

Media Literacy: choices of content consumption among urban media users

Dr. Abira Chaudhuri

Assistant Professor
NSEC, Techno India Group, Kolkata.

Abstract

The advent of new media and colossal shift in communication technologies have made the aspect of media literacy studies significantly crucial and complex in comprehending the nature of media content consumption patterns of the media consumers vis-a-vis media literacy skills. Media today is substantially more than a powerful tool of information dissemination; it has matured into a prevalent platform to access, evaluate, create and validate heterogeneous media contents. The pervasiveness of media has been highly fueled by the rise in recent digital technologies. Media has silently but conspicuously entered into the domains of individual and group opinion and perception. In the world of information overload with internet in our pockets it is easier to access information/content but difficult to assess and navigate the magnitude of impact and heterogeneity associated with it. This study is an attempt to examine and understand the extent and nature of impact media literacy creates (if any) in deciding and devouring the nature of media contents by the urban media users. The study is primarily a qualitative analysis done by conducting focus group interviews aiming to understand the nature and extent of impact caused upon the choices made by the media consumers in selecting media content.

Keywords: *media literacy, content consumption, consumer discretion, media content popularity*

Date of Submission: 08-04-2026

Date of acceptance: 20-04-2026

I. Literature Review

Media literacy and media content

Massive technological development and the emergence of AI technologies has transformed the Media landscape drastically with social networking platforms playing dominant in numerous personal and social spheres, marks media literacy a mandatory skill for media users. The term ‘**Media Literacy**’ is defined as the ability to access, comprehend and responsibly use media and information in our personal and professional spheres. Media literacy—indeed literacy more generally—“is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms” (Aufderheide, 1993; Christ & Potter, 1998). Media literacy in real sense is not just being able to access, interpret and analyse media information, it is the media user’s ability to distinguish between true and fake, real and hyperreal, mediated and non-mediated, and choose content effectively. “Media literacy is the method of dissecting media content in order to critically analyse it. To do this, it is essential to look at media content’s underlying messages, its ownership and regulation, as well as how it is presented. This is not an easy process, and has no stopping point. It is necessary to always question what is shown in mediated communications” (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2018). Media with its unfiltered popularity and intrusion is fostering the emergence and evolution of our opinion, tastes, and perceptions; like- dislike, affinity- hate, consequently affecting our decisions and actions. “As we move towards ‘knowledge societies’, timely access to relevant, useful and quality information, including development information, is critical for making informed decisions and improving the lives of people.”(MILID Yearbook, 2015.)

Media is the most sought after and easily accessed information assembling tool now. However media content is not all about exhibiting reality, it is about crafting construction of narratives and versions of reality; governed by money, motive and muscle with commercial, social and political implications. “Media literacy is so important to consumers because it can help us to control our actions in response to media, and allow it to have less control over our views” (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2018).

Francis Bacon in England was overtly alarmed with the manner of misappropriation our mind exhibits in seeking knowledge. He in his book “The Advancement of Learning”, recognized “explicitly that mind cannot be safely left to its natural tendencies” (Bacon, 1605). According to him, “information-gathering processes play a dominant and crucial part in building a thought process. Media is undoubtedly an information gathering tool which today has reached beyond the domains of information gathering; it has explored the horizons of media content selection, evaluation, rejection, appreciation, validation and creation.

Baran's media literacy skills

Media literacy, like all other forms of literacy necessitates intended and organized understanding of Media; instilling the skills to recognise the characteristics of media literacy. Media literacy skills by (Baran, 2015) propose some noteworthy structures of media literacy; first is “the ability and willingness to make an effort to understand content, to pay attention and filter out noise”; apprehending what elements affect the version, one can be more observant when engrossing content.

Secondly, “having an understanding of, and respect for, the power of media messages” (Baran, 2015). a specific media may appear typecast but it can polarize a enormous bulk, liberating it may hurt the groups being personal and marginalized; must stay neutral towards it while showcasing cross-cultural sensitivity.

Thirdly, “ability to distinguish emotional from reasoned reactions when responding to content and act accordingly”. A specific content might appeal to our Media messages at times hit our emotions and impede logical discerning. Fourth, “development of heightened expectations of media content”, remarks the viral videos or the *most viewed* or *top viewed* viral vlogs, blogs or articles on the internet which could create a hyped effect. Next, is “the knowledge of genre conventions and the recognition of their mixing”; necessitates to comprehend diverse categorization procedures and how content is formed or permeated by these categories or bases. Sixth, is “the ability to think critically about media messages”; refers to the furthestmost significant fact about media contents and media literacy skills- ponder and consider disparagingly. Seventh is “the knowledge of the internal language of various media and the ability to understand its effects”; refers to deciphering messages on the basis of the motive and origin of source.

Baran points out that media literacy is significant in considering a media content in the strictures of being fake or true; mediated or non-mediated, subjective or objective. Discerning media contents and the capacity to differentiate between prejudiced and unprejudiced, dependable and undependable sources is a vital representative of an individual possessing media literacy skills. However, the key apprehension is the part it demonstrates in building choices of content consumption.

II. Research Method And Methodology

This study is an attempt to understand the nature of response and reaction witnessed among the young media users in content consumption choices and introspects the dynamics between individual experience and dependence in discerning media content Vis-a Vis choosing content of consumption. The Objective of this research is to study the nature of impact caused by media literacy skills upon the selection patterns and abilities of the media users in respect to choices made for media content consumption.

The research design and instruments used in this study have been derived from the research literature in the relevant field and the method of intervention is deduced from the recommendations of the literature. The qualitative analysis techniques consisting of three Focus group interviews on semi structured questionnaires has been used to arrive at a conclusion. A purposive sample consisting of 32 participants comprising college-goers, professionals and home-makers who are frequent visitors and highly active media users with exposure to social networking groups in the platforms namely YouTube, Facebook and Instagram not just for their professional and occupational needs but also for personal domains were interviewed in three separate focus groups namely: FG1, FG2, FG3. These participants in particular are either the creators or evaluators of the media content of the groups they belong to or both. The participants include:

- 6- Teachers from schools and colleges in the age group of (26-35 years.)-FG1
- 14- College/university-going students in the age group of (18-24 years.)-FG2
- 8- Corporate and self-employed professionals in the age group of (25-35 years.)-FG3
- 4- Homemakers in the age group of (27-35 years.)-FG1

Data collected from Focus group interviews

The purpose of the study was told to the respondents who were interviewed on a semi structured questionnaire framed on a set of variables. The secondary data (referred materials and related papers) was used for framing the set of variables for the questionnaire used for the interview. The respondents were interviewed in three groups separately in each phase to have a better and detailed understanding about their experience, dependence, opinion and beliefs on the given set variables. A total of 3 Focus group interviews with 32 respondents were conducted with duration of around 60 minutes each. The respondents were probed on the set elements/components of the research and were asked about their experience and exercise on the topic of discussion. The data collected provided deep insights to the key aspects of the research questions and in-depth understanding into specific aspects of evaluative parameters on making choices of media content consumption of the media users.

This research is based on the qualitative narrative interpretive analysis of the data gathered from the semi structured interviews consisting of 3 focus group discussions. Secondary sources have been used as a reference material for framing the research questionnaire. As the research is qualitative in nature, open ended questions

have been framed. The responses of the interviews were transcribed and analysed in order to get answers to each of these research variable. The research hypothesis of the study was determined considering the assortment of the following variables:

- Selection of content based on *credibility of sources*
- Selection of content based on *accuracy and objectivity*
- Selection of content on the basis of its *comprehensiveness*
- Selection of content based on its *popularity*

III. Findings and Discussion

The collected responses to the above research variables were segmented in order to analyse and understand the response to each research variable separately. It is observed that the respondents in general unanimously agreed that the *accuracy* of the content is integral to their selection of content as inaccurate content may sound more like a fiction which at times may sound good but not serve the purpose. However it is also simultaneously noted that around 35% of the respondents do not care about *objectivity* as much as they also consider *accuracy*; media bias, media prejudice or strategic audience capture as in the case of television commercials, is not as significant and alarming a concern to the consumers as the spreading of fake news. While spreading of fake news is considered an act of fooling audience and is dealt in a relatively more serious mode, media polarisation is rather normalised and less significantly prioritized concern so far and still manages to be a veiled content to many media consumers.

Another notable observation is the emergence of verifying the *credibility* of the news or content source is taking a significant lead in making choices of content consumption. Referring to multiple channels and narratives before validating a media content is a common practice for most of the respondents. The respondents unanimously agreed that with enormous technological advancement and massive shifts in media technology, it has become a perpetually cognizant necessity for the media consumers to navigate the challenges of misinformation, disinformation, fake news and hoaxes in accessing accurate and relevant information.

It is a distinguishing reflection that **100%** respondents opines that the selection of social media platforms are more of a selection based on *popularity* than judicious discretion. It is a part of their daily socio-cultural life formed on the basis of like-minded people who stake an akin wavelength in terms of insight, view, adores, aversions, sense of absurdity & reservations apart from information gathering & dissemination. According to the majority of the respondents a key object for the popularity of the social media webs is not just easy propagation and congregation of information but the cost effective element as well. The respondents of **FG2** mentioned that these platforms with their existing niceties and features would not have been as popular as they are if they would have been luxurious to meet the expenses of.

As far as the element of comprehensiveness is concerned, a mixed response has been recorded. The respondents believe that exploring all angles of a specific content is significant in arriving at a conclusion but are more concerned with presumed effects on sociological and political perspectives than psychological or economic. Alternative voices are critically appreciated but not always valued and welcomed by the mass. According to a majority of respondents contents on violence and crime are viewed, scrutinised massively by the viewers but has almost no or very less impact in reducing rate of their occurrences. Moreover, demographic patterns of gender ratio, literacy, and tradition play a pivotal role in deciding the comprehensiveness of a content.

IV. Conclusion

The notion and existence of fake news, disinformation and misinformation, well-known phenomenon with the modern users makes media literacy more of a life skill than just assessing, dissecting and evaluating media contents. Media literacy facilitates better categorisation, a key human aspect and promote identifying fake news, misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, demagoguery, lies and hoaxes which is crucial to media users. However, the study suggests a second important factor- content validation, validating a content after scrutinising multiple versions of the same; a choice made upon a juxtaposition of socio-cognitive aspects, associations and conventions applied as a whole in making decisions of content consumption in amalgamation with media literacy. This amalgamation makes the media users less susceptible to passive consumption of content.

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