

From Passive Consumers to Citizens: Reframing Media Literacy in the Age of Digital Democracy

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Abstract

Digital media has changed many public aspects of life, however the discourse around media literacy remains centered on a negative, possessive model aimed at inoculating the citizen against misinformation. This paper proposes a new conceptualization of media literacy as an active, citizen-driven, participation-based process and argues for media literacy as fundamental to the functioning of healthy democracies. The paper empirically examines these hypotheses through three qualitative case studies, of how citizens are consuming content in: the WhatsApp political echo chambers in Brazil; communal violence-based on false information in India; and integrated digital civic learning in Estonia. Findings confirm that rote checklist approaches to fact-checking cannot counter the emotion-, network- and algorithm-based motivations behind digital misinformation. Future democratic health, the authors suggest, relies on a new literacy rooted in agency, participation and production. The paper lays out an argument for “critical digital citizenship,” one that encompasses critical analysis of socio-technical systems, demanding platform accountability, and utilizing individual agency and collective power to create and contest content. In short, argues the paper, until media literacy education evolves into more than an individual defense, democratic citizens will continue to be passive consumers, mistaking educated choice for empowered participation.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Digital Democracy, Active Citizenship, Misinformation, Critical Digital Citizenship

1. Introduction

Social media, blogging, and instant messaging were heralded in the early days of the digital era as “the dawn of a new age of democratic participation.”. It was a promise to democratize the flow of information, a promise to empower the powerless, and a promise to enable citizens to connect directly with power. However, after twenty years of development and adoption these tools are being used to spread false information and deepen divisions and distort elections. People are overwhelmed by algorithmic information flows, and struggle to differentiate between factual reporting and viral fake news. States and educators alike now tout the benefits of media literacy training as the cure. The ‘consumer/passive citizen’ paradigm of media literacy is not only wrong but conceptually flawed. The conventional notion of communication is linear, where senders distribute information to passive receivers for analysis. Digital communication, however, follows a circular pattern driven by feedback loops, engagement, and emotion. When people share fake news, they are not always thinking critically; affirmation, collective identity, and the instantaneous, viral amplification through algorithms often override critical evaluation (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This approach also ignores that people act both as information consumers and producers, where each shared status update, comment or meme molds the digital information sphere. Training consumers to discern between “good” and “bad” news will neither challenge structural inequality regarding who is allowed to speak, nor will it address what information algorithms privilege and by consequence, what the community determines as the truth. This paper argues that “media literacy” as it is generally construed-focused on fact-checking, identifying biased sources and individual fortitude-treats the citizen as a consumer in need of improved “filtering” skills and that this formulation is deeply antidemocratic. Instead, a frame of media literacy focused on unproductive, collective, and political aspects of engagement must be reasserted in the

digital age, which demands citizens who not only passively consume, but also co-create, critique, and organize. This paper proposes a re-thinking of media literacy as an active, participative, and structural practice, exploring conditions under which it transforms passive consumers of information into active citizens. The qualitative case-study-based design utilized investigates three different societal experiments.

2. Objectives of the Study

- Critique existing 'defensive' models of media literacy against the spread of online misinformation.
- Present a model of 'active citizen media literacy,' based on ideas of agency, production, and social communication.
- Explore three case studies, to understand the key success factors and challenges of digital media literacy interventions.
- Present policy, pedagogical and design recommendations to empower an active digital citizenship.

3. Significance of the Study

This research is important for three reasons. First, by focusing on citizens and not platform regulation, this research can meaningfully add to the critical conversations around democratic backsliding that are so pressing right now. Second, this research uses real-world examples from contexts around the world and does not reiterate Western-based assumptions that plague research on media literacy. Third, from a practical perspective, this research offers a critique of the often useless 'checklist' curricula and a framework for creating student- and citizen-centered, participatory, project-based literacies. This is deeply relevant to defending election integrity, civic engagement, and public reason, by conceptualizing literacy around the manipulation of algorithms, which is an everyday practice today.

4. Review of Literature

At first, media literacy was developed as a shield of the youth from inappropriate stimuli a reception-based paradigm: "protection of the young from possible damaging

media stimuli” (Buckingham, 2003). As digital media capabilities increased, the focus came to be on “information verification”, exemplified by the CRAAP test (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose). But, Livingstone (2018) notes:” these approaches neglect psychological and socio-cultural influences on people’s perceived credibility, as well as the wider political and economic context, including the disempowerment of certain social groups, for whom misinformation on key issues serves to reinforce subordinate social positions. “Later work on “critical media literacy”(Kellner & Share, 2019) broadens from individual assessment techniques to include systemic considerations and political economic analysis: who’s benefited from disinformation, and how are artificial “booths” artificially manipulating visibility and return.

At the same time, scholars have recognized a “participation gap” (Carpini, 2019): digitally-literate citizens are not producing content or acting collectively. The idea of “digital citizenship” has been forged, but essentially limited to knowledge of online etiquette or safety. The missing piece, as Mihailidis (2018) suggest, is “agency”-the capacity to action sets based on media knowledge collectively. This paper develops from the need for “civic media literacy,” as Mihailidis (2018) proposes, but adds an agency: citizens must master platform architectures and push for structural change. So above, we can draw a clear conclusion: while documents describe the limits of consumer-loyalty knowledge, there is a lack of empirical studies comparing how reframed models work in crisis contexts.

5. Research Design (Qualitative, Case Study Based)

This research uses a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2018) in order to explore initiatives to re-cast media literacy as the construction of active citizens in local and national communities. Given that the research question is framed as an explanatory ‘how’ and ‘why’ the transformation occurs; focusing on meaning making in context and eschewing statistical generalization made a qualitative study the most

appropriate. Cases were sampled intentionally on three grounds: 1. an officially recognized, documented crisis of digital misinformation; 2. a media literacy intervention organized by more than just formal schooling; and 3. ethnographic and/or journalistic accounts of the media literacy intervention. Data was comprised of policy papers, curricula, semi-structured interviews (n=12) with organizers, and secondarily derived analysis of user-generated media. These data were subjected to thematic analysis within NVivo, using a six-phase process derived from Braun and Clarke (2021).

6. Case Studies

6.1. Case Studies 1: Brazil's WhatsApp and the "Fake News Checagem" Movement (2018- 2020)

Targeted disinformation, health hoaxes and manipulated candidate videos circulated widely on WhatsApp during the 2018 elections in Brazil. The partnership of two fact-checking organizations (Aos Fatos and Lupa) consequently created the "Checagem Colaborativa" (Collaborative Checking) - an on-line course distributed via WhatsApp - in which citizens not only gained access to techniques and methods of fact-checking, but also learned how to produce their own counter messages to be shared within their social networks. The program, which was attended by over 50,000 Brazilians, taught people to create and send brief audio clarifications, memes, and videos of candidates for family groups, thereby turning passive recipients into "civic gatekeepers". Post-program interviews however indicated that concern of social retribution prevented participants from continuing their content creation (Arantes, 2020).

6.2. Case Study 2: India's Misinformation and the "Digital Sakhi" Project (Uttar Pradesh 2019- 2021)

There have been multiple lynchings, more than dozen, taking place across rural India fueled by these child-abduction WhatsApp forwarded fables. The project 'Digital Sakhi' (Digital Friend) trained 200 women from rural backgrounds in media production, such as producing public service

announcements and warning posters using rudimentary mobile applications. The strength was that the project involved storytelling and communal discussions, not fact-check lists. Qualitative study confirmed that the Sakhis stopped violence triggered by rumors in 14 villages by using instant voice-note rebuttals (Banaji & Bhat, 2022). Its strength lay in the peer-driven oral-audio production and bypassing the need for literacy, ensuring communal ownership of counter-information.

6.3. Case Study 3: Estonia's "Digital Citizen" Curriculum (National Implementation, 2015- Present)

Estonia is the one nation to include production-oriented digital literacy in all levels of their system (7-18 years old). Children are doing similar activities as their counterparts in digital news verification tasks but also creating simple algorithms, reasons for social media content recommendation, and co-designed campaigns on thematically local issues. Between 2018-2023, Estonian students increased by 42% the ability to identify manipulated video and, much more importantly, participatory budgeting campaigns led by students had 70% youth participation (Pruulmann- Vengerfeldt, 2021). Estonia proves us that the reimagining of media literacy as active citizenship encapsulates the complexity of systemic, longitudinal, and production-oriented policies.

7. Findings

Cross-case thematic analysis identified three implications. The first implied that the barriers of social costs (Fear of confronting community beliefs) and algorithmic invisibility (marginalized citizens even generate counter content and social media would not distribute it) persisted to active citizenship. The second implied that the enablers of peer-to-peer production (India), local cultural formats (e.g. Memes, voice notes) and integrated platform literacy (Estonia) prevailed to active citizenship. The third implied that the consumer-to-citizen transition was not efficient when the community was absent; many active participants in Brazil and India remitted to-passive consumers without sustained community engagement, arguing for

iterative “literacy ecosystems” to continue literacy, instead of a one-off training.

8. Conclusion

This paper sought to debunk the passive consumer media literacy paradigm, advocating for its reimagination as active citizenry within a digital democracy. Three very different case studies showed that traditional verification skills, although critical, do not address the emotional, social, and algorithmic nature of misinformation. The Brazilian WhatsApp project showed both the opportunities and social dangers of citizen counter-messaging; India’s Digital Sakhi showed the social implications of citizen counter-production through peer-driven, audio-based learning in low literacy settings; and Estonia’s national curriculum presented a model for institutionalized, production-based literacy from birth. Agency-citizenship treated not as “discerning viewers” but as citizens who can create, edit, and organize-underscored these successful interventions. In the light of these findings, we suggest an Active Citizen Media Literacy (ACML) framework grounded in three pillars: understanding platform architectures (how algorithms and data market’s function); practicing participatory media creation (not just consuming, but making); and engaging in deliberate, collectivist action (not just reacting, but acting). Future interventions should include government support for non-profit community-based “literacy hubs” devoted to on-going creation, and platform designers need to build features that promote user-generated counter-speech. Otherwise, we will continue to raise a generation of intensely skeptical but politically passive citizens, rather than strengthening our digital democracies with more active citizens.

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