

Hayun Jung

### Digital Literacy in the Age of Information

As I sat beside my friend, I couldn't help but notice his fixation on his phone, mindlessly scrolling through endless reels, seemingly oblivious to the world around him and the impending deadlines of his homework. Curious, I inquired about what he was engrossed in, to which he nonchalantly mentioned the latest comeback of New Jeans, a Kpop group, and the latest gossip about a presidential candidate. Puzzled, I asked if he believed everything he was watching. His response? "Of course not, only some information." When questioned further, he revealed that he didn't go out of his way to double check the information, but rather used his intuition, which I found wasn't always accurate. This response highlights a common trend among younger individuals: a tendency to rely on social media as a primary source of news without critically evaluating the information presented.

Indeed, recent studies in 2023 by the Pew Research Center shed light on the prevalence of this phenomenon, revealing that "[when] it comes to where Americans regularly get news on social media, Facebook outpaces all other social media sites. Three-in-ten U.S. adults say they regularly get news there." However, the alarming reality is that many individuals fail to verify the credibility of their information sources, instead placing ungrounded trust in bloggers and seemingly reputable sources. Moreover, the algorithms governing social media platforms exacerbate this issue by tailoring content to users' interests, thereby prolonging their engagement on the platform.

This trend raises concerns about the erosion of critical thinking skills among younger demographics, who may unwittingly succumb to the allure of sensationalized news and

unfounded rumors. The echo chambers created by social media further exacerbate this problem, trapping individuals in a cycle of confirmation bias and preventing them from considering alternative perspectives. A strong example of this effect is evident in a recent investigation by a New York Times reporter into a Flat Earth Facebook group. Over time, group members became increasingly entrenched in their beliefs, dismissing contradictory evidence and isolating themselves from dissenting viewpoints. For example, “In Flat Earth — No Trolls (22,538 members), members shared unscientific evidence that the world was indeed flat and mocked “globers” who claimed otherwise. In a political group called Pinochet’s Anti-SJW Beach Resort (36,059 members), members cruelly evaluated the physical appearance of women and made racist and anti-Semitic jokes.” This isolation poses a significant risk, particularly among impressionable youth who are more susceptible to external influences.

As my friend and I delved deeper into our conversation about social media habits, he confidently asserted that he could discern falsehoods after years of experience. I countered by mentioning the rise of deep fakes and shared how he himself had been duped by a reel, a type of short video on Instagram, just moments before. The video was crafted in a documentary style, featuring seemingly authentic people, and he initially believed it depicted a genuine historical event—only to discover upon further investigation that it was a fabricated story. Today, advancements in editing technology make it increasingly easy to deceive the eye and mind, especially when paired with a compelling narrative. As we scrutinized the videos on our personalized "For You Page" (FYP), a feature on various social media platforms that curates content based on the user's interests, we reminisced about past content. I recalled how I used to unquestioningly accept everything I saw about science or famous landmarks until my friend

debunked a myth one day by fact-checking it. Through trial and error, I gradually gained awareness and learned to navigate the web safely, particularly after a close call with hacking due to visiting pirated websites to watch my favorite TV shows. My friend concurred that we never received formal education on internet usage or security practices but instead learned through experience and advice from peers. This lack of formal education poses significant risks, as illustrated by stories of friends who fell victim to hacking, encountered radical online communities that frightened them, or received failing grades due to using unreliable sources for school assignments. Reflecting on these experiences, we agreed that it would have been immensely beneficial to receive proper instruction on internet usage and security protocols.

Integrating media literacy education into school curricula is essential to equip students with the skills to navigate the digital landscape responsibly. For example, according to an article by Stempedia, "Digital literacy enables students to tap into a vast range of digital resources and information. They can explore diverse perspectives, engage with interactive learning materials, and stay updated with the latest information and research." By teaching students how to evaluate information sources, discern credible sources, and critically analyze news content, educators can empower the next generation to become informed and discerning citizens. The algorithm's personalized feeds can indeed contribute to the radicalization of users by exposing them to extreme and misleading content. The assertion linking Hillary Clinton to ISIS, as mentioned in Oliver Darcy's CNN Business article "How Twitter's algorithm is amplifying extreme political rhetoric", illustrates how sensationalized and divisive content can gain traction, potentially reinforcing extremist ideologies. This can be highlighted by the example of tweets promoting conspiracy theories or false information. With the increasing

reliance on social media and people being more prone to go to it for news, I wonder what the effects of this has on news outlets as well as how it increases the importance of social media algorithms that lead to certain news sources more than others.

In addition to addressing the proliferation of false content, literacy courses have the potential to increase awareness of other prevalent practices on social media, such as marketing tactics. For instance, a study highlighted the phenomenon known as the illusory truth effect, where repeated exposure to information leads individuals to perceive it as more truthful. This effect, attributed to the increased fluency in processing, underscores the importance of understanding how marketing strategies leverage repetition to influence consumer behavior. Furthermore, literacy courses can educate individuals about their susceptibility to repetitive marketing messages and the tendency to perceive frequently seen items as superior. By fostering critical thinking skills, individuals can better discern between genuine value and marketing hype, thus making more informed purchasing decisions. Moreover, such courses offer an opportunity to address the alarming lack of digital literacy among youth. According to an article by Higher Education, “In a 2019 study conducted by the Stanford History Education Group (now called Digital Inquiry Group), almost every high school student was unable to differentiate between valid and fake news articles; its 2016 study had similar results.” As young people increasingly interact with social media platforms, equipping them with the skills to critically evaluate online content becomes paramount in combating misinformation and promoting responsible digital citizenship.

In conclusion, while social media offers unprecedented access to information, it also poses significant challenges in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the content consumed.

Literacy courses not only provide a means to counteract false content but also empower individuals to navigate the complex landscape of social media with discernment and resilience. By raising awareness of marketing tactics and enhancing digital literacy skills, such initiatives contribute to fostering a more informed and media-savvy society. By promoting media literacy and fostering critical thinking skills, we can mitigate the detrimental effects of misinformation and empower individuals to navigate the digital world with discernment and confidence.

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