

INTERSECTION OF MEDIA LITERACY AND CRITICAL THINKING BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES.

By

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Abstract

As media continue to play pivotal role in shaping public perception, their power in polarising or building cohesion in communities take the centre stage. Over time, the trend of media messaging having integrity test deficiencies has become a concern. In effect, the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation in media messaging poses a threat to societal stability. This paper explores the basis and application of media literacy and critical thinking in pushing back integrity deficient messaging in the media. It sets the introduction of five “W”s and “H” to media consumers as a tool to upgrade media literacy and critical thinking as a major objective. It is anchored on two theories: the Critical Media Literacy theory by Douglas Keller and Jeff Share and the Participatory Media theory by Henry Jenkins. The paper utilizes the mixed methods research design, applying quantitative survey and qualitative Focus Group among staff and students of Veritas University, Abuja. From a population of 7354, (Registry, Veritas University, 2024), the Taro Yamane statistical formula was used to get the sample size for the survey. The sampling reflected both stratified and random. Purposive sampling served for the Focus Group. For data collection, the questionnaire instrument was used, applying closed-ended and Likert-scale questions. Data presentation was made in statistical tables. The major findings include: (i) Over 63% of the respondents have not at any time used the five “W”s and “H” as a tool to test the integrity of messaging in media. (ii) Over 69% of the respondents are aware that information of suspect integrity is a regular feature of mainstream legacy media even if they appear not to question it. (iii) An overwhelming 98% of the respondents are not aware of any specific handy tool to test the integrity of message in the media. Recommendations for (i) public awareness campaigns; (ii) identifying community thought leaders to initiate training on five “W”s and “H” as

handy tool to test information integrity in communities; (iii) embedding media literacy in education systems are proposed as a remedy and pathway to critical thinking and community resiliency.

Keywords: media literacy, critical thinking, sustainable, communities.

Introduction

Media has become an inseparable part of daily life, influencing human opinions, beliefs, and behaviours on a global scale. Communities rely on media for information, yet this information is often filtered through biased or manipulative lenses. Scholars have suggested that critical thinking and media literacy potentially offer antidotes to misinformation and disinformation. As digital media continues to shape public discourse, strengthening media literacy and critical thinking remains a crucial endeavour.

Research indicates that misinformation is not merely a result of ignorance but is deeply tied to cognitive biases, political motivations, and digital engagement patterns, (Kahneman, 2012). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Pro-media literacy scholars believe that its adaptation offers the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media in various forms (Potter, 2018). Media literacy enables individuals to critically engage with information and discern misinformation, which directly impacts community sustainability.

On the one hand, critical thinking skills speak to the cognitive ability to objectively analyse and evaluate issues to form reasoned judgments (Paul & Elder, 2019). It fosters informed decision-making, reducing the spread of misinformation and increasing participatory governance in communities. But on the other hand, digital access and media exposure to which individuals have access to influences their ability to develop media literacy and critical thinking (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). In field of learning, particularly the higher levels of education, the process is often linked to stronger critical thinking skills and a greater ability to interpret media content accurately (Facione, 2011). Scholars have contended that community engagement in media initiatives drive the promotion of fact-checking, participatory media, and grassroots journalism can impact media literacy and collective critical thinking (Aufderheide, 1993). The key dependent variables in this study include:(i) Community Resilience and Access to Reliable Information - The level of access to credible media sources influences community resilience. When individuals have media literacy skills, they are more capable of

distinguishing reliable sources, which in turn helps in disaster preparedness and crisis response (Koltay, 2011).

(ii) Informed Decision-Making and Digital Media Exposure - Exposure to diverse media content can either enhance or hinder decision-making. High digital literacy reduces susceptibility to misinformation, leading to better personal and communal decisions (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

(iii) Civic Engagement and Media Platforms - Social media platforms serve as catalysts for civic participation. However, the nature of engagement is dependent on the ability to critically evaluate content, ensuring participation is constructive rather than misinformed (Dahlgren, 2009). (iv) Media Consumption Behaviour and Educational Background - Individuals with higher education levels tend to develop stronger media literacy and critical thinking skills, enabling more discerning consumption of media content (Potter, 2010).

(v) Misinformation Resistance and Algorithmic Influence - The extent to which individuals resist misinformation is influenced by the algorithms governing their online content exposure. Awareness of algorithmic biases aids in mitigating echo chambers and misinformation spread (Pariser, 2011).

(vi) Social Cohesion and Media Representation - Representation of diverse communities in media impacts social cohesion. Critical media literacy allows communities to challenge stereotypes and advocate for inclusive narratives (Silverstone, 2007). (vii) Policy Adoption and Governmental Support - The implementation of media literacy policies is influenced by governmental priorities. Countries that integrate media literacy into educational curricula experience higher levels of civic awareness and participatory governance (Hobbs, 2010).

The relationship between these variables can be considered as catalysts for building sustainable communities. The proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, especially through digital platforms, poses a significant threat to societal stability. Irrespective of best intentions, wherever the identified elements of cognitive limitations occur in media consumption, can a single tool of reflective personal inquiry expose the defect in information use? This paper seeks to determine if the introduction of the five “W”s and “H” media tool to media consumers solves the literacy and critical thinking gaps observable in media exposure.

Objectives

- (i) To determine if the introduction of five “W”s and “H” to media consumers is able to moderate literacy and critical thinking gaps in media use by communities.
- (ii) To find out if media consumers in university communities are inclined to question the appropriateness of the messages consumed in media.
- (iii) To understand if media consumers in university communities are aware of any tool with which to obtain independent insight on media messages they are exposed to.
- (iv) To make a connection between human inquiry, media access and proliferation of misinformation in communities.

Literature Review

Media is a powerful tool that shapes societal values, identities, and discourses. Hall (1997) emphasizes that media represents and frames issues in ways that influence public perception. This framing, particularly when skewed or biased, can either strengthen or weaken the fabric of communities. With the rise of digital media, information spreads rapidly, making it easier for both factual content and misinformation to circulate, with significant consequences for societal cohesion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Therefore, understanding how media constructs and disseminates narratives is crucial for community resilience.

Media literacy involves understanding how media is produced, analysing the content critically, and recognizing its influence on culture and politics (Kellner & Share, 2019). Critical thinking complements media literacy by empowering individuals to evaluate media content logically, question underlying assumptions, and identify biases or misinformation (Livingstone, 2018). As communities engage with media, these skills become essential in discerning accurate information and resisting media manipulation, thereby fostering informed and cohesive societies.

In an era dominated by digital media, the ability to critically engage with information has become a crucial skill for individuals and communities. Media literacy extends beyond the traditional understanding of evaluating credibility; it involves recognizing the ways in which misinformation, propaganda, and cognitive biases shape public perception and discourse (Hobbs, 2021).

Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship

A growing body of research suggests that media literacy education must evolve to address the complexities of digital misinformation and

propaganda. Hobbs (2021) argues that media literacy programs should aim to equip media consumers to recognize manipulative tactics used in digital propaganda. Similarly, Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) examine how viral misinformation, such as the “Pizzagate” conspiracy during the 2016 U.S. elections, thrives in digital spaces where emotional engagement often outweighs factual accuracy. They contend that misinformation is not merely passively consumed but actively shared due to its sensationalist appeal, underscoring the importance of digital literacy in fostering civic responsibility.

Social Media and the Spread of Misinformation

Research has demonstrated that exposure to untrustworthy online sources is neither accidental nor evenly distributed. Guess et al. (2020) found that 27% of American adults visited at least one unreliable news website during the 2016 election cycle, with older adults being particularly susceptible. Furthermore, Lewandowsky et al. (2017) argue that misinformation thrives in the “post-truth” era, where individuals engage in motivated reasoning—seeking out information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs rather than evaluating facts objectively. They provide case studies on climate change denial and anti-vaccine rhetoric to illustrate how misinformation can be politically or ideologically motivated, reinforcing the urgent need for media literacy programs that counteract cognitive biases.

The Role of Education in Strengthening Media Literacy

Educational institutions play a pivotal role in equipping individuals with the skills needed to critically analyse media messages. Livingstone et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of integrating media literacy education in schools, particularly in the context of children’s online data privacy. Their study, which involved interviews with children aged 9–16, found that many young users were unaware of how their personal data was being tracked and used for targeted advertising. Buckingham (2019) expands on this argument, criticizing the failure of policymakers to implement comprehensive media literacy programs despite growing concerns over digital misinformation. He asserts that media education should extend beyond “spotting fake news” to encompass critical engagement with entertainment, advertising, and political messaging.

Cognitive Heuristics and Critical Thinking

The human brain often relies on cognitive shortcuts (heuristics) when processing information, leading to susceptibility to misinformation (Metzger & Flanagin, 2021). Their research demonstrates that people tend to trust highly shared or emotionally resonant content without verifying

its accuracy. Kahne and Bowyer (2017) further illustrate this phenomenon by conducting an experiment where students were exposed to politically charged misinformation and asked to fact-check the claims. They found that students with prior media literacy training were more likely to correctly identify false information, reinforcing the importance of equipping individuals with critical thinking skills to resist partisan distortions.

Education systems are responsible for preparing students to become informed citizens who can engage critically with media (Silverblatt, 2015). Incorporating media literacy such as with awareness and understanding of the five “W”s and “H” as a possible tool for decoding media messaging, encourages students to become active participants in information consumption, empowering them to make informed decisions and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Studies have shown that curricula that integrate media literacy not only enhance students’ understanding of media but also improve critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Kellner & Share, 2019).

Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information spread unintentionally, while disinformation involves the deliberate dissemination of false information to deceive (Livingstone, 2018). Media literacy can act as a remedy by providing individuals with the tools to critically assess information sources, distinguish between fact and fiction, and reduce the harmful impacts of such content on communities.

Theoretical Framework

The paper is anchored on two theories, namely, the Critical Media Literacy theory whose proponents are Douglas Keller and Jeff Share and the Participatory Media theory whose proponent is Henry Jenkins. The Critical Media Literacy theory extends traditional media literacy by incorporating a critical theory approach, which emphasizes understanding how media messages are constructed, the ideologies they promote, and the power structures that shape them.

The Critical Media Literacy theory encourages the questioning of dominant media narratives and challenges the social and political implications of media representations. It is particularly relevant to fostering critical thinking and resilience in communities, as it highlights the role of media in shaping public consciousness and the need for individuals to become informed media producers, not just passive consumers.

Kellner and Share (2019) argue that CML equips individuals with the

tools to critically assess media content and its societal implications, making it a powerful framework for building resilient communities capable of resisting misinformation and divisive media narratives.

Jenkins (2006), in regards to the Participatory Media theory explores the shift from passive consumption of media to active participation by audiences. This theory is particularly relevant in the digital age, where users create, share, and collaborate on content via social media and other platforms. This participatory engagement is key to building resilient communities, as individuals and groups can create media that reflects their values and challenges dominant, potentially harmful narratives.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts the mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus group) methods to explore the relationship between media literacy, critical thinking, and sustainable community development. The rationale for this approach is to triangulate data, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions and cognitive processing regarding media messages and sustainability issues.

Population and Sampling Strategy

The population of the study is the entire students and staff (academic and non-academic) of Veritas University, Abuja, amounting to 7354. According to Yamane, (1967),the statistical formula for sample size determination:

$$\begin{aligned} &1+N(e)^2 \\ &=1+7354(0.05)^2 \\ &=1+7354(0.0025) \\ &=1+18.385 \\ &=19.385 \\ &n = \frac{7354}{19.385} \\ &\quad n \approx 379.2 \\ &\quad n = 379 \end{aligned}$$

For a population of 7354 with a 5% margin of error, we arrived at a sample size of 379 with regards to the survey method whereas for the Focus Group Discussions we set up 4 focus groups, each with six participants. The study focused on undergraduate, postgraduate students as well as academic staff in the Social Sciences Faculty of Veritas

University, Abuja. This choice is strategic because students and academic staff in the social sciences are likely to have prior exposure to the subjects of this inquiry.

Sampling Technique:

A multi-stage sampling approach was adopted:

- **Stratified Sampling:** The faculty was divided into strata based on the following disciplines, Mass Communication, Economics, History and International Relations, Political Science and Diplomacy.
- **Random Sampling:** From each stratum, students were randomly selected to ensure representation.
- **Purposive Sampling (for Focus Groups):** Students who demonstrate keen interest in media literacy, critical thinking, or sustainability, identified through interactions with course lecturers in the specific Departments were screened and picked for focus group discussions. Lecturers were equally picked purposively from the Departments within the Faculty.

Data Collection Methods

For survey, and quantitative data collection, the questionnaire instrument was used applying closed-ended and Likert-scale questions covering demographics, media consumption patterns, media literacy assessment, awareness of the five “W”s and “H” value of news, critical thinking skills, and sustainability awareness. The questionnaire instrument was administered in person data analysis was by descriptive statistics for frequency distribution, and percentages as well as inferential statistics to examine relationships, as well as regression analysis to test the role of the dependent variables on the independent variable.

Focus Group Discussions

This came handy in order to explore the participants’ deeper perspectives on how media literacy and critical thinking shape their understanding and engagement with sustainability issues. The instrument was the structured discussion guide, with each taking 60 minutes and scoping the following: introduction, media exposure, cognitive processing, community engagement, challenges and recommendations.

Data Analysis: The study adopted the narrative synthesis which is the storytelling method that amplifies and illustrates key insights.

Data Presentation

Table 1: Availability of information of suspect integrity in legacy media
Responses **Frequency**
Percentage %

Highly regular	23	6.07
Regular	201	53.03
Rare	175	46.17
Never	0	0
Total	379	100%

Source: Field survey, 2024.

Table 2: Availability of information of suspect integrity in online/social media

Responses	Frequency	Percentage %
Highly regular	224	59.11
Regular	151	39.84
Rare	4	1.06
Never	0	0
Total	379	100%

Source: Field survey, 2024.

Table 3: Familiar with handy tools to test information integrity

Responses	Frequency	Percentage %
Aware	0	0
Not aware	373	98.42
Have used one	0	0
Doesn't matter	6	1.58
Total	379	100%

Source: Field survey, 2024.

Table 4: Have you used the five “W”s and “H” as tool to test information integrity before?

Responses	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes, I have	0	0
No I have not	242	63.89
Don't know	135	35.64
5”W”s & “H”		
Doesn't matter	2	1.05
Total	379	100%

Source: Field survey, 2024

The data available shows that public view about integrity of information in legacy media (the traditional media which make up print newspapers and magazines, terrestrial and cable televisions, and radio stations) is almost sharply divided between those who question the integrity of information therein and those who associate information in the legacy media with credibility. Whereas 175 respondents, representing over 46% believe that integrity is rare in information delivered from legacy media, 201 respondents, representing over 53% believe that there is regular appearance of information of integrity in legacy media.

Strikingly different view of the social media platforms was recorded regarding the integrity of information released. A total of 224 respondents, representing 59% believe information of integrity in social media platforms is highly regularly unavailable while another 154 respondents, representing 39% believe that the unavailability of information of integrity in social media is a regular feature. This puts the public perception of the integrity-deficient status of social media as concerning.

The foregoing is bad enough, but worsened by the unfolding data from respondents which shows that a whopping 273 respondents, representing over 98% are not aware of any handy tools to test the integrity of information in the media before consuming. By inference, this suggests that amid the growing concerns about proliferation of integrity challenged information in the media, nearly all consumers of media information are not aware of a handy tool to test which information is fit for consumption and which is not.

Another combined 377 respondents, representing over 98% reported they have no idea how the five “W”s and “H” could be used as a tool to check the integrity of information in the media.

Findings

The study made the following findings: (i) Over 63% of the respondents have not at any time used the five “W”s and “H” as a tool to test the integrity of messaging they are exposed to. (ii) A little over 69% of the respondents are aware that information of suspect integrity is a regular feature of mainstream legacy media even if they appear not to question it. (iii) An overwhelming 98% of the respondents are not aware of any specific handy tool to test the integrity of message in the media. (iv) Strikingly, over 63% of the respondents are not aware of five “W”s and “H” while another 35% state that they never used the tool to test the integrity of information they consume in the media. The Focused Group

sessions seem to be somewhat differently nuanced, with participants agreeing that application of critical interrogation of media messaging by consumers can significantly reduce the spread of misinformation in communities. A preponderance of participants also made a connection between deeper understanding of the nature of the media and a likelihood to interrogate messages in the media. Drawing from this reasoning a significant number of the participants accepted that current educational curriculum may be inadequate to promote media literacy and critical thinking at a time that community exposure to media messaging is on the rise.

Conclusion

The exposure of communities to media messages is on a steady rise as digital and mobile technologies continue to shape how people interact with media. Inevitably, for communities, the steady gaps in the test of integrity in media messages shape the realities for individuals and increase the potential vulnerability of communities. There is a consensus that individuals deserve to learn the nature of the media as a way to bolster their cognition, critical thinking and ultimately improve their capacity to interrogate media messages. As a potential tool to advance media literacy and critical thinking among media consumers, the five “W”s and “H” are Media literacy and critical thinking, awareness is low and the set skills to apply it is not readily available.

Recommendations

This study, following the identified findings made the following recommendations:

- (i) That public authorities, particularly the National Orientation Agency and allied public institutions in states should undertake public awareness campaigns on media literacy;
- (ii) That agencies and policy implementers should approach their schedules by identifying community thought-leaders to initiate training on five “W”s and “H” as handy tool to test information integrity in communities;
- (iii) That Education Ministries, agencies should endeavour to embed media literacy in education systems as a remedy and pathway to critical thinking and community resiliency.
- (iv) Governments should prioritize the inclusion of media literacy in national educational standards, ensuring that students from primary to tertiary levels acquire critical media skills.

- (v) Media literacy should be embedded across different subjects, encouraging students to critically engage with media in diverse academic contexts.
- (vi) Educators should be trained in media literacy to effectively teach critical thinking skills and address misinformation in the classroom.
- (vii) Governments and educational institutions should develop digital tools and resources that promote media literacy, ensuring that communities can access and engage with critical media education.

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