

Literacy in the New Media Age: What Has Changed ?

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Media landscape has seen remarkable changes over the decades because of new technological inventions globally. Technological inventions have multiple impacts in media landscape that has been differently shaping the traditional one-way communication practice. The concept of media literacy interpreted earlier has also been shifting, and there are issues with the arrival of new interactive media in the world. This article deals with media literacy: its basic concepts and theoretical assumptions and the shifting of the traditional definition guided by the changing media technology and media consumption pattern in Nepali context. It examines the changing Nepali media literacy landscape through a critical approach and analyze how the content generation has been impacted by the changing media climate.

Keywords: Media literacy, interactive media, critical media literacy

Introduction

Mass media as a subsystem within the greater social system has been continuously offering various contents to the targeted audience to satisfy their curiosity of what is going on in the world. In this attempt, they offer diverse types of information; however, their roles are mostly defined as a tool to provide information, education, entertainment and persuasion or motivation. Media literacy

encompasses a spectrum of competencies ranging from adeptly navigating both traditional and contemporary media technologies to cultivating a discerning and critical engagement with media content. This spectrum is particularly pertinent in an era where the media exerts substantial influence, standing as one of the effective forces shaping societal dynamics.

Proponents of media literacy view increased media knowledge in society as contributing to participation, active citizenship, competence development and lifelong learning (Horton, 2007).

Over the years, mass communication scholars have developed different models for the systematic study of communication process, technology as medium and impact of the mass media. The traditional non-interactive era has been dominated by the newly emerged interactive media and it has equally shifted the way people received the message. Scholarly arguments on media literacy as one of the prerequisites for the audience to understand the media message is now transforming along with the nature of the media.

Our literacy journey had started through the stone age via writing on a stone tablet. Now we are at the age of screen-touch writing in an advanced form of interactive media. To achieve this position, we have struggled a lot and came across distinct stages of literacy development.

Media literacy is also called mediacy; is in-depth knowledge of how the media work and how they might influence audiences-like literacy and the ways in which literacy permits people to better understand written texts in all their dimensions including psychological, social, etc. (Danesi, 2009). Media literacy is a fundamental tool to understand the media message without which the message might be meaningless, and it can further case misunderstanding and confusion among the audience. The scholars have differently defined media literacy however there are some commonalities within those definitions. Baran and Davis (2010)

define media literacy as an ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate media messages. The European Commission (EC) defines media literacy as the ability to access, analyze and evaluate the power of images, sounds and messages which we are now being confronted with daily, and are an important part of our contemporary culture (Shapiro & Celot, 2011).

Media literacy encompasses a broad spectrum, encompassing various forms of media such as television, film, radio, recorded music, print media, the internet, and emerging digital communication technologies (Jenkins, 2006). The overarching purpose of media literacy lies in cultivating awareness of diverse media messages, facilitating the recognition of how media channels filter perceptions and shape beliefs, influencing popular culture and individual choices (Hobb & Frost, 2003). Furthermore, media literacy empowers individuals by nurturing critical thinking skills and fostering problem-solving capabilities within the realm of media consumption and interpretation (Buckingham, 2003). This multifaceted approach to media literacy plays a pivotal role in enhancing individuals' abilities to navigate the complex landscape of media, thereby contributing to a more informed and discerning society.

According to Adams and Hamm (2001), media literacy is the ability to create personal meaning from the visual and verbal symbols we take in every day from television, advertising, film, and digital media. Barton and Hamilton (1998) as cited in Mackey (2002) defined literacy as “primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people” (p.3). Similarly, Hobbs (2001) relates literacy with “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms” (p.7). For Sholle and Denski (1995) conceptualize media literacy within a critical pedagogy and thus “it must be conceived as a political, social, and cultural practice” (p.17).

Development of Media literacy

The Roman statesman Julius Caesar had used Acta Diurna in 59 B.C. to inform to his mercenaries and soldiers about the wars. Mass Media scholars believed that Acta Diurna was the first mass media in the history of the world (Palmer, 2023).

While Julius Caesar is often attributed for developing the concept of Acta Diurna, which is considered an early form of mass media, it is important to note that historical evidence supporting its existence during Caesar's time is limited. The Acta Diurna, or "Daily Acts", is believed to have been a daily official gazette or bulletin in ancient Rome, containing news about government proceedings, legal decisions, and other relevant information. However, the exact nature and usage of Acta Diurna during Julius Caesar's rule remain speculative (Rosenstein, 1995).

One primary challenge in establishing Acta Diurna as the first mass media is the scarcity of direct historical documentation. A number of references to Acta Diurna come from later sources, such as the works of Roman historians like Suetonius and Dio Cassius. These accounts provide insights into the existence of official daily announcements but lack specific details regarding Caesar's use of Acta Diurna for communicating with mercenaries and soldiers (Tranquillis, 1957).

It is crucial to approach this historical claim with a degree of caution due to the gaps in direct evidence. While Acta Diurna is considered an important precursor to modern mass media, attributing its use to Julius Caesar specifically for informing mercenaries and soldiers in 59 B.C. lacks concrete historical verification (Cassius & Cary, 1927).

The print was the first means of mass communication in which history started with Gutenberg printing press in 1440 A.D. Gutenberg printing press was introduced. After 1500 years only human beings started printing on paper.

Printing was used for universal literacy and education as McLuhan states. The traditional definition of literacy applies only to print, “having a knowledge of letters; instructed; learned.” (Silverblatt et.al., 2014).

After the First World War in the first quarter of the 20th century, radio appeared as an effective means of communication. The military in war could learn, understand and interpret the listening to their fellow soldiers in war. This could also be one type of literacy that was brought from the invention of radio because the message of the radio could be understood, interpreted, and known (Burns, 2004).

In this digital age, aspects like medium and knowledge to locate the source play a critical role in receiving the information. There are several channels even within the online sphere as they can be through apps, platforms, intranet, email, subscriptions etc.

Initially, the issues of media literacy were solely confined to print literacy which is gradually embedded with radio and audio-visual literacy including television and film literacy and now it is gradually accepting the terms of new media literacy that is mostly based on information and communication technology (ICT) termed as computer literacy or internet literacy. Sonia Livingstone has explored key areas of literacy in the electronic era including cyber literacy (Livingstone, 2010).

There are various theoretical bases for the study of media literacy. According to the uses and gratifications theory audience members are indeed active, but they are not necessarily varying aware of what they do with media (Baran, 2010). Critical cultural studies consider the needs of the audiences and opportunities which are constrained by access to media and their content while social cognitive, social semiotic, semiotic interaction, cultivation and framing theories urge that media content can both implicitly and explicitly guide action. On the other side information processing

theory is based on the belief on the fact that people have various levels of understanding ability and that affects the uses of media and their ability to receive the message. Mass communication scholar Silverblatt (2013) provided one of the first systematic efforts to place media literacy in audience and culture-centered theory and frame it as a skill that must and can be improved (Silverblatt et al., 2014).

The conventional understanding of literacy traditionally pertained solely to print, involving the ability to comprehend and manipulate written letters through instruction and learning. However, contemporary media landscapes have expanded significantly beyond print, now encompassing a diverse array of channels such as print, photography, film, radio, television, and cyberspace. This evolution necessitates a broader and more inclusive perspective on literacy that acknowledges proficiency not only in traditional written formats but also in various visual, auditory, and digital mediums (Kress, 2003). Potter (1998) takes a slightly different approach and includes literacy as a field which need to be developed which is multidimensional in nature with four distinct levels of skills- cognitive, emotional, aesthetic and moral.

As pointed out by Sonia Livingstone (2010) there are various terms used to explain the circumstances of 'Literacy'. According to her argument there are new forms of literacy in the electronic era and the entire issues of literacy cannot be confined within the traditional forms of literacy like print literacy, audiovisual literacy, and critical literacy, and visual literacy, oral literacy cultural and social literacy. The new terminologies are the byproduct of the latest technology that includes computer literacy, cyber-literacy, internet literacy, network literacy, digital literacy, information literacy and still changing the area of discussion based on the technology and uses of media. Media literacy has passed four different eras initiated from classical era where oral and gestural communication was common whereas the second era was renaissance, first industrial revolution which was

observed by the printing text. Likewise, the Appearance of electronic media: telephone, film, radio, and television considered as third era and digital media and internet is the fourth and latest phenomena of media literacy (Tornero, Celot & Varis, 2007).

All of the definitions of media literacy have pointed out four basic components of media literacy as follows:

1. Access:

Access to the medium is very crucial to perceive the media message. The dynamics of access has been changing over the time with the arrival of different media platform; initiated from printing outlets including book and newspapers/magazine, moved to electronic era and now already on the way to converge media of cyber space. Earlier, access to print and audio-visual media were limited but the new technology has completely changed the phenomena. In relation to new media, the digital divide is the main barrier for access (Livingstone, 2010).

2. Analysis

Having access is not sufficient for media literacy. Audience meaningful engagement over the symbolic text depends upon their understanding and analysis of the provided message. Readers and viewers must be literate in the sense of being competent in and motivated towards relevant cultural traditions and values (ibid.). In order to analyze the media content, they need to be aware about media technologies and language with setting.

3. Evaluation

Evaluation of the media content is another crucial factor of media literacy. It is important to evaluate the flooded message from pluralistic media landscape and equally complex for the general people to distinguish dated, biased, or exploitative sources from World Wide Web.

4. Content creation

The traditional definition of media literacy puts the readers

as more passive receivers of the media message and they have no role in content creation. However, computer-based media have crossed the traditional notions of passivity and audience can react, create, and post the message (Jenkins, 2006). Similarly, the degree of awareness of the audience about content creation process may determine the media literacy in large scale.

Literacy and the Nepali Media Landscape

According to the National Literacy Policy of Nepal, a literate person is, ...who is able to read and write short and simple sentences related to daily life in his/her mother tongue or national language... The literacy in Nepal has been linked with the school education, adult education and non-formal educations (Comings, Shrestha & Smith, 1992). The later on two types of education in Nepal has been done to gain certain skills to improve life-skills, gain trainings and become self- dependent. Basic literacy, post literacy, alternative schooling and the life and livelihood skills training program targeted towards income generating aiming at improving quality of lives, especially of socio-economically deprived groups and reducing poverty (GoN/MoES, 2007).

Regardless of the types of education, it is clearly marked that "able to read and write" can be interpreted in the same ways as "literacy in print". This does not specify only books, but also of any types of print like newspaper, magazine, and other forms.

The definition ensures the space of Media Literacy especially in print. The press has been playing an undeniable role in promoting literacy in society. The first publication of the press, Gorkhapatra was started in 1958 BS, which has crossed a century in print and publication. We cannot underestimate the role of Gorkhapatra in developing the literacy level of people, in forming opinions and in creating the understanding of policies, provisions and other norms and values of the society. However, the Gorkhapatra is the press,

which crossed different hurdles in different periods of political upheavals. Now it has been providing publications in multiple languages. Exception to English and Nepali languages, we cannot find multilingual features still today in other national dailies.

After the 2007 BS (1951) revolution for democracy, for the very first time in broadcasting radio was started. Then, many private media emerged in Nepal, both in print and in broadcasting. Radio Sagarmatha is the first community radio station in South Asia (Dahal, 2020). Lately, televisions emerged, and now we have online broadcasting which is called "webcasting." The objective of the mass media has always remained to create awareness in people about the policies, state mechanisms, and other social and political information. If we analyze our history, we can find mass media played a key role in creating awareness in people for the change of the state political sphere. The mainstream media played (has been playing) a crucial role in educating people, forming their choices, and opinions and instilling democratic values in their society and the nation as a whole (Dahal & Khatri, 2021).

On the other hand, if we analyze the history of internet technologies in Nepal. For the very first time, IBM 1401, a generation Mainframe computer, was introduced in 1971 for the census purposes (Karki, 2019).

From the time computer technology was introduced in Nepal, the medium of literacy has been changed. It was further strengthened through the introduction of the Internet in 1994 by Mercantile.

In January 2000, there were 11 licensed ISPs. It has been estimated that Internet subscribers were 9000 in January 2000. So, until 2000 AD, there was a minimum internet internet-literate people. On the other hand, seeing the growing internet literacy, the IT Policy 2000 was enforced to make it accessible to the public, building a knowledge-based society and establishing knowledge-based industries (Turin, 2001).

Currently, if we look, according to the Nepal Telecom Authority report internet penetration in the country has reached 55 per cent as of October 2023 (NTA, 2023) and the number is growing. This means more than half of the population of the nations are connected through the internet. We now have a requirement of internet proficiency in every job description. So, the types of literacy that we are demanding are internet knowledge to recognize the information in the virtual environment in addition to the knowledge of the just able to read and write and interpret simple sentences.

The history of Nepali journalism has been dominated by the contemporary political system. The print era emerged during the Rana regime and flourish with new democratic system. The first printing technology was installed in 1851, the publication of the first newspaper *Sudhasagar* in 1889 and the publication of *Gorkhapatra* in 1901 are the historical milestones of Nepali journalism. Similarly, the electronic era started in 1951 with the establishment of Radio Nepal and Nepal Television in 1985. The restoration of the democratic system in 1990 and the promulgation of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal in 1990 that ensured the rights of the press shaped the direction and created the basis for free and independent media in Nepal. It took more than 200 years for the introduction of print technology, and 50 years for radio and television in Nepal however, in the case of internet-based media they came to the Nepali media landscape quickly. *Kantipur* and *The Kathmandu Post* appeared in the Nepali media market from the private sector in 1993 with a professional approach for the first time. The Internet was introduced in the country in 1993, and a newspaper's print edition was first available online in 1995. In 1995, *The Kathmandu Post* put online its print content. Other early birds were himalmag.com (1997) and nepalnews.com (1998). The latter was the first news-only portal launched by Mercantile Communication, a private IT company. Initially, the website served to host digital

versions of several print (Shapiro & Celot, 2011) newspapers. News portals of most "legacy" media houses, such as kantipuronline.com (2000), thehimalayantimes.com (2001), gorkhapatra.org.np (2002), newsofnepal.com (2003) began as electronic platforms of their print content. Only gradually did some of these sites start to publish web-exclusive content as well (Media Foundation Nepal, 2012). Interestingly another form of media i.e., social media has emerged as strong tool for the exchange of information in our context.

New Literacy Landscape

The first point for the discussion is the increasing number of Nepali internet users that determines the access of the media. The numbers of telephone users have rocketed in Nepal with the arrival of mobile technology and currently one in two Nepali uses internet. There is total 34 million telephone users in Nepal as present and among them 97.5 percent are the mobile service users (NTA, 2023). Ncell Axiata is the largest service provider accounting 51.4 percent followed by Nepal Telecom with coverage of 48.59 percent. On the other side, there are 20 Internet Service Provider (ISP) offering various levels of internet service across the country. The total percentage of Nepali population reached by internet is 55. These figures indicate the numbers of people linked with internet and telecommunication facilities, but the state run NTA has not revealed the data related to the volume of data surfed by the user. The largest service provider, NTC has 8.4 million internet subscribers according to its recent annual report and the increase rate is around 10% (NTC, 2017).

The second point is the increasing number of social media users in our context which is also escalating. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the widely used social media sites. A recent statistics claims that there are 15 million Facebook users in Nepal as of December 2023. Similarly, the user base for Twitter in the

same period is 5.5 million (Social Media Users in Nepal -2023, 2023). These values refer to the growing numbers of people using social networking sites which are becoming the prominent sources information. Similarly, the traditional established media brand has already been using the social media sites for the sharing of their professionally produced content. *Kantipur*, the largest selling newspaper of the country has about 3.5 million followers on Facebook page. Similarly, *Nagarik* has about 2 million followers which is followed by *Setopati online* accounting 1.2 million likes and followers. These facts and statistics indicate that the media access pattern has already shifted and internet-based media literacy is increasing rapidly.

Interestingly, there are some media critic sites and blogs that frequently point out to the misleading information shared from the mainstream media outlets. For example, www.mysansar.com has more than 57,000 followers and this blog identifies itself as fact-checker and media literacy disseminator. Similarly, www.mediakurakani.com is another platform for discussing media messages and its dimensions. It not only prioritizes the impactful content missed out by the mainstream media but also does critical reviews on the doings of the media themselves. For example, recently it has been extensively reporting on the plight of journalists in Kantipur Media Group. Of course, there are other such platforms and social media is the most prominent among many.

Earlier, analysis and evaluation of the media content were scattered and often they were reflected as feedback of the readers to the editors. But these contents were censored by the editorial department of the concerned newspapers and were unable to establish a critical approach. For example: *Kantipur* remained silent over 15 years about the issue of Dr. Rasendra Bhattarai, the so-called billionaire and the story on him that was appeared in leading broadsheet daily as main news on 19 October 2003. The whole story

was focused on the miracle journey of Bhattarai, a self-claimed billionaire. The story was widely criticized by the public based on the authenticity of the provided information; however, *Kantipur* did not offer any explanation on the issue. But in a sudden turn of the event after 15 years of the silence the editor in its silver jubilee special edition, accepted the fault in its reporting. In 19 February 2018 as *Kantipur* published a note from its editor saying, “News editing process may have errors and the scandal of Rasendra Bhattarai is an example”.

Now the critical question can be raised on why the newspaper did not consider its error for such a long time? Have they encountered an ethical question from academia about their silence on such crucial information offered to its readers? Did they realize that media literacy over the years have been changed and it is high time for them to accept the past mistakes in order to continue the readers trust over them? This example clearly establishes the notion that the critical approach of the recipients can influence editorial judgment and compelled to accept the shortcomings.

Furthermore, the analysis and evaluation are guided by several factors including social values, customs, traditions, understanding level and more importantly by political and economic interest in our context. The vested interests of various groups including media itself are some of the crucial factors in determining content creation. The case cited below is one suitable example for the argument.

The series of news published by *Kantipur* daily newspaper on the issue of Ajaya Raj Sumargi, an infamously famous Nepali businessman is widely discussed by social media platforms but the competitors of *Kantipur* are silent on this topic. According to the media reports, they had a land deal in June 2013 and *Kantipur* started its series of news in December 2018. While presenting the news, *Kantipur* quoted the joint reports of the Department of Money

Laundering Investigation (DMLI) and the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) of Nepal Police. On the other side, Sumargi summoned a petition to the district administration office in Kathmandu to protect his life and blamed Kantipur Publications that it has created pressure to return the purchased land at the same cost.

Media Society Nepal, a club of media investors came to the forefront and issued a press statement stating that “a complaint filed by businessman Ajay Raj Parajuli Sumargi at District Administration Office, Kathmandu, against the chairperson of Kantipur Publications Kailash Sirohiya, demanding protection of his life and property was a ploy to tarnish the image of the media house”. Other newspapers gave short coverage if this statement while interestingly, Nepal *Samacharpatra* and *Annapurna Post*, the member institution of the society, covered the news and also included the viewpoint of Sumargi. A blog (Mediakurakani.com) has compiled all this information and presented it with a critical approach. These series indicate the content creation process and possible biases in editorial judgment. A couple of questions to be dealt with this issue for the audience like why this is a serious issue for *Kantipur* and not for its competitors? is there corporate interest in newspapers? why DMLI and CIB have not addressed these issues since it has created hype in the political and media arena? Isn't the reader deprived from getting accurate, unbiased information about the issue and where is pluralistic media? However, the series is believed to be continued and over time it will be resolved either in the way *Kantipur* has been advocating or will dismiss the issue, but one thing is very crucial in this case i.e., questions, interpretations and analysis in social media platform that has pressurized the *Kantipur* for independent, neutral and unbiased information.

From a theoretical point of view, the reader's need for accurate news is constrained by the limited coverage (Single media coverage)

in this regard. If other newspapers would have some sorts of coverage, it could support the opinion formation process. Access was not an area of focus, but content is the driving forces in this case.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that media access in Nepal is growing fast which is the result of the new technological developments although digital divides is still a problem if we talk about media literacy. The growing numbers of educated audience who can analyze and evaluate the context of the media content has an effect in content generation process. But the mindset of the content creator is still a matter for study. During content creation, whether they pay adequate attention towards audience or not is the question for research. As a country of political transition, it is an important aspect for the audience to look the political, financial, and personal influence in the newsroom which could further support to strengthen the critical media literacy and can support for the well function of the political system.

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