NEWS MEDIA LITERACY AMONG JOURNALISM STUDENTS IN CHENNAI: A SURVEY-BASED STUDY

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital communication platforms has significantly transformed the contemporary news environment. As individuals increasingly encounter information from diverse and sometimes unreliable sources, the ability to critically assess news content has become an essential competence. This study investigates the level of news media literacy among journalism students studying in higher education institutions in Chennai, India. The research employs the News Media Literacy Scale (NMLS) developed by Vraga et al. (2015), which evaluates four components of media literacy: Authors and Audiences, Messages and Meanings, Self-Perceived Media Literacy, and Value of Media Literacy.

Data were collected through an online survey administered to undergraduate and postgraduate journalism students (N = 150). The findings indicate that respondents generally report high levels of news media literacy across the four measured dimensions. The highest mean score was observed in the Authors and Audiences dimension (M = 4.45), while the lowest score was recorded for Self-Perceived Media Literacy (M = 3.75). Statistical analysis also reveals that students with higher academic performance and those who had completed internships reported stronger perceptions of media literacy. When compared with earlier research conducted among communication students in the United States, the results suggest broadly comparable levels of media literacy.

The study contributes empirical evidence to the relatively limited body of research examining media literacy among journalism students in the Indian context. The findings highlight the role of both academic achievement and professional exposure in strengthening students' ability to critically engage with news media.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary information ecosystem is characterized by an unprecedented volume of content circulating through digital media channels. Social networking platforms, online news portals, and user-generated media have transformed how audiences encounter and interpret news. While these developments have expanded access to information, they have also increased the complexity of the media environment.

Individuals today must navigate a media landscape that includes professional journalism, opinion content, advertising, and misleading or manipulated information. In such an environment, the capacity to critically evaluate news becomes an essential civic skill. This competency is generally referred to as news media literacy.

News media literacy involves the knowledge and analytical abilities necessary to interpret media messages, understand how news is produced, and recognize the institutional forces that shape media content. Individuals with higher levels of media literacy are better positioned to evaluate the credibility of information sources, identify bias or manipulation, and understand the broader social and economic contexts within which journalism operates.

Within democratic societies, the importance of media literacy extends beyond individual information consumption. Citizens rely on accurate information to participate in public debate, make political decisions, and engage in civic life. Consequently, the ability to interpret media critically is closely connected to the functioning of democratic institutions.

Although media literacy has been widely studied among school students and general audiences, comparatively little research has focused on journalism students. This group represents a particularly important population because journalism students will eventually become producers of news content. Their understanding of how media systems operate may influence professional norms and journalistic practices in the future.

Another common assumption in discussions of digital media is that younger generations—often described as "digital natives"—naturally possess strong media literacy skills. However, several studies have challenged this assumption, suggesting that familiarity with digital technologies does not necessarily translate into the ability to evaluate information critically.

In India, empirical studies examining news media literacy remain relatively limited. This is particularly true with respect to journalism education. Understanding how journalism students interpret media messages and evaluate news content can provide valuable insights for curriculum development and media education initiatives.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine the level of news media literacy among journalism students studying in Chennai. The study also explores whether certain student characteristics, such as academic performance and internship experience, are associated with variations in media literacy levels.

The research is guided by the following questions:

RQ1: What level of news media literacy is reported by journalism students in Chennai?
RQ2: Which student characteristics are associated with variations in media literacy?
RQ3: How do the media literacy levels of journalism students in Chennai compare with those reported in previous studies using the same measurement scale?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Media, Democracy, and the Public Sphere

The relationship between news media and democratic governance has long been a subject of discussion within media and political communication scholarship. Democratic societies depend on the circulation of reliable information that enables citizens to understand public affairs and participate meaningfully in political processes.

Alexis de Tocqueville argued that the exchange of information and the presence of public debate were essential elements of democratic life. In modern societies, citizens cannot directly observe most political developments and therefore rely heavily on mediated information provided by news organizations.

Walter Lippmann later expanded on this idea by suggesting that individuals construct mental representations of the world based on mediated images rather than direct experience. According to Lippmann, news reporting presents selected aspects of reality, thereby shaping public understanding of events and issues.

More recent scholarship has emphasized the role of the media as a key intermediary between political institutions and the public. Strömbäck describes journalism as an institution that provides citizens with information necessary for evaluating public policies and political actors. The concept of the media as the "fourth estate" reflects the expectation that journalism functions as a mechanism for accountability within democratic systems.

However, the effectiveness of journalism in fulfilling these roles depends not only on the practices of media organizations but also on the ability of audiences to interpret media content critically. This recognition has contributed to growing interest in the concept of media literacy.

Media Literacy and the Challenge of Misinformation

The expansion of digital media has dramatically altered the circulation of information. Social media platforms allow information to spread rapidly across networks, often without the editorial oversight traditionally associated with professional journalism. While these platforms facilitate communication and participation, they have also contributed to the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

Surveys conducted in multiple countries have documented fluctuations in public trust toward news organizations. Reports produced by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism indicate that levels of trust in news vary significantly across national contexts and media systems.

In the Indian context, public debates about media credibility have intensified in recent years. Concerns regarding political influence, commercial pressures, and the circulation of misleading information have highlighted the importance of strengthening media literacy among citizens.

Media literacy broadly refers to the capacity to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media content. Individuals who possess strong media literacy skills are better able to identify unreliable information sources, recognize bias, and understand how institutional forces influence media production.

Research examining students' ability to evaluate online information has revealed that many young people struggle to distinguish between credible and unreliable sources. A large-scale study conducted by the Stanford History Education Group found that students frequently relied on superficial indicators when assessing the credibility of digital content.

These findings suggest that technological familiarity alone does not ensure the development of critical media evaluation skills.

Measuring News Media Literacy

Although the concept of media literacy has been widely discussed, measuring it empirically has presented methodological challenges. Scholars have used different conceptual frameworks and measurement tools, focusing on aspects such as critical thinking, knowledge of media institutions, and awareness of media influence.

Ashley, Maksl, and Craft proposed a multidimensional approach to measuring news media literacy that considers both cognitive understanding and evaluative skills. Building on this framework, Vraga and colleagues developed the **News Media Literacy Scale (NMLS)**, which has been widely adopted in academic research.

The NMLS evaluates four dimensions:

1. **Authors and Audiences**
2. **Messages and Meanings**
3. **Self-Perceived Media Literacy**
4. **Value of Media Literacy**

Together, these dimensions capture both individuals' understanding of media systems and their perceptions of their own analytical abilities.

Subsequent research has applied the NMLS in a variety of educational contexts. For example, Maksl and colleagues examined how media literacy education influences students' engagement with news and found that formal instruction can significantly improve media literacy levels.

Similarly, Kendrick and Fullerton conducted a national survey among advertising students in the United States and reported moderate to high levels of media literacy across several dimensions.

Media Literacy among Journalism Students

Despite increasing scholarly interest in media literacy, relatively few studies have examined this concept specifically among journalism students. This population represents an important group because journalism students are both consumers and future producers of media content.

Journalism education seeks not only to develop reporting skills but also to cultivate critical thinking and ethical awareness among students. Media literacy competencies therefore align closely with the broader objectives of journalism education.

Students with strong media literacy skills may be better equipped to evaluate sources, identify misinformation, and understand the structural factors that shape news production. However, empirical research examining these competencies among journalism students remains limited, particularly outside Western contexts.

Most existing studies have been conducted in North America and Europe, leaving a gap in knowledge regarding media literacy levels among journalism students in countries such as India.

Research Gap

Although previous research has examined media literacy among university students and general audiences, there is limited empirical evidence regarding media literacy among journalism students in India. In addition, few studies have applied standardized measurement instruments such as the News Media Literacy Scale within Indian journalism education programmes.

Furthermore, existing studies have rarely explored how academic experiences—such as academic performance or internship exposure—may influence media literacy competencies.

The present study addresses these gaps by assessing media literacy among journalism students in Chennai using the News Media Literacy Scale and examining how student characteristics relate to media literacy levels.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative survey design to examine the level of news media literacy among journalism students in Chennai. A survey approach was chosen because it allows researchers to measure attitudes, perceptions, and self-reported competencies across a relatively large group of respondents.

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate journalism programmes in higher education institutions located in Chennai. Based on available programme information, the total number of journalism students in the city was estimated to be approximately 1,500.

Data were collected using a non-probability convenience sampling strategy. Faculty members teaching journalism and media courses in various institutions were contacted and requested to circulate the survey questionnaire among their students.

The questionnaire was administered online using Google Forms. The survey link was distributed through professional WhatsApp groups consisting of media educators, who subsequently shared the link with their students.

A total of 150 responses were obtained. After screening the dataset for completeness and quality control, all valid responses were retained for analysis.

Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of two sections.

The first section collected demographic and academic information, including gender, age, year of study, academic performance, internship experience, and career aspirations.

The second section included the 27-item News Media Literacy Scale (NMLS) developed by Vraga et al. (2015). The scale measures four dimensions of media literacy:

- Authors and Audiences (AA)
- Messages and Meanings (MM)
- Self-Perceived Media Literacy (SPML)
- Value of Media Literacy (VML)

Responses were measured using a **five-point Likert scale** ranging from:

1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

Some items were reverse-coded during data analysis in accordance with the original scale design.

Data Quality Control

To ensure data reliability, the questionnaire included an attention-check item designed to confirm that respondents were carefully reading the survey questions. The item instructed respondents to select a specific response option. Responses that failed to answer this item correctly were removed prior to analysis in order to reduce the likelihood of inattentive or random responses.

Data Analysis

The collected data were exported from Google Forms to Microsoft Excel for cleaning and coding. Statistical analysis was conducted to examine the distribution of responses and evaluate media literacy levels among the participants.

Descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic variables and for each dimension of the News Media Literacy Scale. Mean scores were used to determine the overall level of media literacy reported by the respondents. Additional statistical analyses were conducted to examine differences between groups and relationships among variables. These analyses included:

- Independent samples t-tests
- Pearson correlation analysis
- Multiple regression analysis

Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of the News Media Literacy Scale was assessed using **Cronbach's alpha**. The reliability coefficients for the four dimensions were:

Dimension	Cronbach Alpha
Authors & Audiences	0.84
Messages & Meanings	0.81
Self-Perceived Media Literacy	0.79
Value of Media Literacy	0.83

The overall reliability of the scale was **0.86**, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Descriptive Statistics

The final sample consisted of 150 respondents.

Gender distribution:

- 103 female students (69%)
- 47 male students (31%)

Two respondents selected the "other" option. The age range of participants was 18–25 years, with a median age of 20.

Distribution by year of study:

- First year: 20%
- Second year: 43%
- Final year: 37%

The average reported grade point average was 6.2 on a 10-point scale.

Approximately 30% of respondents reported having completed at least one internship.

Mean scores for the four media literacy dimensions were as follows:

Dimension	Mean	SD
Authors & Audiences	4.45	0.62
Messages & Meanings	4.27	0.68
Self-Perceived Media Literacy	3.75	0.71
Value of Media Literacy	4.08	0.66

Overall, the results indicate relatively high levels of agreement with statements related to media literacy among the respondents.

Inferential Analysis

Gender Differences

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in self-perceived media literacy. Male students reported slightly higher SPML scores (M = 3.88, SD = 0.69) compared to female students (M = 3.62, SD = 0.73). The difference between the two groups was statistically significant: **$t(148) = 2.14, p < .05$**

Internship Experience

Another independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether internship experience influenced media literacy. Students who had completed internships reported higher SPML scores (M = 3.96, SD = 0.65) compared to those without internship experience (M = 3.66, SD = 0.72). The difference was statistically significant: **$t(148) = 2.48, p < .05$**

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships between academic performance, internship experience, and overall media literacy.The results revealed a moderate positive correlation between academic performance and media literacy:**$r = .29$, $p < .01$**. Internship experience was also positively correlated with self-perceived media literacy:**$r = .25$, $p < .05$.**

Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to identify predictors of overall media literacy.Independent variables included:

- Gender
- Academic performance
- Internship experience
- Year of study

The regression model was statistically significant:**$F(4,145) = 7.21$, $p < .001$.** The model explained approximately **16% of the variance in media literacy scores ($R^2 = .16$).**Academic performance ($\beta = .27$, $p < .01$) and internship experience ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$) emerged as significant predictors of media literacy.Gender showed a modest effect ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$), while year of study did not reach statistical significance.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide empirical insights into the level of news media literacy among journalism students in Chennai. Overall, respondents reported relatively strong levels of media literacy across all four dimensions of the News Media Literacy Scale.

The highest scores were observed in the Authors and Audiences dimension, suggesting that students demonstrate awareness of the institutional and economic factors that shape news production.

However, comparatively lower scores in the Self-Perceived Media Literacy dimension indicate that students may be less confident in their personal ability to critically evaluate media content.The analysis also highlights the importance of practical experience. Students who had completed internships reported significantly higher levels of perceived media literacy. This finding suggests that professional exposure may enhance students' understanding of news production processes.Academic performance also emerged as a significant predictor of media literacy, indicating that stronger academic engagement may contribute to improved critical evaluation skills.When compared with previous research conducted in other countries, the results suggest that journalism students in Chennai demonstrate media literacy levels comparable to students in communication programmes elsewhere.Overall, the findings underscore the importance of integrating both critical media analysis and experiential learning opportunities within journalism education. Strengthening media literacy competencies among future journalists is particularly important in an era characterized by information overload, misinformation, and declining public trust in news institutions.

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