

RESEARCH
ARTICLE**Media Literacy and Social Media Networks****Ahmed Messaoudene**

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Abstract

The world today is witnessing rapid developments in the field of information and communication technologies, which have brought about a qualitative leap in the transmission and production of various media messages. One of the most prominent manifestations of this technological advancement is the widespread use of the Internet in general, and social media networks in particular, which have become a major focus of interest for large segments of individuals. What distinguishes social media networks is their unlimited use, which is not subject to controls or monitoring that define the nature of such use. This highlights the importance of media literacy as a mechanism for fostering social responsibility among social media users.

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Introduction:

The media institution is considered one of the most influential institutions in society, impacting individuals and communities culturally, socially, educationally, and economically. This necessitates that it aligns with the ethical norms and standards of society, and that this is reflected in the content it produces. Therefore, it is essential to highlight the role of media institutions in defending the interests of society and their position within the framework of social responsibility.

The issue of dealing with media messages and their effects is not limited to concepts and behaviors alone; rather, it is closely linked to how individuals interact with the content transmitted through various channels. The enormous volume of information often prevents recipients from verifying its authenticity, which leads to arbitrary interaction with much of this information. Consequently, many facts become obscured, diminishing the possibility of forming an accurate understanding of reality and resulting in its misinterpretation. This, in turn, facilitates the adoption of opinions presented by the media, a phenomenon often referred to as the "pollution of the educational environment."

the diversity of educational institutions, social media networks have emerged as significant social and educational platforms that can play an important educational role in guiding young audiences, providing them with sound scientific knowledge, and reinforcing cultural habits and traditions—if managed effectively. They also contribute to the development of various aspects of an individual's personality, whether academic, social, or psychological. The educational process is no longer merely about rote learning or studying textbooks; rather, it is a dynamic, continuous process aimed at building a well-rounded individual.

Numerous studies have shown that we can benefit greatly from the immense potential of social media networks by guiding their use appropriately. In doing so, these platforms can become educational tools that offer valuable learning services to all users, providing a learning environment that transcends the limits of time and space. This leads us to pose the following question: How can mechanisms of media literacy be developed to foster social responsibility among social media users?

In this research paper, we aim to cover the following points:

1. The concept of social media networks.
2. The characteristics of social media platforms.
3. The evolution of the concept of media literacy.
4. Media literacy strategies and skills.
5. Media literacy and social media networks.
6. A model for applying media literacy to foster social responsibility on social media platforms.

1. The Concept of Social Media Networks:

Social networks refer to websites on the Internet that emerged with what is known as Web 2.0, which enables users to communicate within a virtual community that brings them together based on their interests or affiliations (such as a university, country, journalism, company, etc.). This communication occurs through direct interaction services such as sending messages, participating in others' profiles, and learning about their updates and the information they choose to share.

Social networks vary in their forms and objectives. Some are general and aim at global communication and building friendships around the world, while others focus on forming social networks within a limited and specific scope, such as networks for professionals, photographers, or media practitioners.

A social network is essentially a service that brings people together to create and share content around a specific topic. Social networks originated in forums, newsgroups, and chat rooms that appeared in the early days of the Internet. Since the early 2000s, the presence of social networks—also known as community networks—has become increasingly important and tends to multiply according to various characteristics. The first large-scale social networks (such as MySpace and Facebook) established themselves as public services where everyone can share content of their choice, regardless of the topic, with their contacts.¹

According to Wikipedia, social networks are defined as:

A term used to describe any website on the World Wide Web that allows its user to create a publicly displayed personal page and enables the formation of personal relationships with other users who visit that personal page. Social networking sites can be used to describe socially oriented websites, live discussion groups, chat rooms, and other interactive social sites.²

Currently, there are more than 400 websites on the Internet, the most prominent of which include blogs and forums, in addition to numerous other sites such as Wikis, Facebook, and Twitter. Moreover, some major companies have developed applications to promote the social mindset of collaboration and participation among their users, such as Google and Yahoo, which have focused on collective editing, writing, and implementing joint presentations. There are also sites and services for storing, sharing, and redisplaying photos—such as Flickr—as well as platforms for publishing video clips, such as YouTube, along with many other services and technologies that attract individual interest through sharing and publishing among users.

This innovation has had a significant impact on the rules governing freedom of publication and expression, reinforcing democratic thinking, human rights, and other political, social, and commercial concepts. Around these concepts, communities have formed, benefiting from the ease of use and participation without requiring technical expertise or significant financial costs. Some believe that this will lead to the emergence of a 'global mindset' that will contribute to changing the world."³

2. Characteristics of Social Media Platforms:

¹ Futura Sciences. *Définition: Réseau social*. <https://www.futura-sciences.com/tech/definitions/informatique-reseau-social-10255/>. Accessed at 18:45 on 20/04/2018

² Saud Saleh Kateb, *New Media Forum and Societal Issues: Challenges and Opportunities*, The International Conference on Islamic Media, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, 2011, p.

³ M. Al-Fatafta, *The Relationship between New Media and Freedom of Opinion and Expression in Palestine*, 2011, p. 20.

The Web 2.0 boom, including social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and others, is marked by several appealing and engaging elements, which are outlined as follows:

- **Immediacy:** The rapid transmission of information and its guaranteed delivery to targeted audiences.
- **Interactivity:** The opportunity for real-time interaction between the reader and the author.
- **Multimedia Integration:** The use of all communication means, such as text, audio, still images, moving images, and two- and three-dimensional graphics, among others.
- **Mobility and Flexibility:** New media tools can accompany both the sender and the receiver, such as laptops, internet-enabled computers, mobile phones, and devices that utilize wireless networks.
- **Attention and Focus:** Unlike exposure to traditional media—which is often passive and superficial—the recipient of new media plays an active role in selecting and interacting with content, resulting in a high degree of attention and focus.
- **Storage and Retrieval:** It is easy for the recipient to store and retrieve communication messages, as part of the inherent capabilities and features of the medium itself.⁴

The power of social media does not lie solely in the interactive feature it offers — which enables both the sender and receiver to exchange roles within the communication process — but these media have also brought about a qualitative revolution in multi-modal communicative content. This content now includes texts, images, audio files, and video clips, all of which have become among the most influential factors in shaping visions and attitudes, regardless of the ideologies behind them. Consequently, it has become necessary to develop frameworks that limit the effects of media production and news discourse, especially given that these media now monopolize sources of knowledge and news that were previously provided by institutions dedicated to these functions.

One of the most important mechanisms introduced to shape awareness that can confront such media — as advocated and supported by UNESCO — is media literacy.

Media literacy is a functional mechanism that calls for educating the audiences of mass media and users of digital technological platforms with the skills necessary to deal critically with their content. This is particularly relevant since these platforms have uniquely assumed the roles of informing, guiding, and educating due to the intensity of their use, which achieves these functions incidentally through users' cumulative exposure — unlike traditional sociological structures designated for this purpose, such as the family, schools, and religious institutions.

In this context, media literacy has a dual purpose: firstly, it aims to develop young people's and adults' understanding of media culture, and secondly, it seeks to encourage their active participation within this culture.⁵ This mechanism emerged in response to the prevailing trends that warn of the overwhelming influence of communication and digital technologies, and the tendency of audiences to become passive recipients of the content presented to them. Media literacy thus activates the individual's role when engaging with media content by enabling them to identify the sources of this content and its political, social, commercial, and cultural objectives, as well as the context in which it appears. This is achieved through analysis, critique, and the semiotic interpretation of the values embedded within the messages.

The Media Culture Center defines media literacy as 'the ability to interpret and construct personal meaning from media messages, as well as the ability to make choices, pose questions, and maintain awareness of what is happening around the individual, rather than being passive and susceptible to manipulation.'⁶

3. The Evolution of the Concept of Media Literacy

The concept of media literacy first emerged worldwide in the late 1960s, when experts focused on the potential of using communication tools and media as educational instruments to achieve tangible pedagogical benefits. By the 1970s, media literacy began to be seen as education about the media' — essentially a defensive project aimed at protecting children and young people from the risks posed by the media. The emphasis at that time was on exposing 'fake' messages and 'inappropriate values' and encouraging students to reject and transcend them.

In recent years, however, the concept of media literacy has evolved beyond being merely a 'defensive project' to also becoming a 'project of empowerment'. Its goal is to prepare young people to understand the media culture that surrounds them, to select and interact with it wisely, and to participate in it actively and effectively."

4. Media Literacy Strategies and Skills

UNESCO believes that media literacy plays a vital role in everyday life. It is at the heart of freedom of expression and the right to information because it enables citizens to understand how media and other means of accessing information work, to evaluate their content critically, and to make informed decisions as users and producers of information and digital media content.⁷

⁴ M. Al-Fatafta, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁵ <http://e-graine.org/education-aux-medias/> (Accessed at 20:09 on 20/04/2018)

⁶ Fahd bin Abdulrahman Al-Shamimri, *Media Literacy*, 1st ed., King Fahd Library for Publishing, 2010, p. 20.)"

⁷ (UNESCO. *Media Literacy as a Composite Concept*, accessed 20/04/2018, 20:38.)

Accordingly, viewpoints differ regarding the most appropriate strategies or methods for activating media literacy programs. While some argue that students should acquire media literacy skills through a dedicated subject or standalone course, others advocate for integrating media literacy into the curriculum instead of presenting it as a separate course. Meanwhile, a third group supports employing both approaches together.

In this context, the Center for Media Culture has identified ten strategies for teaching media literacy, the most significant of which are:

- Integrating media literacy into the curriculum, or offering a full course dedicated to media literacy.
- Applying the inductive model, teaching critical thinking skills, analyzing the media environment, studying different perspectives, among other elements.
- Employing the active learning model, which begins with awareness of a specific issue, then proceeds to analysis, followed by reflection (contemplation), and finally response. The outcome of these four activities is the experience the individual gains.⁸

Considine believes that media literacy is a competence rather than a standalone subject, and therefore it should be integrated into the curriculum. Hobbs emphasizes the importance of ensuring that media analysis in schools includes five key concepts:

Media messages are the product of an individual or an institution.

Media messages are produced within social, economic, political, historical, and aesthetic contexts.

The interpretation and construction of meaning arise from the interaction between the audience, the text, and the culture.

Each medium has its own unique codes and conventions.

The role of media expression in shaping people's understanding of social life.

In a different vein, Freed proposes a model for media literacy that places significant emphasis on the concept of interactivity, which characterizes modern media and information technologies. Contemporary digital networks are global in nature, especially with the expansion of wide-scale interactive networks that allow individuals to immerse themselves in global interactive environments. Therefore, critical thinking skills and technical skills alone are not sufficient for navigating this landscape without an understanding of the nature and power of interactivity itself. A media-literate individual is one who recognizes the depth of global interactivity; thus, global awareness becomes the key to media literacy, which implies that contemporary life is inherently interactive.

The European Authority for Education takes a similar position to Freed's, affirming that any model for incorporating media literacy must enable individuals to know, read, understand, and appreciate the messages coming from various types of media that they encounter daily, allowing them to orient themselves and use these media critically, thoughtfully, and appropriately, as well as to engage with the content they convey.⁹

Referring back to Freed, he proposes that in order to achieve an understanding of global interactivity as the foundation of contemporary media literacy, a model he calls *Deep Media Culture* should be adopted. This model comprises three levels:

- Skills for using information technologies and navigating digital networks.
- Critical thinking skills for analyzing media message content.
- Appreciation of global interactivity.

Freed also suggests three strategies for teaching media culture:

- Developing a shared media vision.
- Discussing media choices.
- Discussing global interactivity.

Additionally, Davis proposes that media literacy should focus on three core skills:

Analysis (Consumer Skill): A media-literate individual is an active participant in the dialogue about meaning within media content and is aware of the various factors that influence this dialogue.

Research (User Skill): A media-literate individual is an active researcher who identifies additional appropriate sources for exploring topics of personal interest.

Influence (Producer Skill): A media-literate individual is capable of altering the meaning or impact of media messages.¹⁰

5- Media Literacy and Social Media Networks

⁸ (Fahad bin Abdulrahman Al-Shumaimri, *op. cit.*, p. 38)

⁹ (Source: <http://eduscol.education.fr/numerique/dossier/competences/education-aux-medias/notion/inspection-generale> accessed on 20/04/2018 at 20:21)

¹⁰ (Tahir Hussein Abu Zaid, *The Role of Interactive Social Media Sites in Shaping Palestinian Public Opinion*, Master's Thesis, Al-Azhar University - Gaza, 2012, p. 52)

The more an individual is aware of the principles and rules for engaging with media, the more this awareness contributes to limiting its psychological and social repercussions—especially since media literacy necessitates the need to learn how to observe, monitor, and enjoy with caution and mindfulness.

Given the significant negative impacts of using social media networks, it can be said that implementing media literacy programs across various institutions and organizations could greatly help mitigate these impacts, among which addiction and social isolation are the most prominent. In this regard, the role of the family, school, university, mosque, civil society organizations, and even media institutions becomes evident, as they should adopt media literacy programs prepared with the participation of educational experts, psychologists, sociologists, religious leaders, and media professionals. The goal is to train individuals to engage responsibly with social media platforms and to distinguish between media content that aims to build and that which aims to destroy. It is impossible to establish purposeful media literacy without developing audiences who first possess the ability to discern what benefits them from what harms them when dealing with various media technologies.

Media literacy programs that guide social media users on how to engage with these platforms rely on two fundamental dimensions: the first is cognitive, which focuses on providing individuals with a knowledge base about these networks; the second is practical, achieved by having specialists in media literacy programs train individuals on how to use social media networks and interact with their content through posting, commenting, and sharing. This is done via practical training workshops, through which users learn to distinguish between positive and negative content on the one hand, and on the other hand, to critically evaluate the topics they encounter in various fields.

These media literacy workshops, for example, teach users not to be swept up by rumors—especially since social media platforms like Facebook are based on the ease of posting, commenting, and sharing. Moreover, they emphasize avoiding unethical language in both posts and comments. Thus, the user learns to self-monitor, drawing upon their religious values and conscience before engaging in any behavior while using these platforms.

“6- A Model for Applying Media Literacy to Develop Social Responsibility on Social Media

The preamble of UNESCO’s strategy on media literacy states: ‘UNESCO’s mission is to build media-literate societies and to engage with information through a comprehensive strategy that includes developing curricula for teachers, fostering international cooperation, and formulating guidelines to develop policies and strategies for new national media.’¹¹

“Based on this, the model proposed by the researchers extends to activating the mechanism of media literacy on social networking sites as one of the tools of digital media, initially, due to its connection with the variables of time and functional control. This entails socializing the individual in a way that enables them, first and foremost, to interact with and navigate these platforms by situating them within the structural framework that characterizes the individual’s environment — while adhering to the prevailing societal values and customs as guidelines for engagement. Simultaneously, media literacy becomes ingrained as a human faculty, akin to other senses that interact with the dominant medium of any given era, precisely as McLuhan’s axiom highlights regarding engagement with social media content.”

The proposed model is based on Osgood and Schramm’s concept of shared experience and the role of a unified set of attitudes, ideas, and symbols between the sender and the receiver, which determines the effectiveness of communication. In this framework, the sender converts ideas into symbols and formulates them into a message — whether written, spoken, or gestural — which may be rendered as a radio broadcast, a television image, a press article, or even a military code. The receiver, in turn, decodes the message content into symbols and interprets it according to their understanding of its meaning. Based on the receiver’s comprehension, a response is then sent back to the sender, transforming the communication process into a dynamic, interactive, reciprocal exchange — which constitutes the fundamental basis of the communication process on social networking sites.

The principal issue within Osgood and Schramm’s model lies in the variable margin between the sender’s intended purpose and the receiver’s understanding and response to the message. This gap primarily stems from inherent differences that shape the cognitive structure of the receiving individual on one hand, and the perceptual abilities activated by acquired variables such as education and personal interests on the other. This paves the way for the introduction of an intermediary variable concerned with analyzing both poles of the communication process in order to achieve its intended objectives.

“Referring back to the content of social networking sites, it essentially consists of communicative messages that aim to achieve their objectives while transcending the beliefs, opinions, and orientations held by individuals. Under the influence of globalization — which characterizes these platforms — the content is globalized, surpassing the frameworks and norms of socialization that reflect an individual’s environmental context. In this regard, emphasis

¹¹ (Source: UNESCO, accessed at 20:45 on 20/04/2018)

is placed on structuring an immediate, cognitive, self-regulatory authority when engaging with such content, which begins at the very moment of exposure to information. This information is characterized by:

- **Being vast and dense in scope** and volume;
- Its instantaneous and automatic accessibility to individuals, whether they seek it or not;
- Its diversity, as it encompasses audio, visual, and multimedia content;
- Its attractiveness, employing aesthetic and psychological aspects to establish elements of persuasion, influence, and attention.

Accordingly, these and other factors place the user of such content before the challenge of analyzing media content before entering the dyadic interaction phase (sender-receiver) functionally facilitated by social interaction sites (receiving a message – engaging with the message – disseminating a message).

In line with the proposed model, the sender begins with a preliminary reading of the source or content, fragmenting it into parts with the aim of facilitating its comprehension – which might otherwise be difficult to grasp as a whole – and thereby extracting the key points that constitute the core informational material of the content. This constitutes the first stage, followed by an internal critique of the source, assessing the value of its evidentiary information and hypothesizing about the data collection sources used, relying on various historical and legal projections that may confirm or refute its credibility. This is then complemented by an external critique focusing on the date and place of the material's production, its authenticity, and related factors.

After examining the source, the next step involves stripping the information of its aesthetic and psychological aspects that promote exposure to it, freeing it from elements of persuasion, influence, and attention, in order to focus solely on the raw aspect of the information. This enables a more objective analysis of its discourse, extracting it from its underlying references and frameworks, thus allowing focus on the information itself without being swayed or adopting the ideology or belief system of its source.

Returning to the principle of information flow on social networking sites, the dissemination of information often occurs irresponsibly – in most cases – without awareness of values and beliefs or adherence to social norms. This necessitates rigorous mental scrutiny of the information at the moment of exposure, since the response to content is immediate if it positively influences the receiver and prompts them to interact by sharing the content within their virtual social environment. Here, the user positions themselves as a sender and must frame the content within parameters that ensure a certain standard of language, formulation, and constructive focus, thus reinforcing content that upholds the social values defining the social structure.

When a sender produces content on social networking sites, they functionally assume the role of opinion leadership, while media literacy is activated as a structure within which the discourse is prepared, directed, and then evaluated. This underscores the role of social responsibility when transferring personal viewpoints and mental speculations to the public sphere – that is, social media platforms. Such responsibility necessitates accessing various other information-producing sources that provide information on events and social issues of greater public interest.

Media literacy demands this as part of maintaining the credibility that the sender must uphold before releasing media output into the virtual sphere. Once the content is published on social networking sites, it competes with millions of other messages and media content conveying diverse viewpoints and adopting various ideologies. Therefore, it must stand out and present what is unexpected in order to create an exception, distinguishing itself from the flood of circulating information on these platforms on the one hand, and influencing the targeted receiver on the other – especially if the receiver perceives sociological and cultural similarity in the sender's perspective. This is, in essence, the goal of the entire process: to encourage the adoption of an idea or opinion on a current issue, defending against false values and unsuitable habits, while simultaneously enabling active participation in the virtual space.

It is worth noting that the content on social networking sites is subject to interpretation, intentional omission, or even deletion from the message, in addition to other factors that may intentionally or unintentionally affect the course of the communication process – such as weak targeting of the intended audience, for example. In this context, it is necessary to overcome any form of influence that could undermine the quality and value of the message amid the vast amount of information that presents similar contexts and content. This drives the tendency toward the simplest possible conception of the communication process, provided that this conception allows for the organization and arrangement of the elements of communication and clarifies the relationships between them, thereby facilitating prediction, understanding, and easy inference of its purpose. This is succinctly captured in Lasswell's 1948 model, which answers five key questions (Who? Says What? To Whom? Through Which Channel? With What Effect?). The researcher sees this model as the ideal mechanism for shaping content on social networking sites.

Media literacy, as a mechanism for engaging with social networking sites, is not limited to the communicator alone; it also fully encompasses the receiver as an integral party in the communication process. This is particularly relevant given the fundamental principle of social networking sites, which transforms the perception of the receiver

into that of an active participant, interacting with and engaging in the virtual content, carefully selecting the material that meets their needs and, consequently, choosing the medium that enables this access. This stands in stark contrast to traditional media and communication channels, which viewed the receiver as an isolated being passively influenced by the content they broadcast. According to the proposed model, media literacy situates itself at the point where the receiver is exposed to content, granting them control over the extent to which they are influenced by the text. It does so by enabling them to draw upon various individual historical projections and human experiences in relation to the media content.

The importance of personal experiences emerges in diminishing the impact of the presented content and weakening the level of framing that the sender might rely on to steer the receiver's social reality. The receiver, therefore, must develop their cognitive structure by engaging with other informational media that provide alternatives for understanding the topic and directing perception and behavior, rather than relying on a single source of information.

This model emphasizes the recipient's thinking skills — both innate and acquired — prior to adopting any media content, because the moment of adoption effectively transforms the receiver into a potential sender or communicator. This embodies the concept of the active individual, a notion that social networking sites have reinforced within the framework of participatory, interactive, reciprocal exchange of texts and content.

Conclusion:

It can be said that media literacy has become an urgent necessity imposed by the transformations witnessed in the field of media and communication in general, and the Internet in particular. This reality calls for intensified efforts at all levels through the development of a plan aimed at consolidating the concept of media literacy among users of information and communication technologies. What is required in media literacy is the formulation of an education grounded in critical thinking — one that is capable of liberating the individual from technological fascination, making them more positive and resistant to the logic of convenience, and more conscious and responsible in selecting the products of the media process. With this perspective, recipients come to understand that not everything presented by the media is a truth that must be believed or accepted.

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