication channels and to make independent decisions about the content. The most accepted definition in the international literature, media literacy, is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and convey messages in various forms (Aufderheide, 1997).

Literacy skills, such as classical, media, and digital literacy, can be defined as the ability to effectively use communication technologies with which people interact for every period to consume and produce the content transmitted through these tools with a critical approach. In the classi-

cal sense, *literacy* can be defined as reading, understanding, interpreting, and recording information with the skills of writing various kinds of texts. Writing can be described as the second most crucial discovery after language, which makes numerous contributions to the development of societies, from commerce to the transfer of culture, from social interaction to communication. The most important difference between media literacy and digital literacy is that a critical approach to media content is considered essential in media literacy. In contrast, the distinguishing factor is the active participation of individuals who have become content producers thanks to digitalisation.

Media consumption has always been an essential part of the social structure. Newspapers, radio, cinema, and television have acquired a wide area of use and have affected society. These media types have been described as a part of social life, an important pillar of the economic structure, and an essential structure for our democracies with their different features and areas of use (McLuhan & Powers, 2001). Media tools have a significant role in the construction of the social structure, the transmission and reproduction of culture, and all aspects of daily life, from entertainment to education. Therefore, many different studies have been conducted to determine the effects of the media on people and society (Bennett & Paletz, 1994).

When we look at the research on mass media in general, it is possible to talk about three different periods. The first period is the period of strong influences that allow these tools to form a mass culture and are thought to impact the mass substantially. The second period is known as the period of limited effects, which dominated between 1940 and 1960 and around which social scientists produced much experimental work around the mainstream approach. The third period can be described as the period of critical studies in which criticism is directed at the evaluations of mainstream researchers (Bennett, Woollacott, & Clarke, 1982).

The communication process was assumed as a one-way message flow in the first period, which can be defined as the mass media tools period. The messages flow to the target through a channel, focusing on spreading messages, including propaganda. In this period, theories such as the magic bullet or the hypodermic needle were put forward. Because of the assumptions that the mass media have potent effects on people, this period is called the period of strong effects. The research focused on the mass media and their influence (McQuail & Windahl, 2015). Later, studies emerged that suggested that the target audience may have a selective role, and it was started to be stated that the mass media may have a low impact. In this period, which is called limited effects, theories such as "two-stage flow" were put forward, and it was stated that the effect would be shaped not only by the message transmitted from the mass media but also through the filter of social interactions (Katz, 1987). Subsequently, theories, such as uses and gratifications, focused on what the media consumer does with the media (rather than the mass media) and the characteristics of the message (Hermes, 2013).

An early event to exemplify the impact power of mass media on society told in communication faculties reveals the importance of this subject. In 1938, a radio drama on the CBS radio station caused panic in New York and New Jersey that aliens had invaded the world. This broadcast, the radio adaptation of Herbert George Wells' famous novel "The War of the Worlds," was believed by the listeners to be real. This incident made people stock up on food in fear and panic, and some tried to leave the city. As a result, the police raided the radio station. Even after clarifying the situation, the radio station was to blame for this panic, triggering lawsuits against the station's management.

This event represents a good example of how a society that has just experienced radio broadcasting takes this techno-

logical tool and its messages literally. While some consider such a reaction preposterous, this episode reveals the mass media's capacity to influence people. With the developing technology, all kinds of mass media or new media that pervade our information environment significantly affect individuals and society, whether people are aware of it or not. It is possible to observe the media effects in all walks of life, from the advertising's influence on individual consumers to the formation of public opinion.

In his seminal work "Public Opinion", one of the pioneering books on the media's shaping of public opinion, Walter Lippmann emphasises that people's perspectives are created with the help of the media and that the image created in people's minds is perceived as real (Lippmann, 1929). Today, many experts complain about the alleged harm of media content on society, which causes negative consequences. Mass media's rapid spread of misinformation has led this new society to be labelled as a misinformation society (Pickard, 2016). What is meant by the term post-truth is the difficulty of reaching the truth in today's social structure, where alternative realities exist (Madrigal, 2017). False information and lies quickly replace the truth, and more importantly, reaching the truth ceases to be a choice or even an aim for people (Higgins, 2016). The power of the news media to set society's agenda and focus the public's attention on specific issues is an evident and studied situation.¹ People get more than just learning about specific topics through the news media. Readers and viewers learn through the media what is more important and less important through the media's emphasis on the issues. Newspapers offer a system of which topics will stand out from the daily news. On which page, in which fonts, and in which colours the news is presented shapes the audience's minds. In other words, the news media influences what subjects people talk about and which ones they may ignore. Hence, media outlets contribute directly or indirectly to shaping the audiences' perspectives on relevant content (McCombs, 2002).

Academics put forward many mass communication theories. They researched the characteristics of mass media, its social effects, and the relations between the mass and these tools have put forward some opinions, and studies in this area are continuing. However, despite all these efforts, there are differences in approaches, methodologies, and findings. Moreover, mass media studies based on different assumptions and ideological backgrounds² have led to the emergence of schools that contradict each other and

¹ Janna Anderson, Lee Rainie, (2018). Stories from experts about the impact of digital life, "The negatives of digital life." <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/07/03/the-negatives-of-digital-life/>

² Pamela J. Shoemaker, Stephen D. Reese, (1996). Mediating The Message Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content, Longman.

make different propositions regarding these tools' characteristics and social effects. Even the emergence of many different theories and views is vital in pointing out the complex structure of mass communication and revealing the need for media literacy. It is undeniable that the mass media have a particularly noticeable impact on society, whether strong or limited. For this reason, the people who are the recipients of these messages need media literacy skills in order to avoid any nefarious effects and to make the most of these tools (Livingstone & McDougall, 2014).

Attempts to increase media literacy, first initiated in the United States, have survived to the present day as a subject added to the curriculum in schools in European countries and subsequently in many countries of the world. With the increasing awareness of the importance of media literacy, it has been taught in schools as a stand-alone course. In addition, it has been the subject of symposiums, conferences, and workshops. Some organisations have tried to draw attention to literacy through public service announcements in mass media. These efforts aimed to create a citizen profile that will consciously interact with media tools and content. In other words, media literacy is the adventure of developing a critical perspective that filter the messages disseminated by the mass media (Unesco, 2013). To achieve this aim consider the following perspective: Mass

media are proprietary and commercial structures, content is a "produced material" that is fictional, messages are a version of reality, are shaped by relevant content producers, and messages offer an agenda (Worsnop, 2004).

Despite legal regulations, supervisory institutions, and sanctions, it is impossible to fully protect society and individuals against mass media's possible harms and make the best use of these tools. Therefore, media literacy is the most crucial step in achieving this goal. However, it is not easy to talk about a media literacy skill that can be adopted and applied efficiently for society and mass media, which are in constant flux. For this reason, this effort, which has a history of nearly a century, is often described as an unsuccessful or unaccomplished attempt.

From this point of view, it is concluded that instead of considering media literacy as a stand-alone and independent approach, it is necessary to consider it as a multi-faceted issue related to many other steps taken at this point. For this reason, media literacy is considered a dynamic process constantly renewed and integrated with new approaches in parallel with the development of communication tools and technology. The adventure of literacy, ranging from classical literacy to media literacy, from information literacy to digital literacy, is a result of this situation.

Why do people need "digital media literacy" nowadays?

Technological developments have caused social changes and transformations in every period of history. Since the invention of writing, countless examples can be listed, and all kinds of technological developments that affect societies in different ways also affect individuals. In the 21st century, developments in the field of technology have accelerated compared to previous periods. Social changes and transformations that lasted for centuries began to take place in decades with the influence of technology-based elements. The social structures that emerged after the invention and spread of the newspaper, the radio, the telephone, and television are so different that they cannot be compared with the periods when these tools did not exist. The same situation manifests itself at the point of the individual, and many behavioural changes stand out, from eating and drinking habits to establishing relationships, from work habits to attention level.

The invention of the internet network and its rapid spread have caused differentiation from people's communication habits to their leisure activities. It has become possible to be included in this virtual network from anywhere at any time of the day. This virtual network, which covers almost all daily life, has evolved into a different dimension with the introduction of social media channels. Therefore, new / digital media is considered a new type of media. In addition to meeting societies' communication, education, information, and entertainment needs, it has prepared the ground for creating a secondary identity and realising a new form of existence in the virtual world thanks to the virtual identities produced by people. Moreover, these tools have created the possibility of mutual interaction, unlike what could not be done in previous mass media. In other words, considering that traditional mass media are one-way and interaction is extremely limited or non-existent,

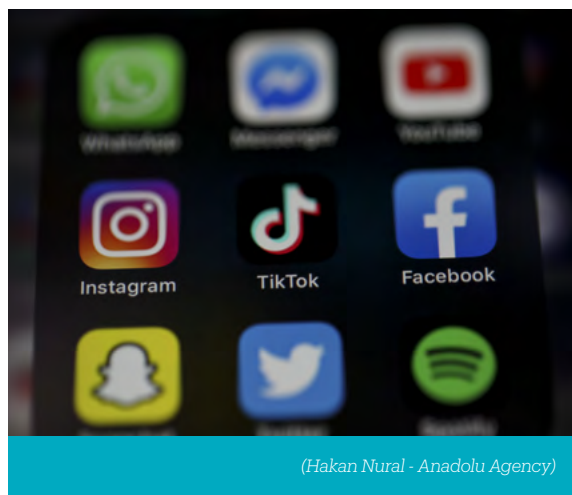
it is likely that advanced technological tools and environments would affect individuals and societies at a much more significant level.

The internet has affected people's daily life in specific ways and changed it as if it is rebuilding society from its foundation. It has caused sociologists to express the new social structure that has emerged thanks to this new technology as a network society (Dijk, 2018). The emergence of the internet and its higher use compared to mass media have been made possible by a series of technological developments that come with it (Dahlgren, 2005). These include minimally manufacturing microprocessors, data storage and transmission facilities, digitisation, and using a single standard language on all technological devices.

Thanks to social media, individuals have turned into both a producer and a consumer rather than just a consumer. People can create content through social media and modify a comment or share content created by others. This whole structure based on mutual interaction has become possible with Web 2.0 technologies, leading to social networking services' emergence. Social media is a web service that collects content from other websites and their users. Social media creates big data network media based on the creativity of individual users or some communities. People in this network are content creators but are generally considered contributors. These participants can create content or be data copied from other sites (Lietsala & Sirkunen, 2008).

Developments in communication technologies have led to significant changes in the daily life of society (Rogers, 2003). Moreover, some changes have been made in citizens' communication with public institutions and how official business and transactions are carried out. Content sharing on social media, creating an account and sending messages, video and voice calls over the internet, and messaging over the internet are among the most intense usage purposes. On the other hand, there is a steady increase in the realisation of business and transactions related to public institutions and organisations over the internet (Beck, 2011). It is seen that social media applications, defined as new media or social media and based on an internet-based global network, have become indispensable elements of people's daily life. People of all age groups use these tools today by creating one or more accounts. In the words of Lincoln (2009), "Social media gives ordinary people such power that they have never enjoyed using power to this extent at any time in history."

There are many areas where internet technology can benefit existing democratic structures and communication



(Hakan Nural - Anadolu Agency)

processes (Dahlgren, 2005). McLuhan's argument of technological determinism has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. He argued that technological tools determine, change, and transform the structure of society. This argument has proven its validity in today's societies. Thanks to the development of information technologies, the technological tools in our lives reveal a new lifestyle and cultural structure (McLuhan & Powers, 2001). Undeniably, digitisation, satellite technologies, and fibre optic technologies profoundly affect today's society.

All the traditional media tools can work over the internet today and integrate with the internet environment. The latter has many features, such as much lower cost and less labour. Therefore, broadcasting can occur wherever there is an internet service. With the introduction of digital technologies into daily life, the three most important features of new media that affect human life are interaction, demasification, and asynchrony (Rogers, 2003). Today's media, defined as new media, and mobile devices, which are widely used in accessing these media, have enabled the sending and receiving of messages among a wide range of users (Kemp, 2019).

The experience of digital communication allows the individual to interact with media content at levels never reached before. This versatile, unlimited, and spaceless interaction opportunity also lacks control and auto-control mechanisms. In addition to all its advantages, it can cause many adverse effects in terms of the lack of internal and external audit and control mechanisms in traditional media tools. A qualitative and quantitative transformation is experienced simultaneously. Therefore, in the classical sense, media literacy needs to respond to the needs of the digital era. These structural changes, pioneered by technological developments, have revealed a new society and

individual in media consumption, as in many other areas. Human interaction with knowledge now takes place in a different dimension. Therefore, this process formed the basis of the conceptualisation of digital literacy.

In his ground-breaking book "The Third Wave" (1980), Alvin Toffler describes this period of information society we live in, the concepts of virtualisation and digitisation as an opportunity to create the most intelligent civilisation in human history with a little rational intervention. According to Toffler, all three periods (waves) are currently being experienced, each at a different rate and in different regions. The agricultural society started ten thousand years ago and was the only structure governing societies for thousands of years. The industrial society started about three hundred years ago and changed the socioeconomic structure of the entire world. Last, the network society started in the second half of the twentieth century and is permeating the world currently. In some locations, agriculture is still done as it was in the pre-industrial period. Some world areas are still under the influence of industrial society, while many regions of the world are under the influence of the Third Wave. The latter is advancing at a rapid rate day by day. Precisely for this reason, due to the simultaneous existence of these three different social structures in the world, there are situations that Toffler describes as wave conflicts; in other words, people equipped with the characteristics of different periods show different reactions to the characteristics of another period.

The structural transformation of societies is a phenomenon that takes place in line with material production conditions. From the hunter-gatherer societies and the agricultural society to the industrial society that emerged with the invention of the steam engine and the mass production line, the social structure was shaped by the influence of these material production forms on which it was built. The social structure of the information age has also been shaped by the technological developments listed above. The industrial society, where factories, working hours, and standardisation are the main production elements, is now leaving its place to the information society, where computers, satellites, intelligent factories and devices, digital networks, and virtual environments have become the essential elements. In addition, the developments in network technology in the 2000s made computers and the internet an integral part of daily life in the age of information societies. These technological developments, which provide the opportunity to produce, organise, store, and transmit information speedily and easily, combined with the developments in the mobile field, have formed the fundamental character of today's information-age society.

In the information age, individuals experience an effortless process of accessing information like never before. However, the fact that access to information can be realised easily has revealed advantages but also drawbacks. The concept of information pollution describes a problematic situation that harms people's daily lives, at least as much as environmental or air pollution. Regular exposure to a constantly flowing flood of information is becoming a serious predicament. At this point, the desired behaviour, which can be described as a skill, is to access accurate, functional information, so knowledge becomes wisdom. The way of behaviour that will make this possible is, of course, to gain literacy skills against the digital information flood. Moreover, since the individual is not only the consumer but also the producer of the content in the digital era, competence in producing, modifying, arranging, organising, and publishing content most beneficially and effectively is among the most basic requirements of this period.

Another vital competence emphasised at the point of digital media and information literacy is to know how digital, that is, virtual platforms, work. Knowledge of the digital language, the language used by computers, phones, and the internet, the sequence of 1 and 0, and knowledge at a level to write the codes that make the operation of all these technological tools possible is an aim of digital literacy.

It is aimed at a more conscious approach to purposeful or misleading media content such as fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and mal information. That is possible by keeping in mind that content is designed, produced, and prepared within the framework of certain purposes and set specific agendas. Since much health-related information can be easily accessed via the internet, people can only be prevented from turning to some treatment methods and drugs without the supervision of a doctor, only by gaining health literacy. Furthermore, with advertisements invading all areas of the public and private sphere via numerous media tools, media and information literacy skills offer tangible resources to prevent citizens from becoming passive consumers with conscious and unconscious biases.

How to Achieve Digital Media Literacy

The importance of media literacy is sometimes hindered by the debates surrounding this field, ranging from signification to implementation. Lack of consensus also touches the population sections that need media literacy skills. Early studies discussed equipping children with this skill, assuming that parents and teachers were naturally protected against the media's harmful effects. This approach has proved ineffective, limiting media consumption for children under parents' supervision while paving the way for adults to exhibit an exaggerated self-confidence towards media content.

At this point, it is evident that digital media and information literacy are necessary and beneficial for all individuals surrounded by media messages nowadays. Studies show that positive results are achieved through media literacy initiatives in all age groups (Bulger & Davison, 2018). Teachers, students, and adults have displayed positive results such as critical thinking, careful consumption, and selectivity towards partisan content. Behavioural change, albeit to a lesser extent, was observed (Jeong, Cho, & Hwang, 2012). Some studies show that media literacy education increases children's critical handling of media messages (Hobbs, 2016). In addition, effective participation and media content production skills, basic requirements of digital media literacy, have increased the ability of students (assigned to produce media messages) to consider different views and interpret events from a broader perspective. According to the findings of Renee Hobbs (2016), high school students tasked with preparing and presenting news content reported an increase in their intellectual interests, such as dealing with all aspects of the issue, questioning what they read or heard, and comparing facts and claims. Moreover, thanks to such initiatives, a remarkable increase was observed in terms of respecting different ideas, even if students did not think the same way.

Being involved in the media content production process reminds us that media messages are constructed and may not reflect the reality. Therefore, one of the essential skills from a media literacy perspective is to take on the role of producing media content by actively using all the possibilities offered by digitalisation instead of being a mere viewer/reader/listener. To this end, it is vital to learn how media content such as video, photography, film, and sound effects is produced, processed, and edited through school courses or public events.

Media literacy effectively protects from the harms of violent elements in the media (Krahé & Busching, 2015). Awareness of and recognising violence presented through the media and developing a critical perspective are essential in reducing the impact of such content. According to a long-term study conducted by Krahé and Busching (2015) on secondary school students in Germany, it was determined that the rate of searching for violent media content and accepting this violence in the media decreased within the sample that took part in the media literacy course. The most exciting finding of this study is that the students who attended the course experienced a decrease in their physical anger, according to their statements. These results support the idea that consuming media content seriously affects our real life and behaviours. In addition, adopting a conscious consumption will not only help the interaction with media in our daily life to take place more healthily, but it may also enable many behavioural problems in our social life to be reduced or even eliminated.

Selectivity towards media content is an approach that can be gained through media and information literacy education. Finding and choosing evidence-based messages that are more reliable instead of messages containing incorrect or incomplete information can be achieved with media literacy education. This skill helps limit the adverse effects of media content handled with a critical attitude. Moreover, the audience's critical approach to the message contributes to combating disinformation. Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer (2017) observed that young people between the ages of 15-27 who attended media literacy courses make positive improvements, especially in critically evaluating partisan political messages. Regardless of whether they agree with the political stance in the relevant message, the youth handled the messages with a more critical approach. These outcomes highlight the importance of media literacy against ongoing information pollution, disinformation, and misinformation through the new and traditional media in today's world.

Media literacy is essential in making visible the systematic and complex structure behind the message, often overlooked by consumers of media content (Bulger & Davison, 2018). Being aware that most of the content is produced by profit-oriented, organised structures creates the basis for being a more conscious consumer.

Conclusion

Initially, media literacy was meant to educate children in cooperation with the school and families. As a result, media literacy was incorporated into school curricula after an excruciating process. However, despite all the energy and resources dedicated to this endeavour, the desired outcomes remained limited. After a few years, it became obvious that media literacy, especially digital media literacy, affects every aspect of life for people of all ages. Therefore, it must target more than just children. These skills are indispensable for all.

Furthermore, several intellectuals expressed their abhorrence of the negative effects of social media. Some went to the extent of calling for a return of these virtual platforms to their original functions. Originally, these virtual platforms were promoted as new democratic instruments and freedom of expression tools. Unfortunately, they have morphed into mass manipulation apparatuses, misleading people via fake news and fabricated information and becoming the biggest obstacle to living together in social peace.

Today, the concept of information pollution is replaced by dirty information. Instead of making human beings more competent, successful, valuable, and connected, the pervasive information environment leads us to an unsuccessful, dissociated, dependent, standardised, and lonely way of life. In fact, societies move in the opposite direction of socialisation, from communication habits to shopping behaviour, from online business to entertainment. These new emerging trends may uproot our "information society" from its societal bonds. The concept of digital media and information literacy, which can solve many problems faced by today's societies, ranging from cultural imperialism to disruptions in interpersonal communication, is one of the most critical competencies to have in the period we live in.



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