

MEDIA LITERACY IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION: CULTIVATING CRITICAL DISCERNMENT AMID DISINFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

In an era dominated by digital media and accelerated information flows, the ability to critically evaluate media messages has become an essential competence for communication and journalism students. This article examines the integration of media education within university curricula, highlighting its dual cognitive and ethical-professional value. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from several theoreticians, it situates media literacy at the intersection of information literacy, digital literacy, and critical thinking. The study analyses the contemporary challenges posed by disinformation, algorithmic amplification and emotional manipulation, arguing that media education must foster practical discernment rather than mere theoretical knowledge. Pedagogical strategies such as inquiry-based learning, reflective journaling, media portfolios, collaborative projects and fact-checking exercises are presented as effective methods to develop students' analytical, ethical and civic competences. Empirical observations indicate that media education promotes critical awareness, active content production, and ethical responsibility, while also highlighting challenges such as the persistence of unverified content sharing and limited reflection on professional ethics. The article concludes that university-based media education is a form of civic literacy, empowering students to navigate complex information ecosystems responsibly and contribute to a more transparent and democratic public sphere.

Keywords: *critical thinking, disinformation, journalism, media literacy.*

INTRODUCTION

In a society increasingly characterized by accelerated information flows, ubiquitous social media platforms and algorithmic systems that often prioritize visibility over veracity, the ability to critically evaluate media messages has become a fundamental competence. The digital information environment has transformed not only the speed at which information circulates but also how it is produced, distributed and interpreted. Within this context, media education can no longer be regarded as a marginal or auxiliary component of the learning process; rather, it represents a crucial condition for the development of autonomous, reflective and responsible forms of thinking.

The contemporary media ecosystem is marked by an unprecedented abundance of information, accompanied by an increasing difficulty in distinguishing between verified knowledge, opinion and manipulated content. Digital platforms facilitate rapid access to news and public debate, yet the same technological infrastructures also enable the widespread dissemination of misinformation and disinformation. As several scholars have noted, the challenges posed by the current information environment require citizens to develop advanced interpretative and analytical skills to navigate the complex dynamics of mediated communication (Buckingham, 2003; Potter, 2018). In this sense, media literacy has become a central component of democratic participation, equipping individuals with the capacity to critically assess sources, understand the mechanisms of media production, and recognize the persuasive strategies embedded in media narratives (Hobbs, 2017).

For students in the fields of communication and journalism, these competences acquire a dual significance. On the one hand, they possess a cognitive dimension, related to understanding the mechanisms through which information is produced, framed, filtered and consumed within contemporary media systems. On the other hand, they involve an ethical and professional dimension, which implies assuming an active role in promoting truth, accountability and public transparency. Future journalists and communication professionals must therefore develop not only technical and narrative skills, but also a critical awareness of the structural factors that influence media content, including economic pressures, editorial routines, political interests and algorithmic mediation within digital platforms (Couldry, 2012; van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018).

Within the broader framework of higher education, media education can thus be understood as a pedagogical approach aimed at cultivating critical thinking, analytical reasoning and civic responsibility. Media literacy does not simply refer to the ability to access information or to decode media messages; rather, it encompasses the capacity to evaluate sources, interpret media representations, identify ideological framing and reflect upon the broader social consequences of communication practices. From this perspective, universities play a crucial role in preparing students to engage critically with media environments that are increasingly complex, hybrid and algorithmically mediated.

Against this background, the present study aims to analyze the ways in which media education can be integrated into university training programmes, particularly within the context of communication and journalism studies. The paper pursues two main directions of inquiry. First, it seeks to clarify the fundamental theoretical concepts underlying media education and to examine their relationship with the phenomenon of disinformation in the contemporary digital environment. Second, it aims to identify pedagogical approaches capable of transforming the university learning process into a continuous exercise in critical discernment, encouraging students to question media representations, analyze narrative framing, and evaluate the credibility of information sources.

The working hypothesis of this study is that media education, when systematically integrated into university curricula, contributes significantly to the development of civic and professional competences essential for the functioning of a democratic public sphere. By fostering critical engagement with media content and encouraging responsible information practices, higher education institutions can play a decisive role in strengthening democratic culture and promoting an informed and participatory citizenry.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MEDIA EDUCATION BETWEEN INFORMATION LITERACY AND CRITICAL THINKING

The concept of media education has undergone significant evolution over the past decades, moving beyond a narrow focus on the technical skills required to operate communication technologies towards a more complex understanding of the relationship between individuals, information and the symbolic power of the media. Early approaches to media literacy often emphasized the ability to decode media messages or to use emerging digital tools; however, contemporary scholarship increasingly situates media education within broader debates about democratic participation, critical thinking and the social responsibilities of media producers and consumers.

According to David Buckingham, one of the most influential scholars in the field, media education refers to “the process of teaching and learning about media; media literacy is the outcome – the knowledge and skills learners acquire. Media education aims to develop both critical understanding and active participation.” (Buckingham, 2003, p.4) This definition highlights two essential dimensions of media literacy: the analytical capacity to interpret media messages and the practical ability to engage with media environments as informed and responsible participants. In this sense, media education does not simply involve learning how media operate; it also encourages individuals to question how meanings are constructed, whose perspectives are represented, and what power structures shape media narratives.

From this perspective, the capacity to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages across multiple media formats becomes a prerequisite for informed participation in public life. Media literacy therefore functions as both a cognitive competence and a civic skill, enabling individuals to navigate increasingly complex communication environments and to contribute meaningfully to democratic discourse.

In a broader sense, media literacy intersects with related concepts such as information literacy and digital literacy. These overlapping frameworks reflect the multifaceted nature of contemporary communication practices, where the boundaries between traditional media, digital platforms and user-generated content are increasingly blurred. Within this context, the framework developed by UNESCO conceptualizes Media and Information Literacy (MIL) as an integrated set of competencies that enable individuals to critically engage with information and media systems.

According to this framework, MIL encompasses three interrelated dimensions (UNESCO 2013):

- first, access to information and media, which refers to the ability to locate, retrieve and select credible sources of information within diverse media environments.
- second, critical evaluation, which involves the capacity to distinguish between factual information and opinion, between verified sources and manipulative or misleading content.
- third, creation and participation, which refers to the ability to produce ethical, clear and socially relevant messages and to participate responsibly in public communication processes.

A similar perspective is advanced by Renee Hobbs, who argues that media literacy should be understood as a reflective and participatory learning process through which individuals learn to recognize the intentions, interests and potential effects embedded in mediated communication. From this standpoint, the goal of media education is not merely to

protect audiences from misinformation or manipulation, but to foster cognitive and civic empowerment. By cultivating analytical skills, ethical awareness and participatory competences, media education contributes to the formation of citizens capable of engaging consciously and responsibly in public dialogue (Hobbs, 2017).

Consequently, within contemporary higher education, media education is increasingly perceived as a strategic component of democratic culture. Universities, particularly those training future journalists and communication professionals, play a crucial role in fostering the intellectual autonomy and critical awareness required to navigate the complexities of the digital information ecosystem. Through structured pedagogical approaches that combine theoretical reflection with practical analysis of media content, higher education institutions can support the development of critical media competences that extend beyond technical proficiency and contribute to a more resilient and informed public sphere.

Media Education and Critical Thinking

The critical dimension constitutes the core of media education. In other words, a media-literate individual does not react automatically to media messages, but processes them deliberately, according to personal goals, prior knowledge and contextual understanding. This perspective transforms media education into a continuous exercise in intellectual autonomy, encouraging individuals to question, interpret and evaluate the information they encounter in mediated environments.

Scholars of media literacy emphasize that critical engagement with media involves more than simply recognizing misinformation; it requires the development of analytical habits that enable individuals to examine how media messages are constructed and circulated within broader social and institutional frameworks. As noted by W. James Potter, media literacy involves the active use of cognitive structures that allow audiences to interpret media messages in relation to their purposes, contexts and potential effects. In this sense, media education fosters the ability to move from passive consumption to reflective interpretation.

Within the university environment, the development of critical thinking entails not only analyzing media content but also understanding the mechanisms through which information is produced. These mechanisms include the selection of sources, the hierarchical organization of facts, the narrative framing of events, and the visual and emotional impact of mediated messages. Journalism and communication students, in particular, benefit from examining these processes, as such analysis reveals the editorial, economic and technological forces that shape media narratives.

From a pedagogical perspective, media education therefore becomes a complex learning instrument that invites students to question informational “self-evidence” and to adopt an ethical stance towards communication practices. By examining how news is constructed, framed and disseminated, students gain insight into the interpretative choices that underlie journalistic production and into the potential consequences of those choices for public understanding.

Consequently, media education is not limited to identifying or debunking so-called “fake news”. Rather, it seeks to explain how and why such phenomena emerge and circulate within digital media ecosystems. This approach involves analyzing the psychological, social and technological mechanisms that facilitate the spread of misleading information. Research on contemporary information environments shows that disinformation often exploits

cognitive biases, emotional responses, and social dynamics such as confirmation bias, echo chambers, and algorithmic amplification (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Understanding those mechanisms allows students to recognize the structural conditions that enable misinformation to gain visibility and credibility in the digital public sphere.

From Technological Literacy to Civic Literacy

A frequent misconception within educational contexts is the tendency to equate digital competence with media education. Although both involve the use of technological tools, only the latter addresses the interpretative, ethical, and civic dimensions of communication. Being able to operate digital technologies does not necessarily imply the ability to critically evaluate information or to understand the broader social implications of mediated communication.

According to Paul Mihailidis, media literacy should be understood not simply as a set of technical abilities but as a form of civic culture grounded in responsibility, participation, and engagement with public life. From this perspective, media education contributes to the formation of citizens capable of critically interpreting media environments and of participating meaningfully in democratic dialogue (Mihailidis, 2014).

Consequently, university education should move beyond a purely instrumental approach focused on how media technologies are used and instead cultivate a reflexive logic that addresses why and for what purposes these technologies are employed. This shift encourages students to interrogate the social roles of communication technologies, the power relations embedded in media systems, and the ethical responsibilities associated with producing and distributing information.

Within this framework, universities have the responsibility to encourage students to become communicators who are aware of the public consequences of their messages. The educational process should therefore facilitate a transition from the passive consumption of content to the responsible production of meaning. In the case of journalism and communication students, this involves recognizing the impact that journalistic narratives, visual representations and digital dissemination strategies may have on public opinion and democratic debate.

Ultimately, the transition from environments dominated by disinformation to contexts characterised by critical discernment can only be achieved through an integrated pedagogical effort. Such an approach combines critical media analysis, journalistic practice and ethical reflection, allowing students to develop both the professional competences and the civic awareness required for responsible communication in contemporary digital societies.

2. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES: FROM DISINFORMATION TO CRITICAL DISCERNMENT

In the digital age, the enormous volume of information circulating online often moves beyond traditional institutional filters and editorial control. While social media platforms have democratized access to public communication, they have simultaneously amplified the risks of disinformation, emotional manipulation and the deliberate distortion of reality. Phenomena such as *fake news*, *clickbait* and *deepfake* increasingly define a new communicative ecosystem in which truth may become negotiable and trust in traditional information sources declines significantly.

Digital platforms have profoundly transformed the architecture of public communication. The logic of visibility and engagement that governs platform algorithms tends to privilege emotionally charged, polarizing or sensational content, often at the expense of accuracy or contextual depth. As scholars analyzing the contemporary platform ecosystem have argued, algorithmically curated information flows can intensify the spread of misleading narratives and reinforce ideological echo chambers (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In such contexts, the challenge is no longer simply accessing information but learning how to interpret, verify, and contextualize it critically.

For students in communication and related fields, this environment represents both a challenge and a pedagogical opportunity. On the one hand, younger generations are frequently described as digital natives, familiar with social media platforms and online communication practices. On the other hand, this familiarity does not necessarily translate into critical information skills. Exposure to vast quantities of online content may generate a state of informational hyper-exposure, where the speed of consumption surpasses the capacity for critical verification.

Recent studies conducted by the European Commission suggest that a significant proportion of young Europeans rarely verify the sources of information before sharing it online. Reports on digital literacy indicate that a considerable number of students rely primarily on algorithmically curated social media feeds when forming opinions about political and social issues (European Commission, 2022). These findings highlight the urgent need for educational interventions capable of strengthening critical information practices among younger audiences. In this context, university-level media education cannot remain limited to theoretical discussions about mass media systems; it must evolve into a process aimed at developing practical critical discernment. Within the broader sphere of public communication, the distinction between misleading information and reliable reporting does not depend solely on factual verification but also on the intentions, ethical standards and social responsibilities guiding the communication process.

Misleading or fabricated news narratives frequently exploit the emotional vulnerabilities of audiences, generating confusion, polarization and mistrust. By contrast, responsible journalism seeks to provide verified information that is contextualized, socially relevant and mindful of its potential impact on public understanding. Such communication practices emphasize verification, transparency and accountability as central professional values within journalism and public communication.

From this perspective, media discernment involves a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. It requires knowledge about sources, contexts and mechanisms of media influence; analytical skills related to verification, interpretation and synthesis; and a set of ethical dispositions grounded in responsibility, civic awareness and respect for the public interest. These elements together form the basis of what scholars increasingly describe as critical media competence. Universities therefore represent a particularly important environment for cultivating these competences. As spaces dedicated to reflection, dialogue and knowledge production, higher education institutions can provide students with both the conceptual frameworks and the practical experiences necessary to navigate contemporary information ecosystems responsibly. Through interdisciplinary learning environments, critical discussion and applied journalistic practice, universities can foster a generation of communicators capable of transforming informational complexity into informed and socially responsible communication.

3. MEDIA EDUCATION IN THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT: THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSOR AND PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

The integration of media education into university training requires a significant pedagogical shift: from information-centered teaching to active and reflective learning. In traditional academic models, knowledge transmission often occupies a central role, with the lecturer positioned as the primary source of expertise. However, contemporary educational paradigms increasingly emphasize student-centered learning environments, where knowledge is constructed through dialogue, analysis, and collaborative exploration.

Within this framework, the role of the university professor evolves from that of a mere transmitter of knowledge to that of a facilitator of critical understanding. This transformation involves the adoption of pedagogical approaches that encourage students to actively engage with media content, question informational structures, and develop independent interpretative frameworks. Methods based on discussion, collaborative analysis and the production of media content can help students move beyond passive reception and become reflective participants in the communication process.

Educational research in media literacy emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs when students are encouraged to analyze real communication contexts, interrogate the credibility of sources and understand the social consequences of mediated narratives. Consequently, pedagogical strategies in media education increasingly incorporate activities such as case-study analysis, newsroom simulations, collaborative investigations of misinformation and the critical examination of digital media environments.

The Role of the Academic Teacher as a Reflective Mediator

In the contemporary educational landscape, the university teacher functions as a mediator between theoretical knowledge and the digital experiences of students. This mediating role becomes particularly important in fields such as communication and journalism, where students are already deeply immersed in digital media environments before entering higher education. Rather than simply presenting theoretical models, the professor guides students in critically interpreting the media realities they encounter daily.

In this position, the academic teacher performs several essential pedagogical functions. First, teaching is oriented towards problematization rather than mere accumulation of information, encouraging students to question assumptions and analyze the contexts in which media messages are produced. Second, the classroom becomes a space for dialogue and argumentative reasoning, where students are invited to articulate and defend their interpretations of media phenomena. Third, the educator creates opportunities for ethical reflection on the role of communication professionals, encouraging students to consider the social responsibilities associated with producing and disseminating information.

The development of critical discernment also benefits from pedagogical approaches grounded in inquiry-based learning, a method that encourages students to actively investigate questions rather than passively receive predetermined answers. Through research-oriented activities, students are encouraged to formulate questions, test hypotheses, and construct their own arguments based on evidence and critical analysis. Such pedagogical strategies align with broader educational theories that emphasize reflective learning and intellectual autonomy as essential outcomes of higher education.

Within this framework, media education acquires a transformative function. It does not merely transmit knowledge about media institutions or communication technologies; rather, it reshapes how students relate to information, authority, and public discourse. By encouraging critical reflection and ethical awareness, media education contributes to the development of a culture of academic responsibility in which communication is understood not only as a professional practice but also as a civic act. In this broader sense, the university becomes a space where future communicators learn to connect professional competence with social accountability. Through pedagogical practices that combine theoretical reflection, critical analysis and practical experimentation, higher education can cultivate communicators who are capable of navigating complex media environments while remaining attentive to the ethical and democratic implications of their work.

4. ASSESSING MEDIA COMPETENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Assessment in media education should reflect not only declarative knowledge but also the processes through which students develop critical thinking and reflective judgement. Unlike traditional forms of evaluation that focus primarily on the reproduction of theoretical information, assessment in media literacy aims to capture students' analytical abilities, ethical awareness and capacity to engage responsibly with media content.

Several pedagogical tools have been identified as particularly effective in evaluating the development of media competences. Among the most widely used are media portfolios, which may include analytical essays, fact-checking exercises, reflections on media consumption and original content production. Such portfolios allow students to document their intellectual progress over time and encourage a continuous process of critical engagement with media environments.

Another valuable instrument is the reflective journal, where students record their perceptions regarding the evolution of their own critical understanding. Through this reflective practice, learners become more aware of how their interpretative frameworks change as they engage with theoretical concepts and practical media analysis. Reflection thus becomes an integral component of learning, enabling students to examine not only what they know but also how they construct meaning from media experiences.

In addition, formative assessment rubrics can be designed around criteria such as factual accuracy, argumentative coherence, ethical awareness, and originality of perspective. These criteria encourage students to move beyond descriptive analysis and develop reasoned interpretations supported by verified sources. Consequently, evaluation becomes a process of learning awareness rather than merely a test of theoretical reproduction.

Pedagogical Outcomes and Challenges in the Digital Context

The integration of media education into the university training of future communication professionals has revealed a number of significant pedagogical outcomes, while also highlighting several challenges specific to the contemporary digital environment.

One of the most visible outcomes is the development of students' critical awareness. Through activities such as comparative media analysis and fact-checking exercises, students gradually learn to identify mechanisms of media manipulation, distinguish between facts and opinions, and formulate arguments grounded in the verification of sources. This progression supports the hypothesis that critical thinking can be systematically cultivated through

reflective pedagogical approaches that combine theoretical understanding with practical analysis. Furthermore, activities centered on the production of responsible content, such as the drafting of constructive or solution-oriented news narratives, have encouraged a shift from passive consumption to active, creative, and ethically informed participation. Students become more conscious of the importance of rigorous information selection and begin to experience the public responsibility associated with the profession of journalist or communication specialist.

During seminar discussions, many students also recognize the difficulty of maintaining a balance between the attractiveness of media content and factual accuracy. This awareness indicates that students are beginning to internalize the broader social role of journalism and the ethical implications of communication practices. In this sense, media education contributes not only to professional competence but also to the development of a reflective professional identity. However, the implementation of media education initiatives can also reveal several persistent challenges. Among these are the continued perception among some students that source verification represents an optional stage rather than a professional obligation; the strong influence of algorithmically curated information flows that generate informational echo chambers; and the relative absence of a sustained culture of reflection on the ethics of communication within everyday media practices.

These observations reinforce the need for media education to be integrated transversally across communication curricula, rather than treated as an isolated thematic component. When incorporated across multiple courses and pedagogical contexts, media competences become more than technical abilities; they evolve into a constitutive element of the professional identity of future communicators.

Moreover, the analysis of teaching activities conducted in the university environment indicates that collaborative learning methods, including peer learning, team projects and structured debates, tend to foster higher levels of student engagement than traditional forms of evaluation. When students are invited to investigate and explain disinformation phenomena themselves, they assume a more active role in the learning process and develop a stronger sense of intellectual ownership over their analytical conclusions.

This participatory dynamic aligns with the perspective proposed by Paul Mihailidis, who argues that media literacy education contributes to the formation of citizens capable of co-creating meaning within digital public spheres. In this framework, students are not merely recipients of information, but active participants in the processes through which public knowledge and shared narratives are constructed. Overall, the outcomes observed suggest that media education produces effects that extend beyond the strictly professional dimension. By encouraging critical reflection, ethical awareness and collaborative inquiry, it contributes to the formation of a civic and ethical student profile anchored in the values of transparency, respect for truth and public responsibility. In this way, media education becomes not only a pedagogical strategy within communication studies but also an essential component of democratic culture in contemporary societies.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that media education constitutes a strategic component of university-level training in communication and journalism. In an increasingly fragmented informational landscape where the boundaries between fact and opinion are becoming

blurred, universities bear the responsibility of reconstructing young people's critical discernment and transforming the learning process into an exercise in civic responsibility.

Media education should not be reduced to a set of digital skills; rather, it must be understood as a framework for ethical reflection on communication practices. Through critical analysis of media messages, fact-checking exercises and the production of responsible content, students can become active participants in a healthy public sphere, equipped to counter disinformation with competence and integrity.

The role of the university lecturer is essential in this transformative process. In guiding students from theoretical frameworks to the realities of digital media, educators act as reflective mediators, fostering intellectual autonomy and encouraging students to take responsibility for their interpretations and communicative choices.

For media education to achieve its full formative potential, several conditions are necessary:

- its explicit inclusion in the curricula of communication and journalism programs;
- continuous professional development of faculty in media and information literacy;
- the establishment of partnerships between universities and newsrooms or fact-checking organizations, providing students with real-world contexts for the application of their skills.

In conclusion, media education at the university level represents a form of civic literacy. It teaches not only how to critically consume information but also how to construct meaning, truth, and empathy in a world saturated with media noise. By cultivating discernment, media education becomes a tool for strengthening democracy and a cornerstone of the professional and ethical standards that will define tomorrow's journalists.

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