Perspective

The Necessity and Importance of Incorporating Media and Information Literacy into Holistic Metaliteracy

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Abstract

Digitalization and the emergence of the Internet have resulted in escalating access to information and communication. Given the circumstances that soaring access to information amounts to the intensification of misinformation and disinformation, a set of critical skills to navigate and critically assess the information is necessary. This paper outlines the significance of these skills, and provides a perspective on metaliteracy as a supplement to media and information literacy, and argues that the ability to conceptualize, access, comprehend, analyze, and use information is crucial in achieving inclusive, pluralistic, and participatory knowledge societies.

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Perspective

The significance of the media is well established, and for many people, it remains the only source of political information. Similarly, the media contents are of particular interest to researchers across disciplines, and an important source for political analysis. (see Hoeglinger, 2016)

It is axiomatic that the mass media are crucial to contemporary representative governments, which are taking the form of an audience democracy and demand the citizens to be well informed and interested in politics (Gavin, 2007; Graber, 2001; Kriesi, 2004). In modern democracies, politics are chiefly maintained through the media and many social and political changes in the 21st century are linked to media processes. This mediatization of politics is of paramount significance since the media can wield their own influence with their resources, interests, and agendas (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Gavin, 2007; Mazzoleni, 2008; Schulz, 2004).

Jürgen Habermas sparked modern research on the public sphere with the publication of '*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*' in 1962, which was translated as *'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere'* in 1989. Hanspeter Kriesi (2004, p. 188) argues, "public opinion is the outcome of the process of political communication in the public sphere", and the public sphere and public opinion are of paramount importance for policy-making (p. 185).

Although a variety of factors, whether domestic or international, exert influence on political attitudes and their development, (Gavin, 2018) the media and new technologies employ 'sophisticated methods' for shaping these attitudes and reconstructing politics (see: Bennett & Entman, 2001).

Given the stakes in political campaigns, the notion of news media wielding their influence to promote one side or the other has preoccupied scholars and worried citizens. Taking into account that the media are constructed and they construct reality, their political economy and political implications cannot be ignored. Simplistically, politicians use the media in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes as a tool for spreading their propaganda, and in liberal democracies for campaigns.

Rooted in Walter Lippmann's 1922 '*Public Opinion'* and Harold Lasswell's 1948 *'The Structure and Function of Communication in Society'*, many studies focused on how the media agenda becomes the public agenda, and consequently the policy agenda. Furthermore, they explored framing, agenda setting, priming, image building, and media effect among other theories.

The convergence of media and technology has given rise to significant information expansion, which makes the navigation of trustworthy information a considerable challenge. To prevent further decadence and mendacity, society needs to comprehend how to access, search, assess, and use data and information; hence, a form of literacy is demanded.

Different literacies can be identified within varying social contexts and under various circumstances. To enumerate a few; there are contributions to the concepts of functional, content, cultural, disciplinary, health, information, media, social media, multimedia, and digital literacies. Modern literacy is tied to technology, has broadened in scope, and the new concept of literacy covers "visual, electronic, and digital forms of expression and communication" (Koltay, 2011).

UNESCO is a staunch advocate of media and information literacy for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and building inclusive knowledge societies where information is fundamental to empower individuals. UNESCO launched the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) in 2005 for the implementation of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) through Literacy for All in order to meet the Education for All (EFA) goals (see: Ameli & Salehi-Nejad, 2019; Moeller et al., 2011).

Although media literacy is of paramount significance to all those who deliberately or unintentionally consume media, and its interdisciplinary concept has become in line with the new digital technologies, its competence as a single independent literacy may prove incomplete. For instance, a veteran journalist, who takes media literacy to be merely news literacy in its traditional print form, might risk ignoring citizen journalism, and news consumption and the spread of information across other platforms such as blogs, vlogs, social media and networks. By the same token, the use of data analytics in political campaigns and pushing one's agenda goes beyond individuals' deliberate subscriptions to news outlets or media channels (e.g. refer to the Cambridge Analytica scandal for further information). It is worth noting that most recently social media played a crucial role in political campaigns amidst the 2018 Russian elections, 2018 United States midterm elections, 2018 Brazilian General Election, and 2019 European Parliament election among others.

Indeed, a single literacy would prove inadequate, inappropriate, and inapplicable if prescribed for everyone universally. Traditionally, literacy indicated the ability to read and write, and numeracy skills. However, in today's world literacy goes beyond these basic skills; it demands critical comprehension of messages at syntactic, semantic, semiotics, pragmatic, and discursive levels; and one requires to be in the constant

state of updating their competences in accordance with the dynamics (Bawden, 2008).

Although the merits of information saturation owing to the rise of information and communications technology (ICT) are considerable, it is worth noting that the ramification of soaring access to publicly available surface information gives room to the escalating misinformation and disinformation.

The mass media are becoming mass entertainment and mass manipulation media, and many media outlets are degenerating into tabloids. Similarly, social media have provided a platform for citizen journalism and yellow journalism, and the ignorant, irresponsible and malicious dissemination of information is a worrisome problem (Kuzmin, 2013). Tabloidization through trivializing important developments or playing up relatively insignificant matters and dumbing down the content, not only prevents them from serving democracy but also "degrade culture and debase public debate" (Gavin, 2007, p. 25).

Unfortunately, these issues have also found their way into academia. It should be noted that in addition to the access constraints in the past, the information was rarely made public without scrutiny by editors, reviewers, and experts, or potential revision and even censorship. For instance, before the serials crisis, the learned societies and publishers took a more rigorous stand on scientific publishing. However– despite my personal active advocacy for open science– open access publishing is conducive to the surge of predatory publishers and the publication of low quality, plagiarized, fabricated, and manipulated papers.

One can argue that in some cases the ICTs not only have widened the gaps between information and knowledge but also facilitated the social stratification.

Whereas we cannot expect the individuals to become experts in critical discourse studies, it is reasonable to hypothesize that a unified approach to literacy prepares individuals to consciously and actively consume, produce, and distribute content digitally.

This approach augments information literacy, the characteristics of which (see: American Library Association, 2000; Bawden, 2008; Buckingham, 2006; Horton, 2008; Moeller et al., 2011) are outlined as the ability to

- determine the kind, extent, and adequacy of the required information,
- articulate, search and access information,
- evaluate information and its sources critically for credibility and authority,

- comprehend the essence and implications of the information,
- use information ethically and legally,
- purposefully and effectively use the information and incorporate it into knowledge, and
- be socially responsible and comprehend the role one plays in communication.

A holistic approach to literacy is demanded to enhance metacognitive critical thinking abilities to consume information, counter misleading or false narratives, and further comprehend the associated issues with the technology such as bias, privacy, and security (see: Jacobson & Mackey, 2013; Leaning, 2019; Mackey & Jacobson, 2011; Mackey & Jacobson, 2019).

Supplemented to information literacy, metaliteracy appertains to media, digital, cyber, ICT, and visual literacies. Metalitecy is an overarching comprehensive notion that provides an integrated and inclusive framework to cultivate critical thinking and proficiency in comprehending data, information, visuals and the media, particularly in technology-mediated settings through fortifying lifelong learning and attaining the objective of engendering critical engagement in individuals.

A metaliterate individual should be able to demonstrate competence in conceptualizing, accessing, filtering, comprehending, interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, using, incorporating, communicating, and redistributing information and data in print, audio, visual, multimedia, broadcast, and digital formats with appropriate attributions and within ethical and legal frameworks. Therefore, stakeholders and responsible citizens should systematically raise public awareness of the significance, scale, and topicality of metaliteracy.

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Biography
Alireza Salehi-Nejad is a social science and multidisciplinary researcher at the Cyberspace Research Policy Center and the Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran. He is also the executive board member of the UNESCO Chair on Cyberspace & Culture.

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