

## **EMERGING ROLE OF MEDIA LITERACY IN EMPOWERING CITIZENRY AND STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates how, with the advent of revolutionary new media, collaborative and interactive forms of media have replaced the traditional forms, leading to a paradigm shift in the media and communication world, with a focus on 'Media literacy' that refers to an advanced human competency in critically approaching media texts and wisely consuming content with an enhanced understanding of the new media and its ethical concerns surrounding author anonymity, lack of accountability and credibility, and its rampant use in spreading fake news, promoting polarisation, running political propaganda, and breeding malicious practices, among others. This paper focuses on media literacy, which inculcates an imperative skill for an informed and empowered citizenry by developing one's ability to encode and decode media symbols and synthesise and analyse messages with a critical and discerning eye. Active engagement of the citizenry in the civic, political, and electoral affairs of the state is instrumental to the foundational value of the state's democracy. It discusses how, in recent times, civic participation has encompassed digital engagement and advocacy through various social media platforms. Easy access to production tools and the necessary skills to disseminate media texts in the form of information or news has led to the growth of a democratic and participatory form of journalism among citizens, at times with the use of mobile phones. The gatekeepers of traditional media have a faded existence in the new world of advanced media technology. The shift of power from traditional media houses to the common man adheres to the intrinsic value of a democracy; however, media literacy is essential to ingrain practices of responsible content production in citizens. This paper aims to promote awareness against potential media bias, manipulative influence, and misinformation. My objective for this paper is to evaluate the role and impact of media literacy in empowering citizen participation in a healthy democracy. This argument will open a new scope for academic understanding of the socio-political fabric and the other attached attributes of the nation.

*Key words:* paradigm shift, media literacy, traditional media, democracy, interactive forms.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Gauging the impact of Media: In an attempt to understand the impact of mass communication and media, several studies have been conducted in the domain of media and communication research over the years. These studies have led to the development of a diverse range of communication theories and models that describe the salient features of mass communication, study its impact on audience, and also demonstrate its power and influence in a society. Though there is no single universal theory of mass communication, but a series of theories put forward by scholars around the world have defined its foundational pillars. Aristotle's model of communication, which is one of the earliest models of mass communication, focussed on public speaking and divided the communication process into five basic parts: speaker, speech, occasion, audience and effect. This unidirectional and basic approach of understanding communication laid the premises for several communication studies over time. With the gradual emergence of the mass media forms like print, television, radio, etc; researchers began

investigating the effect of mass communication in a society. Most of the early theories of mass communication, which studied the impact of media through a perspective of propaganda and persuasion, considered the influence of mass communication through the use of mass media as direct and inevitable. However with time, researchers have challenged this assumption that mass communication directly impacts society. Instead, they have found evidence that individual differences and personal influences play a crucial role in how messages are transmitted, accepted, and retained in the masses, further leading to an enhanced understanding of the process and impact of mass communication in a society. Mass media, which constitutes the various traditional and new media forms like print, radio, television, digital media, etc, performs a few important functions in a society, such as surveillance, information and interpretation of issues, etc. Mass media holds colossal potential in moulding the public agenda and also shoulders the capacity to influence the public opinion. Any information and its interpretation can be conveniently presented or omitted by the media outlets, further dictating the relevance or insignificance of any pressing issue for the public. ‘Gatekeeping’, which refers to the process of filtering information for dissemination acts as an instrument for the media owners, financiers, sponsors, advertisers, etc to keep a hold on the issues that reach the public, thereby influencing the public agenda. In a society, plain information is passive data; media also delivers the interpretation of the information in direct or subtle ways, further influencing the general perspective and public opinion on the issue. Media’s ability to direct and influence the public opinion is media’s strength, but at times, it can be a threat to the society.

‘Media literacy’, which refers to an advanced human competency in critically approaching media texts and wisely consuming content, inculcates an imperative skill for an informed and empowered citizenry by developing one’s ability to encode and decode media symbols and synthesise and analyse messages with a critical and discerning eye. It promotes active and critical consumption of media texts with an enhanced understanding of the threats and concerns surrounding bias in traditional media and also ethical concerns in the new media, such as author anonymity, lack of accountability and credibility, and its rampant use in spreading fake news, promoting polarisation, running political propaganda, and breeding malicious practices, among others.

### **CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND NEW MEDIA**

**Dynamic citizen participation:** Civic participation in a democratic society has expanded beyond the realm of public meetings, rallies or elections. In recent times, the new media facilitates the public discourse and allows space for digital advocacy through the various digital platforms. “Web 2.0 has played an increasingly important role in mobilizing protest, and enhancing political participation and civic engagement” (Falk, S. 2011). The ‘new media’, which is a revolutionary face of media allows interactivity and collaboration from the consumer’s end and alters the system of communication into a fast and effective two-way process. The new advancements in communication technology have transformed the previously existing ways of mass communication. As the public discourse through the online platforms is now open to all, the consumers of traditional media have become ‘prosumers’ of media, where ‘prosumer’ stands for the new audience, which is an amalgamation of producer and consumer of media text. Easy access to tools for content creation and convenience in disseminating the created content through the digital platforms has significantly transformed the media and communication scene.

**Fostering democratic values :** The gatekeepers of the traditional media have a faded existence as the new media allows the common public to freely and conveniently express their opinions, and actively participate in the process of building the public opinion, without the influence of any gatekeeper. This

feature of new media champions the basic right of citizens- to speak and express freely. It reinforces the ideals of free speech in the citizenry.

“Influencing public policies is not easy when seeking to establish an interaction between the rulers and the ruled that have been left in asymmetric conditions due to democratic and communicative deficiencies of representativeness. Here is the significant role of social networks understood as new media and organization” (Sala, 2015). The new media, which is also cost effective, highly engaging and interactive, allows global reach and greater data analytics and insights. Though this form of media is substantially powerful and efficient as a media form, but it also comes with a couple of concerns.

Concerns around new media: The openness and global reach of new media, though empowering, encompasses significant concerns and threats to a society. The process of creating and disseminating information does not require any filtration or consideration, even on aspects surrounding the authenticity of the text. Due to its great impact on the masses, it is also misused to create propaganda driven agendas, spread fake news and drive misinformation. As a result ,the lines between fake and authentic have blurred, misleading opinions and news are widely spread, information overload and credibility issues have emerged, developing an even greater need for media literacy in the masses. The active engagement of the citizenry through the new media can be instrumental in empowering the democracy by increasing the citizen participation; however the citizens have to be equipped with the necessary tools to wisely consume media content. Misleading, fake or biased media texts can do more harm than good to the citizens and the democracy. “The role of networked digital media in civic engagement is a mixed blessing. Too often, the norms and values of these online spaces tolerate or even encourage misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism and other forms of bigotry and harassment. Similarly, the democratization of media production and distribution, which allows previously unheard voices to bypass the traditional media gatekeepers, provides a vehicle for disinformation and hatred as well” (Greenspon and Owen, 2018).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY:**

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. Does media literacy empower the citizenry and strengthen the democracy

### **OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the role of media literacy in strengthening a democracy
2. To examine the role of media literacy in empowering citizenry of a democracy

**AIM OF THE STUDY:** This paper aims to investigate whether media literacy leads to an informed citizenry and empowered democracy, and also understand how media literacy, which is a necessary human competency in recent times, can equip the citizens of a democracy with essential knowledge to effectively participate through the media forms and help empower the democracy.

**RESEARCH METHOD:** The study follows a qualitative research method, which involves systematic qualitative analysis of the text or data collected.

**DATA COLLECTION:** Relevant data has been collected through secondary sources like books, journals, articles, etc.

**DATA ANALYSIS:** This paper follows a qualitative analysis of secondary data. The collected data is analyzed using discourse analysis.

## **DATA INTERPRETATION**

### **MEDIA LITERACY: A REQUISITE FOR CITIZENS IN A DEMOCRACY**

“Media literacy is a core competency for engaged citizenship in participatory democracy. It combines new models of engaged and citizenship and participatory politics with frameworks for digital and media literacy education, to develop a framework for media literacy as a core political competency for active, engaged, and participatory citizenship” (Mihailidis, P., & Thevenin, B., 2013) In Renee Hobbs's award-winning video documentary, *Tuning in to Media: Literacy for the Information Age* (March 1994), she states, “In a culture saturated with images children need a set of skills to enable them to ask important questions about what they see, watch, and read. For too many years educators have ignored, trivialized, or dismissed these: newspapers, magazines, radio, film and, of course, television. Yet it is through media messages that we receive most of our information about the world. Now as never before media culture is our culture.” Media literacy is a way to address the negative aspects of media, like bias, manipulation, misinformation, fake news, propaganda, etc. It transforms media consumption from a passive activity to an active participation where the end consumer receives the data with an understanding of the potential threats and concerns with the media text in hand. Media Literacy aims to educate and increase an average citizen's capacity to dissect media texts and absorb them with a critical mind and a discerning eye.

It implants the quality of being analytical and investigative regarding the authenticity of the media text, accountability of the source, potential bias or manipulation in the idea presented. Media literacy promotes awareness of media's influence in an average human being and society, and develops active approach towards consuming as well as creating media. It encourages the consumer to question, reflect and take action. The end goal of media literacy

is to develop critical thinking, facilitate effective communication and empower active citizenry. Media literacy, which is an inquiry based process, also inculcates critical analysis of- the perspective of the media text, it encourages the consumer to examine the background of the author, purpose of the text, pattern of representation, bias or any censorship. Beyond the realm of critical media consumption, Media literacy also encourages self expression, enabling the users to actively and efficiently exercise their fundamental right to speech and expression. It empowers the citizens to directly participate in the public discourse and contribute to the formation of the larger public opinion in any matter.

### **EMPOWERED DEMOCRACY: INFORMED AND ENGAGED CITIZENRY**

Basic idea of a democracy: In simple terms, democracy is a system of governance, where the government of a country is elected by the people. The supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections. The citizens of a democracy are expected to act in a responsible and active manner for the growth of a healthy democracy. The active participation of the citizenry in the country becomes a deciding factor for a democracy's health. Apart from voting in the elections, the citizens participate in a democracy by taking active interest in the working of the government and by criticizing it when required.

“Citizen Participation, however, differs from all previous form of participation because the citizen performs public actions that are destined to interact with the State in the sense of influencing it to establish programmatic planning together. That is, setting proposal, plans, programs, and budgets of

public policies and their methods of implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and accountability,” (Sala, 2015).

Exercising ones fundamental right to speak and express freely, citizens are expected to engage in the public discourse, for example by speaking against any bill passed or by advocating for a bill or public policy made by the government . In a democracy, ordinary people participate primarily through elections. By exercising their right to vote, people elect their representatives, however active participation from the citizens is not limited to this. Citizens can actively engage in political discussions, campaign for a candidate, express their opinions for or against any government or civic activity freely. “You are not citizen to participate; you participate to become citizen,” (Sala, 2015). The media plays an important role in the relationship between the citizens and democracy. It serves as a watch dog of the government, the society and the country in large. It serves as an extended safeguard to the citizen’s right. The new media today has further enabled even greater and easier participation by transforming the traditional and static media with filters and gatekeepers, into an interactive media, with no filter. The new media empowers the citizens to express freely and participate in the public discourse conveniently.

Role of media literacy: Owing to the issues surrounding bias in traditional media or ethical concerns in new media, Media Literacy serves as a vital instrument which equips the citizens with a fundamental competency to negate the negative aspects of media, and in the process empowers them to effectively participate in the democracy. In a world of fake news and misinformation, media literacy acts as a safeguard against bias, misinformation, and propaganda and empowers the citizens to look deeper into the presented media text. It empowers the citizens to get a complete picture of the issue, which puts them in a better position to understand and decide on the issue. “It is more powerful in digital media when we use them rather than simply consume them” (Davis 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this paper was to investigate whether media literacy leads to an informed citizenry and empowered democracy, and also understand how media literacy, which is a necessary human competency in recent times, can equip the citizens of a democracy with essential knowledge to effectively participate through the media forms and help empower the democracy. The key findings of this study, as discussed in the sections above firstly indicate the extraordinary transformation in the media and communication world, where channels of mass communication have become interactive and accessible to all, leading to a more open form of public discourse. Expanding beyond the boundaries of elections, public meetings or campaigns, citizen participation and advocacy through the new digital media has become prevalent. Since the new media empowers the citizens to exercise their freedom of speech and expression effectively, this revolutionary form of media promotes and fosters the core democratic values. The limitations of the traditional media like gate keeping, bias have a faded existence, however the empowering new media poses a few concerning threats to the society like fake news, misinformation, polarization, etc. In this scenario, media literacy is no longer an advanced human competency, but a basic human need required for the citizens to actively participate in a democratic set up as citizens. Media literacy inculcates an imperative skill for an informed and empowered citizenry by developing one’s ability to encode and decode media symbols and synthesise and analyse messages with a critical and discerning eye. It educates the citizens to critically approach media texts and wisely consume content with an enhanced understanding of the concerns surrounding the traditional as well as new media. The findings also indicate the role of active citizen engagement

in strengthening a democracy. As vital it is for citizens to actively participate, efficiency in understanding the nuances of media, to be able to utilize and employ media wisely, is also significant in strengthening a democracy. As digital spaces in the new form of media continue to dominate the scene of public discourse in recent times, inability to access and participate through these platforms, and consequently, the lack of media literacy while utilizing the same, will lead to a form of marginalization – digital in form. As an extension of the study conducted, understanding the causes and consequences of digital marginalization with respect to citizen participation and democracy, will open a new scope for academic research.

Since, the citizens are empowered with the ability to understand biased presentation or patterns in media, detect agenda and fake news, media literacy effectively promotes a more informed electorate, strengthening the core of the democracy. Therefore, Media literacy promotes a more informed electorate as it enhances civic engagement, and fosters a sense of political efficacy among citizens. Moreover, in the process, it empowers and strengthens the democracy by developing informed and engaged citizenry.

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