The Critical Need for Media Literacy in a Digital Society

Kelli Al Claude

Professor Wood

English 1301

El Paso Community College: English Department

April 28, 2025

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Most of us start our day checking Instagram and end it binging Netflix. In between, we're constantly bombarded with ads, news alerts, and messages all fighting for our attention. Our lives are completely tangled up with digital media, but how many of us actually stop to think about how all this screen time messes with our heads? Media literacy—basically the ability to understand, analyze, and create media—isn't just some optional skill anymore; it's something we absolutely need to function in today's world. As tech gets more advanced and media gets sneakier, teaching people how to see through the diversions has to become a priority. Without these skills, we're all open to manipulation, making uninformed choices, and potentially causing harm online without even realizing it.

Our digital landscape is packed with devious techniques designed to influence how we think and act without us even noticing. Online advertisers are constantly stalking our online activities, gathering massive amounts of data about what we like, what we buy, and even where we go so they can hit us with ads that seem eerily personal. This is problematic from a privacy standpoint, but most people scrolling through their feeds have no clue how their data is being harvested or how it's being used to manipulate them, as the Electronic Privacy Information Center (2023, EPIC) points out, “Some targeted ads aren’t just annoying — they can be predatory and harmful, using people’s online behavioral data to reach vulnerable consumers that meet specific parameters” (para. 3). They go on to give examples of how bad this can be noting that “People searching terms like “need money help” on Google have been served ads for predatory loans with staggering interest rates over 1,700%” (EPIC, 2023, para. 3). The ad industry has gotten aggressive with their attention-grabbing and mind-gaming tactics, and without decent media literacy skills, most of us are totally clueless that we're being played.

Beyond traditional advertising, our media environment contains content specifically designed to manipulate our emotions and perceptions. According to the video "Neuromarketing: How Brands Are Getting Your Brain to Buy More Stuff," companies use techniques based on neuroscience to bypass our rational thinking and trigger subconscious responses that lead to purchases: Through neuroscience – but also with the help of psychology and behavioral economics – they get a pretty good idea of what makes us tick. And they use this knowledge to get us to buy more of their stuff" (Deutsche Welle, 2020, 00:04:32). These tactics aren't limited to selling products—they're also used in political campaigns, social media algorithms, and news outlets to shape public opinion. Without the ability to recognize these manipulation tactics, people are vulnerable to having their thoughts and behaviors influenced without their knowledge or consent.

The problem extends to how we perceive ourselves. Beauty filters on social media platforms are changing how young people, especially girls, see themselves. These augmented reality tools dramatically alter appearances, creating unrealistic beauty standards impossible to achieve in real life. According to Ryan-Mosley (2021), in his article Beauty Filters Are Changing the Way Young Girls See Themselves," young girls are increasingly comparing themselves to these digitally enhanced images, leading to negative impacts on self-image and mental health. In his article, he talks with two young people, Veronica and Sopiha, who experienced the problems with self-perception on social media. He concludes by saying:

> In light of all the effort it takes to navigate this complex world, Sophia and Veronica say they just wish they were better educated about beauty filters. Besides their parents, no one ever helped them make sense of it all. 'You shouldn't have to get a specific college

> degree to figure out that something could be unhealthy for you,' Veronica says" ("Selfie Regulation" section, para. 14).

This demonstrates how media doesn't just influence what we buy—it shapes our very sense of identity and worth and those affected by it realize the problems that it presents, but often only after going though those trials.

A systematic review of social media literacy reveals that it encompasses not only technical skills for using platforms but also critical understanding of how social media functions and the ability to communicate responsibly online (Polanco-Levicán and Salvo-Garrido, 2022). The review identifies four key dimensions of social media literacy: functional consumption skills (ability to access and navigate social media), critical consumption skills (ability to analyze and evaluate social media content), functional production skills (ability to create and share content), and critical production skills (understanding the impact of what we share). These competencies have become essential as social media increasingly dominates how we receive information and communicate with others.

Without these media literacy skills, people are vulnerable to risks in the digital environment. For example, data brokers collect vast amounts of personal information and sell it to companies, political campaigns, and other entities who use it to influence behaviors. As the Electronic Privacy Information Center explains, these brokers "amass and monetize detailed profiles about individuals" without their knowledge or meaningful consent (Electronic Privacy Information Center, 2023). This hidden data collection and profiling represents a significant threat to personal privacy and autonomy that most people don't even realize exists.

Polanco-Levicán and Salvo-Garrido make a compelling case for why these skills are essential in today's digital environment. The researchers found that social media users need both

technical and critical competencies to engage meaningfully with these platforms (Polanco-Levicán and Salvo-Garrido, 2022). Media literacy becomes more important as the world develops, since, as Polanco-Levicán and Salvo-Garrido (2022) note, “the social media differ from each other, so it is relevant to visualize the characteristics of each of them and their differences, noting they each have their own culture that is reflected in the language, behavior, and interactions generated” (p. 8). Without these skills, users are more likely to fall victim to misinformation, privacy violations, and manipulation by both commercial and political actors. As social media becomes increasingly central to how we communicate and access information, the need for comprehensive media literacy education grows more urgent.

Media literacy education provides the tools needed to navigate this complex landscape. “The Five Key Questions and Core Concepts of Media Literacy” offer a framework for critical analysis: questioning who created a message, what techniques are used to attract attention, how different people might interpret the message, what values and perspectives are represented or omitted, and why the message was sent (Center for Media Literacy, 2023). By applying these questions to the media we consume, we can move from passive consumption to active, critical engagement.

Some might argue that media literacy education isn't necessary because young people today are "digital natives" who naturally understand technology. However, technical proficiency with devices doesn't automatically translate to critical thinking about media content. Many young people know how to use social media but lack the skills to evaluate the credibility of information they encounter or recognize manipulation tactics. The ability to post a video doesn't mean a person understands how the platform's algorithm works or how their data is being collected and used by the company. Additionally, others might claim that media literacy education would

overburden already crowded school curricula. However, media literacy can be integrated into existing subjects rather than taught as a separate course. Language arts classes can incorporate analysis of media texts alongside literature, social studies can examine how media shapes political discourse, and science courses can address how scientific information is communicated through media. This integrated approach recognizes that media literacy is relevant across disciplines.

Some critics worry that media literacy education might promote particular political viewpoints. However, proper media literacy education doesn't tell students what to think but rather teaches them how to think critically about all media messages, regardless of source or perspective. The goal is to develop independent thinkers who can evaluate content based on evidence and credibility rather than emotional appeals or bias. By learning to ask the five key questions outlined by the Center for Media Literacy, students develop analytical skills that can be applied to any media message, regardless of its political orientation.

The consequences of media illiteracy extend beyond individual harm to societal impacts. When large portions of the population lack the skills to critically evaluate media messages, democracy itself is threatened. Voters who cannot distinguish between credible information and manipulation are less able to make informed choices. Communities divided by algorithmically-driven filter bubbles lose the common ground necessary for productive civic dialogue. The online tracking practices detailed by EPIC (2023) represent not just privacy violations but potential threats to autonomy and free choice when this data is used to manipulate public opinion.

The beauty filters phenomenon illustrates another dimension of this problem. When young people lack the media literacy to critically evaluate the artificially enhanced images they

see online, they develop distorted standards for themselves and others. As Ryan-Mosely (2021) describes, many teenage girls now consider their digitally filtered faces to be their "real" faces and their unfiltered appearances as flawed or inadequate. This distortion of reality and identity formation has psychological consequences that extend far beyond screen time into real-life self-concept and mental health.

By prioritizing media literacy education, we can help create a society where people engage with media consciously and critically rather than passively absorbing whatever content algorithms and advertisers place before them. This shift from passive consumption to active engagement is essential not only for individual wellbeing but also for the health of our democratic institutions and communities. In a world where media mediates so much of our experience, literacy means not just being able to read words on a page but being able to read the media landscape itself.

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