



Mapping Media Literacy in Indian Media Education: A Qualitative Curriculum Analysis of Media Institutions in Delhi

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Abstract

This study looks at the incorporation of media literacy into the undergraduate and postgraduate media programmes at select higher educational institutions in Delhi, and tries to understand its breadth and nature. Using qualitative content analysis, this study examines the official curricular materials such as course outlines, learning outcomes, and module descriptions to understand how media literacy conceptualised, structured and pedagogically integrated into media education. The analysis zeroes in on the four fundamental areas of the study: critical understanding of media, digital competence, media ethics and responsibility, as well as socio-culture of media. Fragmented and largely theoretical approaches in addressing contemporary digital media issues such as misinformation, algorithmic bias, and participatory culture, are among the overriding challenges with the incorporation of media literacy in most curricula. This study identifies the contemporary need for an updated, interdisciplinary, practice-oriented media literacy framework for Indian media education.

The recommendations focus on curriculum relearning, faculty professional development, and critical digital pedagogy vis-a-vis the media literacy curriculum.

Keywords: Media literacy, Media Education, Curriculum Analysis, Delhi Institutions, Higher Education

1. Introduction

In the current era, media literacy has become a necessity due to the rise of digital technologies, participatory cultures, and algorithmic information flows. In India, however, media education continues to focus primarily on a journalistic approach and the other areas of media education like media production and mass communication theory. The rise of misinformation, political polarization, and the AI-managed media environment has once more amplified the need for Critical Media Literacy (Kellner & Share, 2019; Hobbs, 2021). In literature on the subject, the prevailing view is that media literacy now involves much more than accessing and analysing media. It now includes the ability to critique power relations, question representations, and engage in ethical participation in the digital public sphere (Buckingham, 2022; Mihailidis, 2018).

In India, the media and communication programs of study at the universities and the vast literature on the subject have not been matched by media literacy policies and development at the level of the curriculum (Ravi 2020). The UGC has set out a few guidelines on employability and digital skills, however, there is no national-level policy that positions media literacy as a pedagogical priority. Because of this, the development of media literacy in higher education is based, to a large extent, on the initiative and academic freedom of individual institutions (Kumar 2021).

Delhi serves as an important case for this kind of study. As the national capital and an educational center, Delhi is home to some of the foremost media educational commands in the country, both public and private, as well as autonomous institutions, including the University of Delhi, Jamia Millia Islamia University, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, and Jawaharlal Nehru University. These educational institutions not only produce a sizeable portion of the media workforce in the country but also lay the epistemic foundations of media pedagogy in the country. As such, it is crucial to understand how they conceptualize and frame media literacy. Most of the research on media education in India is broad in scope (e.g., Garg, 2019; Ray, 2022) and unfortunately very little has been done to systematically study the presence and depth of media literacy in existing curriculum and syllabus documents. Much research emphasizes student perception (e.g., Thomas & Joseph, 2020) or media use behavior (e.g., Ranganathan, 2021), sidestepping the more critical structural issues of course content. There has been little research on whether the curricula respond to the challenges of the moment, such as misinformation, algorithmic bias, surveillance capitalism, and platform power, issues that are at the center of global media literacy today (Farkas & Schou, 2020; Zuboff, 2019).

To address this gap, I have undertaken qualitative content analysis of the undergraduate and postgraduate media syllabi of five Delhi-based higher education institutions. Unlike other studies which rely on interviews or classroom observations, this study examines what is taught and what the stated expected learning outcomes are, using curriculum documents as the unit of analysis. A coding framework based on critical media literacy theory (Kellner & Share, 2019) and digital citizenship (Mihailidis, 2018) has been used which also facilitates comparative analysis across institutions.

This paper seeks to add to the discourse on media literacy in the Global South, particularly in curriculum studies, which seems to be an under-researched area, as most studies focus on outcomes at the learner level or practices at the level of the teacher. This study also provides an evidence-based analysis that may be useful to curriculum developers at the national level, policymakers, and accrediting bodies, and national curriculum bodies such as the UGC, AICTE, and NAAC. More broadly, the paper expands on the argument for media literacy to encompass more than functional media literacy to include a critical, ethical, and democratic dimension.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Defining Media Literacy: Global Perspectives

Media literacy has changed from a protectionist approach—one that focused on keeping audiences safe from the influence of the media—to an empowerment, participatory, and critical paradigm (Potter, 2019). The most commonly accepted definition describes media literacy as the capacity to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act with all forms of communicating (NAMLE, 2007). Hobbs (2021) further expands on this, stating that media literacy, in a democratic society, is intertwined with civic agency, particularly in the active defense against the spread of disinformation, hate speech, and extremist propaganda.

Critical media literacy as proposed by Kellner and Share (2019) goes beyond the technical and interpretive skills to the questioning of ideology, power, representation, and social inequity within the media. This perspective argues that media literacy education must also deal with the intersection of race, gender, class, and political economy, and the control of algorithms, among other things. In a similar vein, Buckingham (2022) cautions against the tendency to oversimplify media literacy to protectionist media scepticism on one end and basic digital skills training on the other, advocating instead for a contextual, inquiry-based pedagogy.

2.2 Media Literacy in the Digital Era

Examination of new literacies and new digital world risks, which include data surveillance, online manipulation, and virality duration, was added by digital media environments. Mihailidis (2018), for example,

argues for digital citizenship literacy, where people would be expected not only to 'read' media, but also 'write' in an ethical manner, and engage with algorithms and networks. Drawing on earlier theories of digital surveillance capitalism, Zuboff (2019) points to how digital platforms commodify user data and how user behavior and consciousness are subsequently shaped.

The challenges of new media literacy have shifted to include deepfakes, AI driven misinformation, political microtargeting, and influencer discourse (Farkas & Schou, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2020). There is now a body of scholarly work which argues competency of which these works speak cannot be thought of traditional journalism syllabus in a purely instrumental way, which has focused on skills for the newsroom (Bulger & Davison, 2018).

2.3 Media Literacy and Higher Education

Several nations globally have applied media literacy to their education policies. Among other nations, Finland and Canada have been praised for implementing media literacy education on all school and university levels (Kupiainen, 2020). The European Union countries have also provided media literacy education policies through the Digital Competence Framework (Vuorikari et al., 2022). In most developing countries, and India in particular, media literacy education lacks focus and centralisation in government policy, as 'decentralisation and the policy absence are characteristic of developing nations', (Tewari, 2022). Livingstone (2004) and other authors recommend, to avoid the stronger 'achieved' literacy levels, that 'media literacy be progressively included' as 'a primary focus to be mastered in the design of all curricula' while crossing other subjects. Additionally, in spite of curriculum existence, the absence of 'definitive measuring' media literacy 'frameworks' dilutes 'institutionalisation of media literacy' (Fedorov & Levitskaya, 2021).

2.4 Media Education in India: Current Landscape

Media education in India has grown rapidly since the 90s, as over 300 universities have been established for journalism and mass communication (Ray, 2022). Likewise, Indian journalism and mass communication education has been accused of perpetuating a narrowly defined industry focus on 'production' and 'newsroom' work (Kumar, 2021). Indian journalism education still centres on 'print structures' in the journalism curricula, as Garg (2019) remarked, while most of media and communication work has shifted to the digital space.

The NEP 2020 does not lay out a robust framework on media literacy, only mentioning digital literacy. The UGC model curricula for journalism programmes portray "media ethics" and "new media" as core content, yet do not delineate critical media literacy competencies (Ravi, 2020). Consequently, schools and colleges differ dramatically in the scope and quality of media literacy education, leading to a widening gap.

Research shows a lack of awareness and knowledge among students regarding disinformation, algorithmic bias, data privacy, media ownership, and other related issues (Thomas & Joseph, 2020; Ranganathan, 2021). Even in postgraduate programmes, media literacy is regarded as an ancillary discipline, not as a core discipline, and often assumed to be a soft discipline (Ray, 2022).

2.5 Gaps in Indian Scholarship

Some research does analyse media usage and fake news consumption, and even journalism training, yet the curricula themselves remain largely unexamined. Inconsistent findings on student perception characterized some Indian research (e.g., Joseph & Thomas, 2020), while other research (e.g., Garg, 2019; Chaturvedi, 2021) includes calls for the integration of media literacy without exploring its current state within curricula.

There is a clear gap in:

A media literacy syllabus gap analysis

A comparative analysis of media literacy teaching embedded in curricula across institutions

Analysis of media curriculum and its contemporary relevance to the media.

3. Research Gap

Although media literacy is gaining importance as a democratic and cognitive necessity in a digital world, the integration of media literacy into the curriculum in Indian higher education has still not received adequate attention.

Most of the existing literature on media education in India has concentrated on

- (a) the growth of journalism and mass communication programmes (Ray, 2022)
- (b) students' perceptions and media consumption (Thomas & Joseph, 2020)
- (c) critiques of the industry-oriented, skill-focused media education (Kumar, 2021; Garg, 2019).

Nonetheless, only a handful of studies focus on the curriculum documents and how media literacy is defined and institutionalized.

Most of the studies consider media literacy as an add-on and a desirable learning outcome, and do not examine if it is integrated into the course objectives, learning outcomes, readings, assessments, or pedagogies at the foundational level. This poses a methodological gap: While media literacy at the student and societal level has been studied, curriculum-level media literacy, specifically in the Indian context, has not been analyzed.

The lack of studies that strategically map, compare, and evaluate Indian media syllabuses through a media literacy lens has resulted in three fundamental issues.

- The absence empirical clarity on how far Indian media institutions teach media literacy in comparison to generic communication skills.
- There are no benchmarks or frameworks to evaluate or improve the quality of media literacy education.

- There seems to be a sort of ‘policy blindness’ where UGC, NAAC, or AICTE cannot redesign or implement reforms without evidence-based assessments.

Given that misinformation is one of the highest in the world for the country along with a ‘trust’ deficit in the media (Reuters Institute, 2023), and increasing algorithm-led political communication (Bhatia, 2021), this gap would be most striking. This then poses the educational, political, and ethical imperative of critically literate citizenry.

3.1 Research Objectives

Based on the above gap, this study has four core objectives:

- To identify and examine the media literacy components integrated into the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula of five leading media schools in Delhi
- To organise the media literacy components into the thematic categories of critical analysis, digital/media competencies, ethics, socio-cultural context, and issues of the emerging media
- To assess the curricula with regard to the level of rigor, pedagogical clarity, and topicality
- To suggest redesign of curricula based on critical, digital, and democratic frameworks of media literacy.

3.2 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

Research Question 1: What is the representation of media literacy in the official media education syllabi of chosen institutions based in Delhi?

Research Question 2: What aspects of media literacy are embedded, whether in a direct or an indirect way, within these syllabi?

Research Question 3: How much of the syllabi covers contemporary digital media issues, such as misinformation, artificial intelligence, surveillance capitalism, political communication, and platform governance?

3.3 Rationale / Significance of the Study

This study focuses on the intersections of three academic/policy areas:

Media education, by prioritizing critical literacy as a curricular concern rather than skill training.

Media literacy studies in the Global South, by presenting a non-Western, documentary-based examination, thereby filling a gap acknowledged by Buckingham (2022) and Tewari & Rawat (2022).

Educational policy/curriculum reform, by providing insights that are likely to influence the UGC model syllabi, NEP-2020, and learning outcomes set by NAAC.

This study is unlike perception-based studies, as it is based on primary institutional documents—syllabi, course outlines, and program structures. This makes it foundational for future research, policy advocacy, and pedagogical change.

4. Research Methodology

This study focuses on five leading media education institutions in Delhi: the University of Delhi, Jamia Millia Islamia, and Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University. The main objective is to observe how media literacy is viewed, situated, and incorporated within undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in journalism and mass communication. This is done without conducting interviews, surveys, or classroom observations, and instead, focuses solely on publicly available institutional data. This includes syllabi, course outlines, and program structures. These were gathered from official university webpages and prospectuses during January–February 2025 to ensure the most recent versions were analyzed.

This study focuses on courses that address critical thinking, digital literacy, media ethics, misinformation, and the social role of media in democracy. An approach that captures the documents and analyses them with a flexible framework is preferable to an overly rigid coding scheme. This approach incorporates themes that recur across the documents. Understanding the presence or absence of media literacy courses, how media-related competencies are described, and the degree to which a course is practical or theoretical are examples of the themes. Each course was analyzed in its entirety, including objectives, learning outcomes, and recommended readings, as well as instruments designed to measure how an institution conceives media education.

This is an interpretive approach. It involves the observation of patterns, silences, gaps, and priorities rather than the measurement of the degree of something. It also involves comparative analysis across two levels on two different analyses per institution. (a) undergraduate vs postgraduate programmes and (b) traditional universities vs specialised media institutes. Given that this is a study based on documents, I did not consider it necessary to obtain ethical approval. Nevertheless, I was careful to reference each curriculum and not to mischaracterize the intent of the institution. In this regard, the study appreciates that official syllabi do not capture the entire truth of teaching and learning in the institutions, yet they embody the formal academic vision which is sanctioned by the departments, faculties, and regulatory authorities.

This makes it possible for the study to engage with scholarship on media literacy in India by analysing how the higher education system positions embedded media education—as a vocational skill, a democratic necessity, a critical practice, or a technological competency. It also provides a comparative map for future empirical studies, such as classroom observation, faculty interviews, and student perception surveys.

5. Findings

The preparation of curriculum documents from the selected Delhi media institutions provided meaningful insights into the discourses and texts from which the uneven patterns on media literacy and education and their configuration within the formal curricula is approached. Across the sample, media topics in various forms are present, albeit they are not always tagged or coherently framed as “media literacy.” Frequently, the ideas and competencies of media literacy, such as critical media content analysis, constructive production, ethics, and contextual social awareness, are compartmentalized and dispersed across papers instead of being concentrated. The lack of focus on standalone media literacy competencies suggests that it may be included as an implicit learner outcome perhaps integrated with other relevant curricula components.

A strong emphasis on the development of technical competencies relative to the fundamentals of journalism in most programme outlines suggests an overall orientation towards the acquisition of practical skills. Some curricula texts, however, suggest the integration of more evaluative and critical components, suggesting that the theory of media and the broader society does, in fact, exist somewhere in the curriculum. That is, the balance between practical and critique-oriented components does not appear to be uniform across the various course descriptions, with some prioritizing practical competencies and others, more evaluative and contextual texts. The integration of applied and conceptual dimensions suggests the adoption of hybrid curricula, although the relative emphasis and integration of the various components and strands differ between the various programmes.

Questions related to media literacy like misinformation, media ethics, the implications of media on society, and other issues are covered in the syllabus to varying degrees and gaps exist around more recent and emerging issues. Often, these issues are briefly mentioned in several documents or treated as part of more extensive topics, such as ethics, media law, or media studies. There is also an absence of reference and discourse on emerging issues.

The different curricular documents show how some aim for clarity in articulating learning outcomes, while others do not seem to attempt this. While some documents clearly state goals and competencies to be achieved, others only aim at building a list of topics or readings. Therefore, intended learning outcomes for the students remain diffuse. Furthermore, the modes of assessment and the links (or lack thereof) between learning

objectives and assessment tasks are not fully described. This leaves unclear how learning related to literacy may be evaluated or reinforced through these assessments.

Overall, the documents point to the opportunities and the gaps in the assessment. There seems to be more than a few curricula that contain elements pointing to a critical and contemporary view of media literacy. That said, certain contemporary issues, like the challenges of platform economies, opportunistic algorithms and the spread of digital misinformation, that media literacy curricula should address are very often not included or integrated. In short, the materials suggest that while content related to media literacy exists in the curriculum, it is expressed in a variety of ways that often seem incoherent or loosely organized.

6. Discussion

Looking at the responses collected in this study, the conclusion drawn is that the understanding of media literacy, as seen in the curriculum documents of some media educational institutes in Delhi, is more about a loosely held notion than a formally established academic category. This is consistent with a few of the global literature observations that media literacy is frequently “present but unnamed” in higher education (Buckingham, 2019; Potter, 2021). That is to say, a large part of the conceptual building block associated with media literacy may well be offered in more or less of it, but will not be referred to as media literacy, or media literacy education.

6.1 Media Literacy as an Implicit Rather Than Formal Category

The fact that many educational institutes do not offer a course titled “Media Literacy” or “Media Literacy Education” does not mean there is no media literacy there. It may well be that the institutes expect media literacy to emerge as a given competency from a curriculum comprising several disparate courses. This dovetails with Livingstone’s (2004) suggestion that media literacy is often a transversal skill operating, “across” several courses or subjects, and not contained “within” one. This diffusion may lead to a far more pervasive ambiguity, in that one may not conclusively say if the students are being exposed to critical, civic, and emerging digital discourse systematically, or at all.

6.2 Skill Training vs Critical Understanding

The curricular patterns demonstrate what scholarship on media education calls the ‘vocation’ versus ‘critical’ media tension, especially in the Indian context. Some culturally oriented institutions seem to take a media theory approach, while others take a media practice approach. As identified by Indian media education scholars, this gap seems to align with the more fundamental question in Indian media education: Should media programmes prepare practitioners journalists, or citizens, or both?

6.3 Limited Engagement With Contemporary Digital Issues

One significant gap in the reviewed research is the absence of timely issues of misinformation, algorithmic governance, surveillance capitalism, AI, and the social web. Global studies have documented the need for digital and post-digital media literacy, especially with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic (Frau-Meigs, 2022; Hobbs, 2020). Nevertheless, the examined course outlines still reflect a pre-digital media paradigm, focusing on the content and structures of legacy media, media ethics, and traditional journalism tools and classical communication theories. This suggests an issue previously identified in the literature on Indian journalism education: the gap between practice and the theory. (Rao & Wasserman, 2020).

6.4 Lack of Structured Outcomes and Assessment

The absence of well-defined learning outcomes pertaining to media literacy stands out. According to curriculum design literature, media literacy must be intentional, assessable, and measurable if it is to be meaningful (Aufderheide, 1993; UNESCO, 2021). When syllabi mention topics without specifying outcomes, it challenges the understanding of whether students are instructed in the critical consumption of media, the ethical production of media, and the participation in democratic communication processes.

6.5 Implications for Indian Media Education

Indian media education, more broadly, reveals challenges, particularly the incomplete shift from the information paradigm to the literacy paradigm. The former is concerned with the provision of media knowledge, while the latter centres the student in the interpretative, analytic, critical, and ethical creation of media in and across complex socio-technical systems. The absence of a clearly defined media literacy paradigm results in courses that are misaligned with the socio-informational, political, and technological, and media literacy contemporary needs of society.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to understand the positioning of media literacy within the curricula of five principal media education institutions in Delhi. The review findings show the presence of media literacy-related themes across different papers, although without clearly defining and articulating it as a core, structured topic. Media literacy education still lacks coherence and remains dispersed across different fields, including media theory, journalism, ethics, and digital media. The disproportion between skill acquisition and critical understanding is also notable, as some programmes prioritise practical training for journalism, production, and advertising, while others focus on theory, societal context, and critical democracy. Although neither approach addresses contemporary challenges, such as AI tools and media, digital surveillance and privacy, platform politics, and misinformation, curricula still rely heavily on outdated teaching of traditional media.

7.1 Recommendations

- The inclusion of a dedicated Media Literacy paper at UG and PG levels.
- Revise the syllabi to cover contemporary issues such as misinformation, AI, datafication, platform governance, and fact-checking.

- Provide clear learning outcomes and media literacy competencies to be achieved in a course. - Integrate practical and theory components.

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