

# Assessing Contemporary Media Literacy Journey, Challenges, and Achievements in the Age of Misinformation and Fake News

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**ABSTRACT:** The contemporary realities of media production and use have brought about the need for media literacy, which has emerged as a subject matter in both the academics and public square. The popularity and pervasiveness of user-generated content in the form of citizen journalism, social media, alternative media, and others have invaded the once professionally processed information, whose sources are known and vetted by proud and logo-embossed media outlets. The result has forced on the world the need to train consumers of media content to become literate and discern for themselves the facts from the lies and the useful from the useless. This paper analyzes the causes that made media literacy binding, its methodology, and most directly, the need for a review of journalism education content and processes to match the contemporary mindset of the digital generation of students.

**KEYWORDS:** Media literacy, new media effects, media education, social media effects

## **Introduction**

The many challenges regarding the adoption and popularity of alternative media (new media) have attracted many researchers who have expounded and defined those issues, sometimes recommending ways to curb them. What is generally lacking, however, is research that investigate the implications of the consequences of social media reliance, fake news consumption, and misinformation propagation. And more importantly, not much is being dug out regarding the root causes of these changes, who benefits from them, and what can be done to effectively address the issues from their source. These are issues raised by the invasion of the once generally credible and reliable media.

This study, while expounding on the idea (Deuze 2005) that new media and multiculturalism have caused a shift in journalistic ideals, journalism practice, and journalism in general, sought to advocate for reasonable alternatives to their implication on journalism education. Also assessed in more detail is the idea of media literacy adaptation to assist in navigating the negative consequences of the ever-changing new media environment.

To add value to the discourse on social media in particular, studies like (Schreurs and Vandenbosch 2021) introduced a social media literacy model (SMILE) to assist in the understanding of social media literacy issues including (a) how to conceptualize social media literacy; (b) how social media literacy can change the dynamics between social media and its users; and (c) how participatory mediation processes result in social media literacy. Another study believes and advocates for changing journalism education to align with contemporary uses (Bindig and Castonguay 2013), saying ‘the format and pedagogy of media education’ must change, as the world is dealing with a youth population that is born and raised in the digital age. This work, therefore, explores the option of media literacy.

## **Background: Definitions and Concepts**

### *Media Literacy*

So, what is media literacy? Media literacy is defined as an expanded conceptualization of literacy that includes the ability to access and analyze media messages as well as create, reflect and take action using the power of information and communication to make a difference in the world

(Clark 2013). Another definition (Potter 2020) sees it as “a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the mass media to process and interpret the meaning of the message we encounter.” In a similar definition, Media Literacy “is traditionally conceived as a process or set of skills based in critical thinking” while viewing or ingesting media messages (Bugler & Davison 2018). To acquire these skills deemed necessary in most, if not all, media literacy definitions, it requires what is generally referred to as media education. UNESCO, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (Fedorov 2015) defined media education as that which enables people to gain an understanding of the communication media used in society, and the way they operate. In addition it is to also provide users the ability to acquire media skills used to also initiate communication with others. So beyond understanding and learning to use contemporary media, are analysis and reflection on content, identifying the sources of the message, and the interest (commercial and cultural) behind the creation of the message in the first place. That is intended to make the educated user not only critically analyze but also, if he chooses to, determine the appropriate media for communicating his own messages to an audience.

To venture into more details of the concept of media literacy and why it has captured that much attention, and when, is to view it as a topic (Bugler & Davison, 2018) that has become a rallying point for countering “fake news,” advocated by a diverse array of stakeholders – from educators to legislators, philanthropists to technologists who until now appear to be the major stakeholders who have pushed significant resources toward media literacy programs. The Bugler and Davison study asserts that contemporary media literacy centers around five major areas. These are “youth participation, teacher training and curricular resources, parental support, policy initiatives, and evidence base construction.” To assess the issue credibly, we need to navigate the concepts surrounding media literacy.

### *The Concepts*

Among the sources that scrutinized and expounded on several details of the concept is James Potter in his book ‘Media Literacy’ from the year 2020. New media and its overwhelming sources (Potter 2020) have not only created hurdles in people’s ability to navigate the once narrow and fewer sources with greater control of choice and timing, it has also programmed consumers or users of contemporary technologies to the benefit of several stakeholders. “Encounters with media today seem frustrating; ...multitasking is becoming the norm because of the enormous content created daily for consumption.” To compound the problem for those navigating for information is “the tendency to feel fatigued by overwhelming information” which makes people move towards further narrowing their routine sources, compounding the problem. Nobel-winning economist Herbert Simon observes that “a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.” These are just some of the challenges that call for media literacy as described by Potter, (Potter 2020).

Potter added, “Once you begin to see things from a media literacy perspective, you can see how this process of (media) influence works, and this understanding will help you gain control over this shaping process.” Some of the solutions offered by the author for some of these include equipping yourself with media literacy strategies to assist in erecting safeguards while ‘encountering’ the media. These strategies allow people to adjust their media habits and become motivated to increase their control over issues of media influence. The book focuses on four key areas, “media industries, media audiences, media content, and media effects.” (Potter 2020).

Another study, (Hobbs & Frost 1999) describes seven debates about the issue of the media literacy movement occurring at that time. In their words; “As the media literacy movement gains momentum in the United States, the increasingly diverse community of educators, community organizers, and activists, scholars, social service and media professionals have a lot of issues to debate because media literacy can take many different forms.” They described the main questions to ask based on those advocating angles as; (1) Does media literacy protect kids? (2) Does media literacy require student media production

activities? (3) Should media literacy have a popular culture bias? (4) Should media literacy have a stronger ideological agenda? (5) Can media literacy ever reach large numbers of students in K-12 American schools? (6) Should media organizations support media literacy initiatives financially? and (7) Is media literacy best understood as simply a means to an end? (NKA).

According to the writers (Hobbs & Frost 1999), these questions assist in determining the core issues and allow us to see where consensus is emerging. On youths, for example, one of the core issues is whether “Media literacy is just about the only antidote for a culture where we continue to amuse ourselves to death, where information has replaced knowledge, where style has replaced substance, where violence is the major form of entertainment, where human relationships are trivialized and commodified, and where we let technology drive the quality of our lives without reflection or analysis.” Scholars who see media literacy as necessary to counter these include Neil Postman (Postman 2005), while others such as David Buckingham (Buckingham 1998) initially see media literacy as unnecessary protectionism. Henry Jenkins stressed fostering participatory culture in digital media (Jenkins 2009), asserting that providing youth with social skills and cultural competencies is instrumental to their full participation in digital culture. Hobbs in another study (Hobbs 2010) proposed the addition of reflection and action to the core competencies of digital and media literacy to empower and support lifelong learning among users.

By 2019, Buckingham had produced a book titled ‘The Media Education Manifesto’ (Buckingham 2019), which was described as a comprehensive and coherent approach to media education. In it, Buckingham “makes a passionate case for media education, outlining its key aims and principles, and exploring how it can and should be updated to take account of the changing media environment.” About the same time, 2019, some studies are observing a move from protectionism to participation (O’Niel 2019). Other scholars also deemed the ability to participate in the media environment and to create and distribute media messages, as pivotal to new media literacy (Lin et al. 2013)

In his book titled ‘Amusing Ourselves to Death’, Postman looks at what happens when politics, journalism, education, and even religion become subject to entertainment demands. Its review described it as ‘a blueprint for regaining control of our media so that they can serve our highest goals.’ While (Cho et al 2022) centered on another concept, i.e., the user’s selections of social media that is in dynamic causation with their choices of messages and networks. The foci of analysis in *Social Media Literacy, SoMeLit*, as tagged by the author, therefore, are one’s selections and values that influence and are influenced by the construction of one’s reality on social media; and the evolving characteristics of social media platforms that set the boundaries of one’s social media reality construction. The work expounds on the concept of personal locus as established by Potter (Potter 2019) earlier.

The media industry is one of four main categories that media literacy spotlights, as described by Potter (Potter 2020); with those four key areas being, “media industries, media audiences, media content, and media effects.” Medium theory (Meyrowitz 2009) contends that the nature of the medium impacts social, individual, and societal processes. Medium literacy (Meyrowitz, 1998, 2009) focuses on the characteristics of each medium, rather than the interactions between the user and the medium.

Unlike in the case of medium literacy, however, social media platforms are demanding and responsive to user engagement. The identities and realities constructed and communicated by users and groups differ by platform. For instance, Twitter use is for “information and informality,” Instagram use is for “stylized self-presentation,” and Snapchat is for “spontaneous ludic connections” (Boczkowski et al. 2018: 245). These platforms provide sites of subcultures where the users apply, accept, and reinforce different standards of realness (Cho et al 2022).

More recently, however, various studies on media literacy and media education continue to be addressed with some degree of confusion and vagueness. In a study (Wuyckens 2022) titled “Untangling Media Literacy, Information Literacy, and Digital Literacy: A systematic meta-review of Core Concepts in media education” the authors highlighted what they described as the confusion between the constitutive dimensions of literacies, recurrent difficulties in establishing theoretical articulations between contributions, and operationalization problems in observing and assessing these literacies.

And because of its ever-changing nature, being pushed by constant technological upgrades, innovation and user habits, Bugler and Davison made the following five recommendations towards the achievement of media literacy:

- a) Develop a coherent understanding of the media environment. With new technologies and techniques, make sure you always update existing programs.
- b) Improve cross-disciplinary collaboration. Media literacy is often seen as a narrow, pedagogical field. But work from other disciplines – social psychology, political science, sociology – is producing new research and findings that could greatly benefit media literacy.
- c) Leverage the current media crisis to consolidate stakeholders. The new attention on “fake news” could allow for new cross-disciplinary collaboration and therefore, greater coherence within the field.
- d) Prioritize the creation of a national media literacy evidence database. A centralized and stable base for evaluation data would make a more accurate assessment possible. There are many potential political challenges to such an evidence database.
- e) Develop curricula for addressing action in addition to interpretation. With the increased use of social media, literacy efforts need to be able to address user behavior in addition to interpretation (Bugler and Davison 2018).

### **Root Causes of Poor Media Literacy**

To examine the causes, one has to pry into issues such as:

#### *I. Types of Problematic Informational Sources*

a). Misinformation: Misinformation is nonfactual information served to the public, generally as news or informational pieces. The Oxford English Dictionary defines misinformation as “the act of giving wrong information about something.” An example from the American Psychological Association is rumor. By its definition, rumor, according to Webster's Dictionary, is “a statement or report circulating without known authority for its truth”.

b). Disinformation is another issue. Disinformation is the intentional propagation of messages specifically written using nonfactual content. These messages are written while intentionally misstating the facts. An example, according to the American Psychological Association, is propaganda; messages written to make people, ideas or institutions look good that are not the case in reality.

c). Amateur writers: Novice writers armed with the prevalent but also easy-to-use internet and communication technologies produce messages for public consumption. Amateur writers, including those engaged in what is generally described as citizen journalism, who are operating blogs and news websites without formal journalism education or even training, find it easy to write and propagate information in the form of news, which is hard for the general public to differentiate from truly and professionally written pieces. Their negatively impactful messages are generally regarded as misinformation, the definition of which is false and inaccurate information, meaning the facts are wrong, but the intent may not be intentional. They lack professional training in news writing and propagation.

d). Fake News: The largest culprit, in all these, is fake news. Fake news is fake or misleading information generally presented as news, no matter how damaging, to the public.

News commercialization (written for financial gain) to sell goods, services, or even people (politicians for vote) as a form of advertisement also falls under fake news, provided that the advertorial was not disclosed as such but was disguised as a naturally occurring news event. Due to its seriousness in derailing people from facts, various studies have been conducted on fake news and its impact.

In one study about the impact of fake news, it was found to have the ability to reduce the impact of real news that has been grounded in fact (Silverman, 2016). The Silverman study about the 2016 Trump election bid in the United States demonstrated that fake news posts on Facebook received more engagement than real news from professional media outlets. “Fake news does not meet the definition of disinformation or propaganda. Its motives are usually financial, not political, and it is usually not tied to a longer agenda” (Dean, 2018).

## *2. Quantity of Daily Informational Intake*

Informational overload is another major issue. It would not be inaccurate to rate it as the major culprit in that some elements of the aforementioned issues under types of informational sources were present in some form in the years previous to the internet. The internet, alternative media, and social media platforms have made them a prominent issue today. Overabundance of information or informational overload is a consequence of new and easy-to-use technological innovations that allow people to jam and congest the internet with content, making it difficult for people to find the required information quickly and conveniently (Mostaq & Haq 2014). Its an issue about the amount of information one has to deal with in his once ordinary daily life.

Seeking news and information was previously something one determines with his efforts, to either turn on the television, news radio, or purchase and read newspapers and magazines. Today, however, this information may not have to be solicited but is usually placed strategically around the devices one uses as a matter of necessity daily, such as the handheld phone and the computer.

## *3. Changes in Sources and Informational Patterns*

Further compounded among the issues media literacy address are the changes in sources and informational patterns as described by the flow model below [flow mode 1], first produced and presented at a conference by this writer in 2016. As visualized, the complexity of new media information flow is another challenge for media literacy advocates.

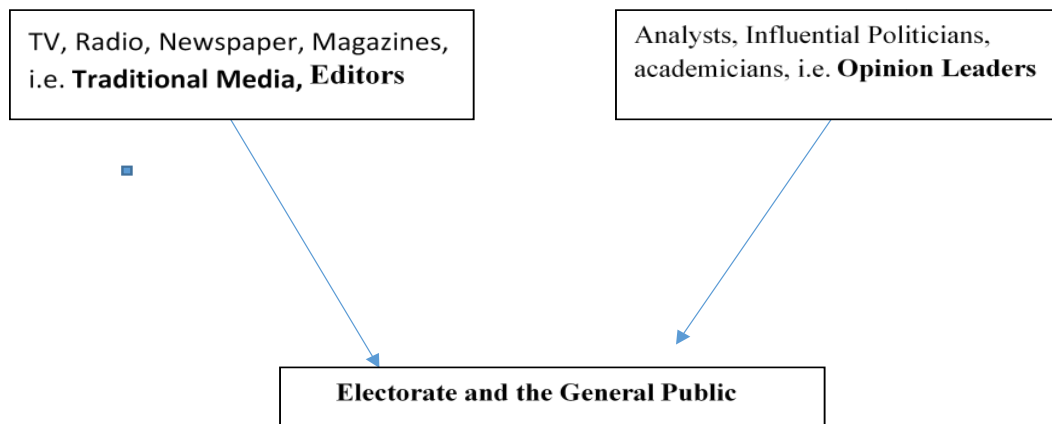
Also observable as an issue, is the feedback mechanism. Feedback permits the information consumer to leave a comment for the writers or the public, including those who may or have not even encountered the message before, further assisting in spreading the original message.

*Interactivity:* Social media has the ability to allow users on the platform to interact in real-time or otherwise, another technological advancement that contributes to both information overload and complexity.

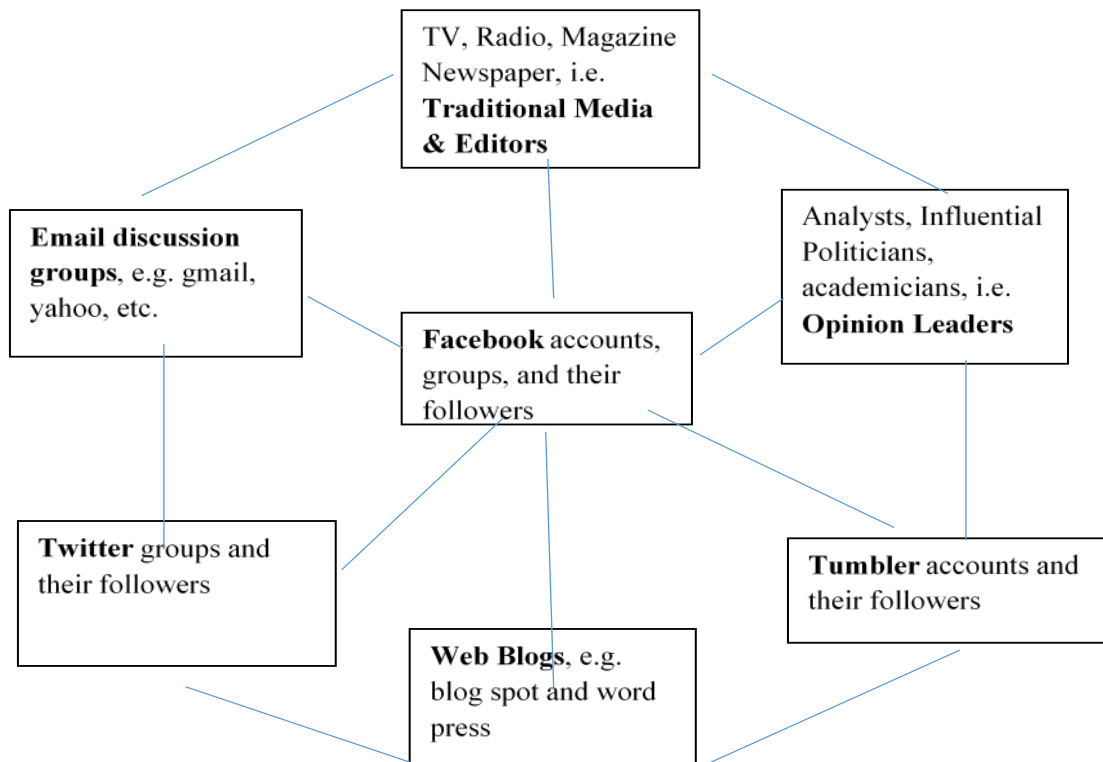
*Hypertext:* Hypertext is another contributor to the information overload issue. With URL links, one may choose to read further on a topic or specific idea highlighted in blue, usually from offsite sources.

*Complex information flow:* As evident from the flow model below, media information flow has become complex and networked, encompassing participatory production habits and sharing. Before the age of new media, traditional media consumption and flow pattern was simpler and top down.

**Chart 1. Information Flow Pattern:  
Flow Model 1  
Traditional Media information flow is top-down**



**New Media Information flow is networked and cyclical**



*Source: Author's model from 2016 © (Original)*

## **Discussions**

### *Adjusting to the challenges*

The impact of all these diverse sources, manners of information presentation, and absorption has resulted in some counter practices whose impacts are still being assessed. These practices include multitasking and automaticity. Automaticity is a simpler subconscious routine, a coping mechanism adopted over time to skim through messages, circumventing fatigue from information overload. While multitasking is generally seen as positive in getting more tasks accomplished, its psychological impacts on a person are still being examined by psychologists. As for automaticity (Potter 2020), its drawback makes users miss important information they may have gained had they exacted the effort. One of the consequences of that (Potter 2020) is people lose on opportunities to make better and wider experienced decisions.

Information overload is fast becoming an issue in various professions due to the exponential expansion of capacities to document and share ideas, putting pressure on people's finite resources and time (Mostak & Hoq 2014). While other scholars argue that today's Information age plays a major role in driving human civilization forward, Alvin Toffler, who made the term information overload popular in the 1970s (Toffler 1981), defined the issue of information overload as the 'difficulty a person faces when making a decision in the presence of excessive information.' A user fails to process any more information because of its enormous size and volume. It is also defined as an 'overabundance of relevant information that cannot be assimilated' (Morris and Edmund 2000). And Mayer (1998) as 'a state that exceeds the limited human information processing capacity.'

As to the causes of information overload (Mostak & Hoq 2014), they listed several reasons, including too much information, difficulty in managing information, irrelevant and unimportant information, multiple sources of information, and lack of time to understand the information. The problem is made worse because, in such a situation, the irrelevant information far outweighs the relevant information. So, in bringing media literacy to mind, the majority of people lack adequate information literacy skills to readily identify information needs, locate their required information from appropriate sources, retrieve the information in the right format, assess the worth of the information in tandem with one's needs, and use the retrieved information to address the needs.

In a recent study to understand better and analyze the concept of information overload and how it manifests itself in users, the authors (Belabbes et al. 2023) extracted triggers, manifestations, and consequences of information overload. They found triggers related to information characteristics, information needs, the working environment, the cognitive abilities of individuals, and the information environment. In terms of manifestations, they found that information overload manifests itself both emotionally and cognitively.

### *Impact of Media Literacy*

On the impact of media literacy thus far, research on media literacy education and reduction in racial and ethnic stereotypes found that children as young as 12 can be trained to recognize bias in media depictions of race and ethnicity and understand the harm it can cause. (Scharrer E, Ramasubramanian S. 2013).

A study (Kahne & Bowyer 2016) of media literacy on youth found it to be effective in assisting youth to navigate information in a more discerning way. The study investigated youth judgments of the accuracy of truth claims tied to controversial public issues. In an experiment embedded within a nationally representative survey of youth ages 15 to 27 (N = 2,101), youth were asked to judge the accuracy of one of several simulated online posts. Consistent with research on motivated reasoning, youth assessments depended on (a) the alignment of the claim with one's prior policy position and to a lesser extent on (b) whether the post included an inaccurate statement. To consider ways educators might improve judgments of accuracy, we also investigated the influence of political knowledge and exposure to media literacy education. We found that political knowledge did not improve judgments of accuracy but that media literacy education did.

The study (Kahne & Bowyer 2016) contributes to our understanding of how young people judge the factual accuracy of partisan claims tied to controversial societal issues and demonstrates clear reason for concern. To summarize, we found evidence that youth are guided by both directional motivation and accuracy motivation when making such judgments. But we also found that the impact of alignment with one's prior beliefs was greater than the impact of whether a given statement is accurate.

Another impact study (Melki et al 2021) on media literacy and navigating misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that media literacy does make a difference in curtailing the spread of misinformation by social media users. The conclusion of

that study states: “Higher education and trust in information from the government contributed to decreasing belief in COVID-19 myths and false information. Trust in news from social media, interpersonal communication, and clerics contributed to the increasing belief in COVID-19 myths and false information, which in turn contributed to less critical social media posting practices, thereby exacerbating the infodemic. Media literacy training contributed to increasing critical social media posting practices, thereby playing a role in curbing the infodemic.”

To summarize some of the points made thus far, in a pictorial format, examine the table below [table 1].

Table 1.

|                           | Traditional Media   | New Media   |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Sources                   | Fewer sources; easier cognitive processing  | Numerous sources, challenges in cognitive processing  |
| Institutions              | Fewer institutions process and present content; but criticisms of gatekeeping for favoring authorities and elites were raised   | Numerous & hard-to-identify sources process and present content; need for media literacy to curb negative consequences  |
| Content                   | Professional quality in accordance with ethical and tenets of social responsibility; more confidence in the sources' credibility  | Non-professional quality of message; lack of ethical and social responsibility tenets; less confidence in sources' credibility                                |
| Regulations               | controlled by regulation and policy to curb excesses; Results include Increased ability to effectively seek, retrieve, and critically apply information in decision making. | generally not controlled by law, platforms and their owners are left to self-impose restrictions; inability to effectively seek, retrieve and use information |
| Sources and Legal Redress | More sanitized content pre-authenticated by their sources, allowing for legal redress   | non-clarity of sources, making it hard to identify and hold sources accountable for content   |
| Journalism Curriculum     | Journalism curricula are more aligned to real-life media experiences.   | Journalism curricula are less aligned to real life media use.   |
| Students Experience       | Confidence in the eventual use of knowledge and skills acquired in real working life.   | Anxieties in ever using some knowledge and skills learned in a fast-changing technology environment.  |

*Source: Table is original by author, 2023*

The table above, table one [1], presents in a juxtaposition way, some of the qualities and drawbacks of the two systems, specifically highlighting media literacy argument angles and the needs for it.

### **Analysis and Recommendations**

Based on the studies cited and other arguments presented, media literacy appears to be making an impact in overcoming some of the issues by providing skills that assist in information retrieval, critique, analysis, and use. Though the importance of such efforts appear to be on the back burner for authorities who decide where national resources are spent, hope is not all lost, as long as all key stakeholders who have been behind credible media literacy and media education campaign



continue to highlight as well as put the necessary pressure on those who have control over resources and policy.

Corporate profit, political expediency, and other manipulative tendencies are yet to be discounted credibly as the main drive toward introducing and maintaining these rapidly changing communication technologies that lack corporate social responsibility values, and majorly driven by immature youth user taste (Jenkins 2006). Other studies by psychologists have further exposed corporate tactics of making these devices addictive to young vulnerable users using the ingrained psychological make-up of the human brain (Neufeld and Matte 2006). These kinds of age-old tactics and practices of corporate exploitation, however, are not new and have, over time, moved many non-profit organizations, human rights advocates, and others to compel governments to enact some laws, regulations, and countermeasures to ensure the protection of some basic rights of citizens. Another problem compounding the effect is that while corporate issues like these used to be confined to national borders, globalization and corporate expansion multi-nationally in recent times have spread such effects globally. Two decades after these studies echoed concerns, an effective solution to the phenomenon has remained elusive.

There are still scholars and analysts who remain steadfast, not losing sight of the causes of the quagmire, armed with several recommendations for curbing them. It is an issue of whether the world has thrown in the towel when it comes to putting the usual pressure on both corporations and governments to act in ways that significantly reduce the runaway train of corporate and political gains against public good, i.e., corporate and governmental social responsibility.

As we write this, the issue of artificial intelligence (and GPT) has just added similar challenges, further disabling the digital generation, and students of various professions including journalism and media, the ability to develop their natural critical thinking skills. These knowledge and critical thinking skills should enable them better navigate adult working and living life when the need arises. College professors are decrying the challenge they face today in their ability to work in teaching and guiding students upon the road to master critical thinking skills, originality, and hard work that build them and their nation credibly.

Regulating some aspects of new technology has been propagated with little success because of corporate entities' usual and age-old capitalistic maneuvers and manipulations. Henry Jenkin has, over the years (Jenkins 2006) exposed how these technology developments and direction have been driven based on user taste ahead of any more productive or moral-based priority. It is more than evident that a major part of these challenges can be addressed as all other societal issues have always been addressed through legislation, reprimands, fines, and even court injunctions and imprisonment if necessary. As described aptly, (Cho et al 2022), “Compared to mass media institutions, platforms lack formal regulation and protocols, affording them with political and economic flexibility. Being privately owned, the platforms may be attentive to financial interests. Many platforms may remove content or terminate accounts at their own discretion, and enforcement is often perceived as arbitrary at best (Duguay et al., 2020). While federal laws govern the content and conduct of public and private broadcasting companies, social media companies lie largely outside of their purview, granting them substantial power surrounding political speech, discourse, and perhaps political bodies themselves.”

The capitalistic and profit making influence over all else can be gleaned from current works (Vinney, 2023) showing that, although media literacy education has now become accepted and successful in English-speaking countries, including Australia, Canada, and Britain, it has yet to become a standard part of the curriculum in the United States, the global leader of capitalism. However, Fedorov (Fedorov 2015) sees similar trends in Russia also when he states, “Both in the West and in Russia, the preference in media education today is given to the critical thinking/critical autonomy development theory, the cultural, socio-

cultural, and semiotic theories. The neglect of effective redress of root causes in both societies therefore appears the norm.

The traction on the political angle is also slow and frustrating at best. The protective theory, focusing upon screening the audience from the harmful influences of the media is losing ground. Wallis and Buckingham described the once popular introduction of media education regulation and policy in Britain as ‘dead’. Writing in 2016, Wallis & Buckingham (2016) “media literacy’s broader educative purpose, so clearly articulated in much of the early policy rhetoric, was effectively marginalized. From the Coalition government onwards, the promotion of media literacy was reduced further to a matter of market research. Today, if not altogether dead, the policy is governed by entirely different priorities to those imagined at its birth.”

As for political impact of the prevalence of negative impact of alternative media, some studies on populist politics in Britain, most especially Boris Johnson, and to some extent, Trump 2016 election (Evans et al. 2021), shows that the two elections have benefited from the polarization in political campaigns and elections rhetoric emanating from alternative media that has most especially those negative consequences that media literacy seeks to address. In conclusion, therefore, it appears one remedy is to find ways to pressure these multinational technological companies to modify the direction of research and development. That is remedy that address the issue at the source. Emphasis on curricular adjustment to reflect courses on Media literacy skills, albeit media education should and must continue. At the same time, more effective ways of information storage, categorization, and retrieval may also play a role in reducing the effect of poor media literacy.

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