

MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY AND EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF DISINFORMATION

 <https://doi.org/10.63330/aurumpub.073-008>

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Abstract

The expansion of digital platforms, social media, and, more recently, generative Artificial Intelligence tools has transformed the ways in which information is produced, distributed, selected, and interpreted. In this context, disinformation has become an educational challenge that extends beyond the ability to identify false content, encompassing an understanding of information-circulation processes, source evaluation, recognition of interests and discursive strategies, interpretation of different languages and modes, and responsible participation in digital environments. This chapter aims to analyze how media and information literacy can contribute to educating individuals capable of participating critically in democratic life in contexts marked by disinformation, algorithmic mediation, and the growing automated production of content. Methodologically, this is a qualitative bibliographic and documentary study grounded in recent research on media literacy, digital education, disinformation, citizenship, digital platforms, and Artificial Intelligence, as well as documents produced by UNESCO. The analysis also considers studies on inclusion, accessibility, and digital inequalities, recognizing that the development of critical competencies depends not only on the existence of technologies, but also on concrete conditions of access, participation, and education. It is argued that media education must move beyond instrumental approaches and isolated fact-checking practices by incorporating critical media analysis, responsible authorship, an understanding of content-circulation mechanisms, the interpretation of algorithmic environments, and respect for plurality. It is concluded that education for democracy in contexts of disinformation requires continuous educational processes capable of integrating critical thinking, communicative responsibility, rights, participation, and a critical understanding of the technologies that structure the contemporary information ecosystem.

Keywords: Democracy, Digital citizenship, Disinformation, Education, Media literacy.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the contemporary information ecosystem has profoundly altered the relationship among individuals, information, and the public sphere. The production and circulation of content no longer depend exclusively on traditional communication institutions, but now take place in digital environments where any user can simultaneously access, produce, share, and reframe messages. UNESCO (2021) understands media and information literacy as an interconnected set of competencies that enables individuals to engage critically and effectively with content, information-producing institutions, and digital technologies. The second edition of its international curriculum was updated precisely in response to the intensification of disinformation, hate speech, digital citizenship, and the growing presence of Artificial Intelligence, indicating that education for dealing with information must keep pace with transformations in the communication environment itself.

In this scenario, disinformation should not be understood merely as the presence of factually false content. Its scope encompasses forms of circulation, framing, selection, recommendation, and sharing that can confer visibility and legitimacy on certain messages irrespective of their informational quality. The Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms, published by UNESCO in 2023, address the protection of freedom of expression and access to information in conjunction with the challenges associated with disinformation, hate speech, and conspiracy theories. The document emphasizes transparency, accountability, and the provision of information to users as important principles for building digital environments compatible with human rights. This perspective is important because it shifts the focus away from an alleged individual inability to distinguish “truth” from “falsehood” and toward a broader analysis of the technological and institutional structures involved in the circulation of information (UNESCO, 2023).

Schools occupy a particular position in relation to this reality. Young people and adults access content through platforms whose selection logics are not always transparent, interact with different communicative genres, and participate in networks in which information, opinion, advertising,

entertainment, and persuasion may be deeply intertwined. In this regard, media literacy cannot be reduced to teaching technical procedures for using devices or accessing sources. In a systematic review covering studies published between 2013 and 2023, Rojas-Estrada, Aguaded, and García-Ruiz (2024) emphasize the importance of integrating media and information literacy into the curriculum in order to educate informed, critical, and participatory citizens. The review's findings also show that its incorporation into formal education depends on coordination among education policies, teachers, civil society, and the academic community, indicating that isolated practices are unlikely to replace a consistent curricular approach.

The growing presence of Artificial Intelligence makes this discussion even more complex. Generative systems expand the possibilities for producing texts, images, videos, and other content, but they also make the distinction among human authorship, automated production, editing, and manipulation less evident. Although Velho et al. (2026) specifically discuss the relationship between AI and inclusive education, they draw attention to issues extending beyond that field: resource accessibility, data protection, algorithmic biases, teacher education, and the need for pedagogical mediation. Similarly, Santos et al. (2025) argue that technology is neither a neutral nor a universal solution, since digitalization may expand learning opportunities while also deepening inequalities in access, vulnerabilities, and less visible risks. Contemporary media literacy must therefore also incorporate a critical understanding of the technological systems through which information is produced and ranked.

At the same time, educating critical media readers does not mean establishing a pedagogy of permanent distrust or replacing debate with the simple classification of content as true or false. In developing and testing an educational intervention focused on fake-news literacy, Scheibenzuber, Hofer, and Nistor (2021) found a substantial improvement in students' credibility assessments following the intervention. The study suggests that analytical competencies can be taught, but it also highlights the need for pedagogical situations in which students investigate problems and apply evaluation criteria rather than simply receiving ready-made answers. From this perspective, media literacy means teaching students to

ask who produced a given message, what evidence is presented, which sources are used, what information has been omitted, why particular content circulates, and what consequences may arise from sharing it.

Another central issue concerns the inequalities that permeate the digital environment. Critical participation cannot be discussed when certain groups face barriers related to access, accessibility, or education. In a systematic review of AI, accessibility, and digital inclusion, Sousa and Fujita (2026) identified advances made possible by assistive technologies and intelligent interfaces, but also gaps related to digital literacy, the absence of standards, and the limited participation of users with disabilities in technology-design processes. Santos et al. (2025), in turn, observe that even the physical availability of resources does not eliminate the need for education toward a critical, ethical, safe, and creative digital culture. Therefore, media education for citizenship must consider who is able to access digital environments, under what conditions, and with what concrete possibilities for understanding, producing, and challenging the content circulating within them.

Based on these issues, this chapter is guided by the following question: how can media and information literacy contribute to critical education and democratic participation in contexts marked by disinformation, algorithmic mediation, and the expansion of automated content production? Its objective is to analyze the contributions and limitations of media literacy in educating individuals capable of accessing, evaluating, interpreting, producing, and sharing information critically, ethically, and responsibly, while considering the challenges posed by disinformation, digital platforms, Artificial Intelligence, and inequalities in access. UNESCO (2021) provides a relevant foundation for this approach by integrating information, media, and digital competencies within a perspective that connects critical thinking, social participation, and an understanding of communication systems. The discussion is subsequently developed along three lines: media literacy and the critical interpretation of the information ecosystem; disinformation, platforms, and democratic education; and educational practices for authorship, participation, and digital responsibility.

METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as qualitative bibliographic and documentary research aimed at analyzing the relationships among media and information literacy, disinformation, social participation, and education for democracy within the context of digital culture. The choice of a qualitative approach stems from the nature of the object under investigation, since individuals' relationship with information, media, and platforms involves processes of interpretation, meaning-making, credibility assessment, participation, and positioning in relation to different forms of communicative mediation. The intention is not to quantify occurrences of disinformation or measure individual behaviors, but to understand categories and principles capable of grounding educational practices focused on the critical interpretation of the information environment.

The bibliographic research prioritized recent studies capable of situating media literacy within the challenges of the contemporary digital ecosystem. Studies were considered on the curricular integration of Media and Information Literacy, pedagogical practices involving the analysis of news and fake news, digital citizenship, youth participation, connected education, and the impacts of Artificial Intelligence on the production and circulation of content. Central references include Rojas-Estrada, Aguaded, and García-Ruiz (2024), whose systematic review discusses the incorporation of media literacy into curricula, and Scheibenzuber, Hofer, and Nistor (2021), who present an intervention focused on the critical evaluation of fake news. These studies were selected because they address both the structural dimension of media education and concrete experiences in developing analytical competencies.

The main conceptual and documentary reference was the curriculum *Media and Information Literate Citizens: Think Critically, Click Wisely!*, published by UNESCO in 2021. The document brings together information, media, and digital competencies within the field of media and information literacy and incorporates topics such as Artificial Intelligence, digital citizenship, disinformation, and hate speech. Its use in this study does not imply the uncritical adoption of an international model; rather, it provides a

conceptual framework for identifying competencies related to access, analysis, evaluation, creation, and participation within the communication ecosystem.

The documentary component also included UNESCO's Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms (2023). This publication was included because the phenomenon of disinformation should not be reduced to the individual actions of users. The guidelines address transparency, platform accountability, access to information, freedom of expression, and risk mitigation in digital environments, making it possible to situate media education within an ecosystem in which technological and institutional decisions influence the visibility and circulation of content. The study thus combines an educational perspective with the understanding that platforms and algorithmic systems also shape the conditions under which individuals encounter and interpret information.

The materials provided for the preparation of this chapter were used complementarily. Santos et al. (2025) contributed particularly to understanding technology both as an opportunity and as a source of new inequalities and risks. The article emphasizes that digital exclusion, surveillance, structural limitations, and the absence of critical education must be considered when technological resources are incorporated into education. Velho et al. (2026), in turn, provide support for discussing teacher mediation, bias, data protection, and the need to subordinate AI to pedagogical objectives and principles of equity. Although media literacy is not the central subject of these studies, their contributions were incorporated where they help clarify the ethical and educational conditions of participation in digital environments.

The systematic review by Sousa and Fujita (2026), which examined 31 international studies on Artificial Intelligence, accessibility, ethics, and digital inclusion, was also included in the body of material analyzed. The authors identify both technological advances and gaps associated with digital literacy, institutional regulation, and the participation of potentially excluded groups in technology development. This study helps prevent media education from being understood solely as an individual competency: opportunities for participation also depend on accessibility, system design, conditions of access, and recognition of user diversity.

The temporal scope prioritized studies published between 2021 and 2026, a period marked by intensifying debates about disinformation, digital platforms, and generative Artificial Intelligence. Earlier works may be used in subsequent sections only when they perform a conceptual function necessary to understanding the object of study, thus preventing the theoretical framework from relying excessively on references removed from the current conditions of the information ecosystem. This decision follows the same orientation adopted for the other materials: recent literature serves as the principal axis, while earlier authors are included only when their contributions remain indispensable.

The analysis was organized into four interpretive categories: a) media literacy as an integration of access to, analysis, evaluation, and production of information; b) disinformation and the development of critical thinking; c) digital platforms, algorithms, and Artificial Intelligence as mediators of the information ecosystem; and d) participation, citizenship, and communicative responsibility in educational contexts. These categories emerged by bringing together recurring themes in the academic literature, UNESCO documents, and the selected materials, without establishing in advance a causal relationship between media literacy and political or social behaviors.

Finally, it is important to clarify that this study is not a systematic review and does not seek to exhaust the existing literature on disinformation and media literacy. It is an interpretive bibliographic and documentary analysis constructed from sources selected for their relevance to the research problem. The findings presented therefore correspond to a theoretical synthesis of the evidence and arguments identified in the body of material analyzed. This delimitation is particularly necessary because the relationship between media education and democratic participation involves distinct cultural, educational, and technological contexts. Accordingly, the contributions discussed are presented as educational possibilities supported by the sources, rather than as universal effects or outcomes automatically produced by adopting particular pedagogical practices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY AND THE CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

The literacy required to participate in contemporary society is no longer limited to mastery of reading and writing in their traditional forms. The proliferation of platforms, languages and modes, content producers, and automated systems requires individuals to be capable of locating information, understanding its origin, evaluating evidence, recognizing different communicative intentions, and producing content responsibly. In the curriculum *Media and Information Literate Citizens: Think Critically, Click Wisely!*, UNESCO (2021) brings together media, information, and digital competencies precisely because the contemporary environment makes it increasingly difficult to separate these fields. From this perspective, media and information literacy corresponds to the ability to engage critically with content, media institutions, and technologies, rather than merely to the instrumental mastery of digital tools.

This conceptual expansion is particularly important because high levels of media exposure do not necessarily indicate high levels of competence in media analysis. Young people who are familiar with social media, applications, and search engines may operate these resources with ease while simultaneously experiencing difficulty in assessing source credibility or identifying the processes that make certain messages visible. In a systematic review of the integration of Media and Information Literacy into prescribed curricula, Rojas-Estrada, Aguaded, and García-Ruiz (2024) emphasize precisely the need to incorporate it into formal education as a component in educating informed, critical, and participatory citizens. The study examined publications in different languages and found that effective curricular incorporation depends not only on the existence of media-related content, but also on education policies, teacher education, and coordination among schools, academia, and civil society.

In a study focusing specifically on adolescents, Suárez-Perdomo, Garcés-Delgado, and Arvelo-Rosales (2025) reach findings that reinforce this understanding. Their systematic review brought together

interventions conducted in educational settings between 2010 and 2024 and showed that media literacy programs can foster competencies in critical analysis, reflection, and decision-making in response to media content. Rather than teaching isolated procedures, the experiences analyzed seek to create conditions for adolescents to question what they receive, interpret communicative strategies, and use media more consciously.

It is important, however, to avoid a conception of media literacy centered exclusively on protection against problematic content. UNESCO's formulation (2021) also encompasses creation, expression, access, participation, and dialogue. Educating media-literate individuals therefore does not merely mean teaching them to distrust messages or detect falsehoods. It involves enabling them to understand how information is produced, become familiar with different sources, express ideas, create content, and participate ethically and knowledgeably in communication environments. Critical interpretation must therefore coexist with authorship, preventing media education from producing individuals whose relationship with information is merely defensive.

The educational nature of these competencies also appears in the meta-analysis by Cho, Carpenter, and Li (2025), which synthesized 160 media literacy interventions conducted over four decades. The authors found positive overall effects, with especially consistent findings concerning knowledge and critical beliefs related to media. At the same time, behavioral outcomes proved more complex, which precludes the assumption that a better understanding of media mechanisms will necessarily change all forms of behavior. This difference is pedagogically relevant: learning to evaluate content is an important condition, but changing consumption and sharing habits involves other social, emotional, and contextual factors.

In school practice, evaluating digital information requires procedures that extend beyond the internal reading of a single piece of content. Wineburg and McGrew (2019) found that professional fact-checkers tended to leave an unfamiliar page quickly in order to investigate, through other sources, who was behind the content and what their reputation was. The authors called this strategy lateral reading.

Instead of continuing to examine a page's appearance, language, or graphic elements, the reader opens other sources and forms a contextual judgment about its credibility. This shift is significant because digital environments can simulate visual legitimacy with relative ease, making criteria based solely on the appearance of content insufficient.

The pedagogical potential of this strategy was subsequently tested in school settings. Wineburg et al. (2022) developed an intervention with high school students in government classes, teaching them to use the open web to investigate sources before accepting the information presented. Participating students made gains in their ability to assess the credibility of digital content compared with the control group. In a later review, McGrew (2024) identified favorable findings from different explicit lateral-reading interventions conducted with groups ranging from school students to adults, reinforcing the idea that information-evaluation procedures need to be taught, practiced, and discussed.

Providing a rigid checklist of questions or a sequence of procedures is not enough, however. In analyzing conversations held after lateral-reading activities, McGrew and Byrne (2022) observed that teachers and students often focused their discussion on particular details of the sources examined rather than making explicit the strategies that could be transferred to new situations. This finding highlights the importance of pedagogical mediation: the task needs to enable students to understand why a particular procedure works and how it can be applied to other content.

Media literacy is therefore processual in nature. It does not end with an activity on "fake news," nor can it be achieved through a single teaching sequence. The reviews by Rojas-Estrada, Aguaded, and García-Ruiz (2024) and Suárez-Perdomo, Garcés-Delgado, and Arvelo-Rosales (2025) point to the need for a more consistent integration of these competencies into educational experiences. Rather than constituting peripheral content, media analysis can extend across reading, writing, the Humanities, the Natural Sciences, and other fields in which students use evidence, sources, and arguments.

This perspective also requires an understanding that critical access to information cannot exist without material and pedagogical conditions for participation. Santos et al. (2025) note that the digital

environment can simultaneously expand access to knowledge and produce new inequalities, particularly when students face problems involving connectivity, infrastructure, or education. The text also draws attention to less visible risks, such as surveillance, isolation, excessive screen exposure, and the weakening of interactions, showing that connected education must be accompanied by planning, teacher education, and equity policies.

For this reason, although Sousa and Fujita (2026) specifically examine academic libraries, they make a relevant contribution to an expanded concept of information literacy. In their systematic review, the benefits of intelligent accessibility solutions coexist with gaps related to digital literacy, regulation, and the limited participation of users with disabilities in technology design. This finding reinforces a fundamental issue for this chapter: learning to navigate the information ecosystem critically also presupposes being able to access it under conditions that enable effective participation.

Media and information literacy should thus be understood as continuous education for accessing, investigating, evaluating, interpreting, creating, and sharing content. UNESCO (2021), Cho, Carpenter, and Li (2025), McGrew (2024), and Suárez-Perdomo, Garcés-Delgado, and Arvelo-Rosales (2025) offer different evidence and models, but converge in rejecting the idea that everyday contact with technologies spontaneously produces critical readers. Operational familiarity may be acquired through use; a critical understanding of systems, sources, and communicative strategies requires intentional education.

DISINFORMATION, DIGITAL PLATFORMS, AND CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

A discussion of disinformation first requires conceptual precision. Although widely used, the term “fake news” encompasses distinct phenomena and has become insufficient for rigorous analysis. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) propose the concept of information disorder and distinguish three categories: misinformation, referring to the circulation of false information without the intention to cause harm; disinformation, relating to the deliberate creation or dissemination of false information with the intention

of causing harm; and malinformation, in which true information is used out of context or in a deliberately harmful manner. This distinction does not resolve the full complexity of the phenomenon, but it prevents false content produced by mistake from being treated in the same way as deliberate manipulation operations.

This distinction has educational consequences. If all incorrect information is simply classified as “fake,” the opportunity to discuss authorship, intention, context, circulation, and appropriation is lost. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) propose examining agents, messages, and interpreters precisely because the same content may acquire different meanings and effects depending on who produces it, how it circulates, and who receives it. Media education must therefore teach students to analyze not only “whether something is true,” but also who is communicating, on the basis of what evidence, in what context, and with what possible objectives.

In platform environments, this analysis becomes more complex because individuals do not access content in a neutral or purely chronological order. Recommendation systems, search engines, advertising, engagement metrics, and curation processes help determine what gains greater or lesser visibility. UNESCO’s Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms (2023) are based precisely on the understanding that problems related to disinformation cannot be addressed solely by holding individual users responsible. The document includes transparency, accountability, risk assessment, and the protection of human rights among the principles relevant to governing these spaces.

Recognizing the structural dimension of platforms prevents a simplistic pedagogy. The objective is not merely to teach students “not to believe everything they see on the internet.” The organization of the environment itself influences what information appears, what content is repeated, and how certain messages circulate among groups. UNESCO (2023) therefore emphasizes the need to empower users and develop media and information literacy programs capable of reducing inequalities in participation and fostering critical media use. Individual education and institutional accountability must proceed together.

In a systematic review of educational approaches to misinformation, Rau and Premo (2025) show that education has been called upon to prepare individuals not only to recognize problematic content, but also to respond appropriately to it. The authors identify different approaches and reinforce the need to design evidence-based educational interventions while recognizing that misinformation appears on social media, in science, in traditional media, and in educational contexts. The problem therefore does not belong exclusively to social media and cannot be solved by abandoning a particular platform.

Recent research involving adolescents provides particularly important evidence. Rodríguez Castillo et al. (2026) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of studies published between 2019 and 2025 on media literacy and misinformation on social media. Of the studies identified, 46 were included in the qualitative synthesis and 18 in the meta-analysis. The authors found a favorable effect of educational interventions on the ability to identify misleading content, with particularly relevant findings for lateral-reading strategies, source verification, and cognitive inoculation.

These findings must, however, be interpreted without attributing to schools an unlimited capacity to neutralize disinformation. The same review demonstrates heterogeneity among the interventions, contexts, and measures employed. Rodríguez Castillo et al. (2026) advocate the continuous, cross-curricular integration of media literacy rather than isolated activities. This reinforces a recurring conclusion in the literature: recognizing a false news story in a guided activity does not necessarily mean that the same behavior will be reproduced in response to every item of content received in everyday life.

Another reason to avoid simplification lies in the relationship between information and previously formed convictions. Evaluating a message is not a purely technical process. Values, experiences, group affiliations, emotions, and prior knowledge all contribute to interpretation. Education addressing disinformation must therefore provide space for examining arguments, checking evidence, and learning to revise positions in light of new information, without turning the classroom into an environment for imposing political conclusions. The educational objective is to improve procedures of analysis and argumentation while preserving students' autonomy to form their own judgments.

This concern becomes especially important when the subject is democracy. In systematizing the literature on political information literacy among young people, Koren (2025) describes a set of competencies related to understanding, analyzing, and critically evaluating political information. The author identifies adolescence and youth as important periods for learning about civic life and highlights the need to prepare young people to navigate complex information environments without reducing political education to the transmission of predetermined positions.

In this regard, education for democracy means creating conditions in which individuals can interpret information, become acquainted with different perspectives, examine evidence, and participate responsibly in public discussions. It does not mean directing students to support a particular party, candidate, or ideological position. Media literacy contributes to this process by strengthening the reading and participation competencies needed for each person to develop their own positions autonomously.

The systematic review by Soria-Pérez et al. (2024) connects digital citizenship, safety, political culture, and democracy, demonstrating that participation in digital environments requires competencies that extend beyond the technical operation of technologies. From this perspective, digital citizenship involves rights and responsibilities, as well as the ability to communicate, interpret information, and participate in social relationships mediated by technology.

Consistent democratic education must also preserve freedom of expression and plurality. UNESCO's Guidelines (2023) address responses to disinformation in conjunction with the right to freedom of expression and access to information, rejecting approaches that disregard rights-based safeguards. This balance is central to education: combating disinformation must not become the suppression of legitimate differences, just as defending freedom of expression does not require treating every statement as equally supported by evidence.

Media literacy therefore fosters democratic education when it teaches individuals to distinguish among fact, interpretation, and opinion; seek evidence; compare sources; recognize uncertainty; identify attempts at manipulation; and participate in debate without regarding disagreement itself as evidence of

falsehood. Rau and Premo (2025), Koren (2025), Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), and UNESCO (2023) offer complementary perspectives for understanding that disinformation requires educational, technological, and institutional responses, none of which is sufficient in isolation.

GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AUTHORSHIP, AND EDUCATION FOR DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

The emergence of generative Artificial Intelligence has added a new layer to the information ecosystem. While the internet had already expanded any user's ability to publish and distribute messages, generative systems have made it possible to produce synthetic texts, images, voices, and videos rapidly and at scale. In a UNESCO document devoted specifically to media and information literacy responses to generative AI, Frau-Meigs (2024) emphasizes that these technologies affect individuals' relationship with information, media, and decision-making, creating opportunities related to creativity and access while also posing challenges involving source reliability, privacy, stereotypes, discrimination, and disinformation.

In this context, the question "Who wrote this?" becomes less straightforward. A piece of content may have been created entirely by one person, produced by a system in response to human instructions, edited by several individuals, or developed through successive interactions between people and automated tools. Media literacy must therefore incorporate new questions about authorship, provenance, and traceability. Frau-Meigs (2024) argues that AI literacy can be incorporated into Media and Information Literacy, particularly because synthetic content alters traditional criteria for assessing reliability.

This change does not mean that all earlier strategies have lost their usefulness. Lateral reading remains valuable, and perhaps even more necessary, because the visual or textual appearance of content no longer provides sufficient indications of its credibility. McGrew (2024) demonstrates that teaching individuals to leave the content under examination temporarily and investigate the source elsewhere improves their assessment of digital information. With generative AI, this logic must be complemented by

provenance verification, comparison with primary sources, and awareness of the possibility of synthetic references, images, or statements.

In analyzing Artificial Intelligence and inclusive education, Velho et al. (2026) emphasize that the educational benefits of these tools depend on teacher mediation, data protection, accessibility, and efforts to address algorithmic bias. Although the subject of that study differs from the focus of this chapter, its underlying principle is directly applicable to media education: merely exposing students to generative tools does not mean that their use will produce critical competence. Pedagogical mediation remains necessary to discuss limitations, validation criteria, and responsibilities related to authorship.

Alves et al. (2024) reach a similar conclusion when relating AI resources to personalization and accessibility while emphasizing the need for human oversight and attention to ethical issues and data security. This point helps move beyond two common extremes in educational debate: representing AI as an automatic solution to learning problems or rejecting it entirely as an inevitable threat. A critical approach examines concrete uses, benefits, limitations, and institutional conditions.

Technology itself may also function as a mechanism of inclusion or exclusion. Sousa and Fujita (2026) identify resources such as automated reading, intelligent assistants, and inclusive interfaces, but show that limited digital literacy, the absence of standards, and the exclusion of users themselves from development processes undermine the inclusive potential of these solutions. In this sense, digital citizenship does not simply mean knowing how to use tools; it presupposes the ability to understand and question them and to participate in decisions about their use.

Accessibility must be integrated into this education from the outset. Santos et al. (2025) argue that connected education must ensure equitable opportunities for access, including for students with disabilities and individuals in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability. The study broadens accessibility beyond technical adaptation to include different formats, comprehensible interfaces, and inclusive pedagogical practices. This contribution prevents digital citizenship from being formulated solely for those who already possess equipment, connectivity, and well-established competencies.

There is also an ethical dimension related to authorship. Using generative systems to create content does not eliminate human responsibility for what is shared. The ease with which a message can be produced does not guarantee its accuracy, and an automated response does not transfer responsibility for the circulation of incorrect information to the system. Frau-Meigs's proposal (2024) insists precisely on user empowerment and the ability to use synthetic media ethically, connecting media literacy, autonomy, and responsibility.

For schools, this creates pedagogical possibilities that are more productive than simply prohibiting or permitting tools. Students can compare an AI-generated response with reliable sources, identify claims requiring verification, analyze nonexistent references, discuss alterations to images, examine different prompts, and reflect on how linguistic choices change a response. In this type of practice, AI ceases to be merely a production tool and also becomes an object of critical investigation.

Consequently, teachers assume a mediating role that should not be confused with constant surveillance. Velho et al. (2026) emphasize that automation does not replace pedagogical judgment or educational relationships. Applied to media literacy, this understanding means creating situations in which students can explain why they consider a source reliable, describe how they verified a particular claim, and recognize the limitations of their own conclusions.

Digital citizenship must also encompass an understanding that platforms and AI systems are constructed through human and institutional decisions. UNESCO (2023) emphasizes that governance, design, moderation, and curation must observe principles of transparency and human rights. Teaching about algorithms does not mean requiring advanced programming knowledge; rather, it means enabling students to understand that what appears on their screens results from selection systems and that these systems may have particular criteria and limitations.

At this point, AI literacy becomes directly connected to democratic education. Individuals with at least a basic understanding of how content is produced, selected, and recommended are in a better position to question its circulation and participate autonomously in public debate. Frau-Meigs (2024)

warns, however, that this area of education is still being developed and needs to be systematically integrated into media literacy policies and programs.

Generative AI therefore heightens the need for media education rather than rendering it obsolete. UNESCO (2021) had already proposed integrating media, information, and digital competencies; the emergence of generative systems requires the addition of questions concerning synthetic authorship, provenance, bias, data protection, and responsibility in sharing.

In summary, the theoretical framework makes it possible to understand education for democracy in times of disinformation through three complementary movements. Rojas-Estrada, Aguaded, and García-Ruiz (2024), Cho, Carpenter, and Li (2025), and Suárez-Perdomo, Garcés-Delgado, and Arvelo-Rosales (2025) support media literacy as an educational competency that must be intentionally developed; Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), Rau and Premo (2025), and Koren (2025) demonstrate the complexity of information disorder and its relationship with civic education; and Frau-Meigs (2024), UNESCO (2023), Sousa and Fujita (2026), and Velho et al. (2026) show that the emergence of algorithmic platforms and AI adds new challenges involving authorship, access, transparency, and responsibility. Within this framework, the school's function is not to determine which positions students should adopt, but to provide the knowledge and procedures that enable them to examine information, compare evidence, construct arguments, and participate autonomously in public life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The integrated reading of the selected academic studies and documents made it possible to organize the findings into four interpretive clusters. The first demonstrates that media literacy cannot be reduced to identifying false news, since it encompasses competencies involving search, contextualization, analysis, production, and the responsible circulation of information. The second shows that disinformation must be understood within an ecosystem mediated by platforms and recommendation systems, rather than merely as the result of individual choices. The third focuses on the school's

pedagogical possibilities, particularly the explicit teaching of information-evaluation procedures. The fourth brings media literacy and democratic education together while preserving plurality and individuals' autonomy in constructing their own positions.

BEYOND THE IDENTIFICATION OF FALSE NEWS

A first finding concerns the inadequacy of approaches that restrict media education to the question of whether a particular news story is true. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) had already demonstrated that the information ecosystem encompasses distinct phenomena through their differentiation among misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. This distinction changes the pedagogical analysis: evaluating a message requires consideration not only of its factual accuracy, but also of its authorship, context, intention, mode of circulation, and possible use of true information in a misleading manner.

The findings of educational interventions reinforce the importance of developing a broader set of competencies. By bringing together 160 interventions conducted between 1983 and 2023, Cho, Carpenter, and Li (2025) identified a positive overall effect of media literacy, particularly on knowledge and critical beliefs concerning media. The effects on behavior were less consistent. This finding prevents the unrealistic expectation that understanding information mechanisms will necessarily and immediately transform everything an individual consumes or shares.

A similar conclusion appears in Rau and Premo's review (2025), which was based on 107 articles addressing educational approaches to misinformation. The authors identified a variety of interventions originating in fields such as information literacy, lie detection, research on the misinformation effect, and fraud prevention. The diversity found reveals that no single universal method exists for developing resistance to misleading content. Different forms of misinformation mobilize distinct competencies and require interventions tailored to the type of problem being addressed.

When the focus shifts specifically to adolescents, the findings become particularly relevant to basic education. In a systematic review and meta-analysis of media literacy and misinformation on social

media, Rodríguez Castillo et al. (2026) identified favorable effects of interventions on the ability to recognize misleading content. The study highlights strategies such as lateral reading, source verification, and inoculation-based interventions, but also records heterogeneity among research designs, populations, and assessment instruments.

It would therefore be incorrect to treat an isolated checking activity as synonymous with media literacy. Rojas-Estrada, Aguaded, and García-Ruiz (2024) demonstrate that the curricular integration of Media and Information Literacy requires continuity and coordination across different areas of the curriculum. Their review shows that the consistent incorporation of these competencies also depends on education policies and on preparing teachers themselves.

This continuity also appears in the review by Suárez-Perdomo, Garcés-Delgado, and Arvelo-Rosales (2025), which focuses on interventions intended to develop media literacy among adolescents. Rather than assuming that young people's familiarity with technology spontaneously generates critical thinking, the authors approach these competencies as forms of learning that must be developed in educational settings.

The study by Scheibenzuber, Hofer, and Nistor (2021) provides a concrete example. The researchers developed a problem-based online course addressing fake news and found a significant improvement in participants' assessments of credibility. Of greater importance to this chapter is the pedagogical design adopted: the students did not merely receive definitions, but were presented with situations requiring analysis, problem-solving, and the application of criteria.

The analysis of this evidence leads to a fundamental distinction. Teaching about disinformation conveys knowledge; teaching students to investigate information seeks to develop procedures that can be applied in new situations. Both processes are necessary, but they are not equivalent. Knowing the characteristics of misleading content does not guarantee that students will know what to do when they encounter an unfamiliar source in another context.

It is at this point that lateral reading becomes relevant. Wineburg and McGrew (2019) observed that professional fact-checkers, unlike the university students and historians participating in the study, tended to leave an unfamiliar website quickly to investigate its provenance through other sources. Instead of attributing credibility on the basis of graphic appearance, the domain, or the information the page provided about itself, they sought external evidence.

This finding is pedagogically significant because many criteria traditionally taught for evaluating websites can easily be simulated. A seemingly institutional address, sophisticated design, or section entitled “About Us” does not provide a sufficient guarantee. Lateral reading changes the focus of the question: rather than asking “Does this site look trustworthy?”, students investigate “What do other reliable sources say about who is behind this site?”

The effectiveness of this strategy was subsequently examined in high school education. Wineburg et al. (2022) conducted a field study with students in government courses, in which teachers delivered six lessons on evaluating online information. The intervention classes included 271 students, while the comparison group included 228. Students who received the intervention demonstrated significantly greater growth in their ability to judge the credibility of digital content.

This does not mean, however, that lateral reading should be turned into an infallible formula. In reviewing different interventions involving the strategy, McGrew (2024) identifies favorable evidence across groups ranging from school students to adults, but emphasizes the importance of explicit instruction. Students need to understand when to leave a page, what to search for, how to evaluate the sources they find, and when they can consider themselves to have sufficient evidence to formulate a provisional judgment.

The first synthesis of the findings therefore points to a form of media literacy that combines concepts, procedures, and reflection. Identifying misleading content is one of its applications, but its educational objective is broader: to develop individuals capable of investigating information, explaining their criteria, and recognizing when the available evidence remains insufficient to support a conclusion.

DISINFORMATION DOES NOT CIRCULATE IN A NEUTRAL SPACE

The second analytical cluster shifts the discussion from content to the environment in which it circulates. Digital platforms do not function merely as containers that store messages. Recommendation systems, search engines, advertisements, interaction metrics, trends, and automated forms of selection contribute to the visibility assigned to information. UNESCO's Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms (2023) are based on this principle, combining freedom of expression and access to information with the responsibilities of different actors in addressing misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and other risks.

For schools, this understanding represents a significant change. Teaching students to evaluate specific content is necessary but insufficient when they do not understand why certain messages repeatedly appear in their online experience. Media literacy thus comes to include questions about recommendation, data collection, advertising, forms of engagement, and visibility mechanisms.

Educational technologies provide an example of this ambivalence. Santos et al. (2025) observe that digitalization can expand access, interactivity, and personalization, but can also preserve or deepen inequalities when connectivity, infrastructure, and critical education are lacking. The same study draws attention to vulnerabilities related to surveillance, overload, and digital exclusion.

This prevents discussions of media literacy from being restricted to individual behavior. Telling students to “be critical” in environments constructed by systems they do not understand transfers all responsibility to users for a problem that is also structural. In proposing a multistakeholder approach, UNESCO (2023) distributes responsibilities among platforms, governments, civil society, academia, the media, and other actors.

Sousa and Fujita (2026) make a complementary contribution by showing that technological innovation and inclusive access do not automatically advance together. In their review of 31 studies, automated reading solutions, assistants, and intelligent interfaces coexist with difficulties involving digital

literacy, the absence of clear regulations, and the limited participation of persons with disabilities in technology design.

This finding is directly related to digital citizenship. Full participation does not exist when an individual can technically enter a platform but lacks accessible conditions, an understanding of the mechanisms employed, or the knowledge needed to assess the available information. The concept of access must therefore encompass presence, understanding, and the actual possibility of taking action.

In a systematic review of digital citizenship among students, Soria-Pérez et al. (2024) identify cognitive, social, technological, ethical, and personal dimensions, showing that educating digital citizens goes far beyond operational ability. Twenty-nine empirical studies selected through a structured search were analyzed, and the findings indicated the importance of educational strategies associated with participation and the responsible use of digital environments.

Generative Artificial Intelligence intensifies this problem because it simultaneously expands creative capacity and makes content more difficult to trace. Frau-Meigs (2024) identifies source reliability, privacy, data rights, disinformation, and autonomy among the issues that media literacy responses to generative AI must address.

This does not lead to the conclusion that AI-generated content should automatically be considered false or inappropriate. Automated origin does not determine the factual quality of a claim, just as human authorship does not guarantee accuracy. The change lies in the need to expand verification procedures: generated claims must be compared with independent sources, references must be checked, and images or videos may require provenance investigations.

Velho et al. (2026) help clarify this mediation by arguing, in the context of inclusive education, that the benefits of AI depend on accessibility, teacher education, data protection, and attention to algorithmic biases. Their contribution extends beyond the specific field analyzed by showing that no resource becomes pedagogically appropriate merely because it incorporates a recent technology.

Similarly, Alves et al. (2024) emphasize the need for human oversight and attention to the ethical implications of using AI in education. The study connects the technology to possibilities for personalization and accessibility, but maintains the teacher's central position in analyzing the conditions under which these tools are used.

The second finding may therefore be summarized as follows: media education must teach students to interpret content as well as the environments that organize its circulation. Understanding platforms and AI systems does not mean mastering their programming, but recognizing that the information experience is mediated and that technological choices can affect access, visibility, and participation.

THE SCHOOL AS A SPACE FOR INVESTIGATION, AUTHORSHIP, AND MEDIATION

The third axis focuses on educational practices. The evidence analyzed suggests that schools can develop information-evaluation competencies when they systematically provide opportunities for students to investigate real or realistic content, compare sources, explain their criteria, and revise their conclusions. This requires a pedagogy different from one based exclusively on transmitting a list of “reliable websites.”

The study by Wineburg et al. (2022) demonstrates that online evaluation strategies can be taught within existing curricular components. The six lessons delivered by high school teachers were incorporated into government courses, showing that work on source credibility need not be isolated from the curriculum.

The manner in which teachers conduct the discussion, however, makes a difference. In analyzing conversations held after lateral-reading activities in six high school classrooms, McGrew and Byrne (2022) found that many interactions remained focused on the details of the specific sources examined. The processes used to reach the assessment received less attention.

This finding is highly important to teacher education. If students merely learn that “website A is unreliable,” they acquire knowledge about that particular case. When they understand that they

investigated authorship, sought external sources, and compared evidence, they acquire procedures that they can attempt to apply to website B. The transfer of learning depends on making the strategies used visible.

Mediation should therefore not end when the class finds the “correct answer.” Teachers can ask students to explain the path they followed, compare different strategies, indicate which evidence was decisive, and acknowledge which questions remain unresolved. In this format, error no longer functions solely as an incorrect response, but becomes material for understanding how judgments are constructed.

Authorship is another fundamental dimension. UNESCO (2021) does not limit media literacy to critical consumption; creation and participation also form part of its Media and Information Literacy curriculum. Students must therefore learn not only how to evaluate what they receive, but also how to take responsibility for what they produce and circulate.

Content production may constitute an especially valuable strategy. When creating an informative post, podcast, short video, or school news report, students are required to make decisions about sources, data selection, language, editing, and audiences. Such decisions make it possible to discuss concretely the responsibilities accompanying authorship and how communicative choices may alter the interpretation of a message.

With the presence of generative AI, this work gains new possibilities. A system may produce different versions of a news story, argument, or image for students to investigate the choices made, identify claims requiring verification, and compare the result with primary sources. The tool thus ceases to be treated merely as a production shortcut and becomes an object of critical interpretation.

Frau-Meigs (2024) specifically advocates integrating media literacy and AI literacy while emphasizing user autonomy, source reliability, and data-related rights. In the school context, this means that competency development cannot be limited to teaching students how to formulate better prompts; it must also address when to use the tool, how to verify its responses, and which responsibilities remain human.

Teacher education becomes a prerequisite for this movement. Rojas-Estrada, Aguaded, and García-Ruiz (2024) identify in the literature the need to coordinate curriculum, policy, and teacher development so that media literacy no longer depends on sporadic initiatives. Without this structure, relevant practices tend to remain tied to the personal interests of individual professionals.

Nor is it reasonable to concentrate all this work in a single subject. Questions of authorship and argumentation can be explored in Portuguese Language classes; historical analysis and source contextualization can be addressed in the Humanities; and information about health, the environment, and science can be investigated in light of procedures specific to the Natural Sciences. Media literacy is cross-curricular precisely because information problems cut across different fields of knowledge.

At the same time, a cross-curricular approach cannot mean an absence of responsibility. When it is said that “everyone can address the subject,” there is a risk that no one will actually take responsibility for it. The curricular integration advocated by Rojas-Estrada, Aguaded, and García-Ruiz (2024) presupposes intentionality, learning objectives, and continuity, rather than occasional references to media.

The third synthesis therefore presents the school as a space for investigation and responsible production. The objective is not to provide students with a definitive list of sources, but to teach them to construct well-founded judgments, recognize limitations, and assume responsibility for their own uses of information.

MEDIA LITERACY, PLURALITY, AND EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

The final analytical cluster connects the chapter’s subject to its democratic dimension. The ability to participate in collective decisions depends, among other factors, on access to information and on the capacity to understand and evaluate it. The relationship between media literacy and democracy must, however, be formulated carefully: developing information competencies does not determine which political opinions an individual should adopt.

In a systematized review of 99 studies on political information literacy among young people, Koren (2025) identifies the ability to understand, analyze, and evaluate political information as one of the competencies needed to navigate the contemporary information environment. The study includes individuals aged 13 to 35 and emphasizes that knowledge, skills, and information self-efficacy are distinct dimensions of civic education.

This contribution is important because it preserves autonomy. The purpose of education is not to lead students to a particular political conclusion, but to improve their ability to distinguish evidence from unsupported claims, compare arguments, and make better-informed decisions about public issues.

In this sense, critical thinking must not be confused with automatic opposition. Questioning a source means investigating its evidence, not simply rejecting it. Similarly, recognizing epistemic authority does not mean accepting every claim without examination. Democratic education must simultaneously teach openness to revision and the ability to demand justification.

UNESCO's Guidelines (2023) emphasize another indispensable dimension: responses to disinformation must be compatible with freedom of expression and the right of access to information. For education, this relationship means distinguishing among legitimate disagreement, verifiable factual claims, and deliberately manipulative content, while avoiding the treatment of disagreement as synonymous with disinformation.

This distinction is particularly important in the classroom. Socially controversial subjects may involve different interpretations and different forms of evidence. Teachers need not eliminate disagreement; their pedagogical task may consist of creating conditions in which positions are supported by arguments and sources and expressed with respect for interlocutors.

Soria-Pérez et al. (2024) broaden this horizon by showing that digital citizenship encompasses ethical, social, technological, and cognitive dimensions. Responsible behavior online is therefore not limited to personal safety. It includes how individuals interact with others, share information, and participate in common spaces mediated by technology.

Authorship and participation intersect at this point. Sharing information is also a communicative action with potential consequences. Teaching responsibility does not mean instilling fear of publication or discouraging expression; it means creating conditions in which individuals understand that freedom to participate and responsibility for what they circulate go hand in hand.

Generative AI adds another issue to this field. Synthetic content may expand expression, creativity, and access to multimedia production, but it may also make visually convincing manipulations simpler and less expensive. Frau-Meigs (2024) specifically relates the strengthening of Media and Information Literacy to preserving human agency and autonomy in this new context.

It would be inappropriate, however, to construct a pedagogy based on the assumption that the digital environment is inherently dangerous. Santos et al. (2025) describe both opportunities to expand knowledge and risks arising from digitalization. Critical education needs to maintain this dual perspective: technologies can expand participation and learning, but their benefits depend on the social, institutional, and pedagogical conditions of use.

The findings of Cho, Carpenter, and Li (2025) help maintain proportionate expectations. Media literacy interventions produce positive effects, particularly on knowledge and critical beliefs, but behavioral changes are more complex. Education for democracy is therefore a continuous process, not an automatic result of a teaching sequence.

When these studies are brought together, a conception of information citizenship emerges that is based on evidence-informed autonomy. A democratically educated individual is not someone who agrees with a predetermined position, but someone who is better able to investigate information, recognize uncertainty, distinguish disagreement from falsehood, and explain their positions to others.

The role of the school thus becomes simultaneously epistemological, ethical, and democratic. It is epistemological because the school teaches procedures for evaluating claims; ethical because it addresses responsibility in the production and circulation of information; and democratic because it recognizes a plurality of perspectives without abandoning the requirement for evidence and arguments.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The investigation developed in this chapter has shown that media and information literacy is becoming increasingly relevant in an ecosystem marked by an abundance of content, the operation of digital platforms, and the accelerated development of generative Artificial Intelligence. The issue is not limited to the existence of false information. The challenge also lies in the ways content is produced, selected, recommended, reframed, and shared, requiring competencies that integrate interpretation, investigation, authorship, and participation.

In response to the research problem, the evidence analyzed indicates that media literacy can contribute to democratic education by expanding the conditions for accessing, analyzing, and evaluating information without determining which positions individuals should adopt. The curriculum proposed by UNESCO (2021) and recent reviews converge in treating these capacities as forms of learning that must be intentionally developed, rather than as an automatic consequence of familiarity with technology.

The distinction among misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation proposed by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) proved particularly useful in preventing the complexity of the phenomenon from being reduced to the label “fake news.” By considering authorship, intention, context, and circulation, the analysis shifts from a binary distinction between true and false to an investigative process in which different dimensions of the message must be examined.

The evidence concerning educational interventions also presents promising findings, although it does not justify simplistic solutions. Cho, Carpenter, and Li (2025) identified an overall positive effect across 160 interventions, while Rodríguez Castillo et al. (2026) found favorable results specifically in the development of competencies related to misinformation among adolescents. At the same time, both bodies of evidence reinforce that effects vary according to the objectives, methodologies, and outcomes assessed.

Among the practices analyzed, lateral reading stands out because it moves students away from assessments based exclusively on the internal characteristics of a page and toward investigating its

provenance through external sources. The study by Wineburg et al. (2022) shows that this strategy can be taught in high school and can improve credibility assessment. McGrew and Byrne (2022), however, demonstrate that teacher mediation must make the procedures used explicit so that students do not merely learn the answer applicable to a specific case.

The analysis also showed that holding users exclusively responsible would be insufficient. Digital platforms participate in organizing visibility, and governance, transparency, and rights-protection policies form part of the response to information-related problems. UNESCO (2023) specifically proposes a multistakeholder approach that simultaneously preserves freedom of expression and access to information.

The emergence of generative AI heightens the need for this education. Systems capable of producing synthetic content make investigating provenance, checking claims, understanding system limitations, and maintaining human responsibility for the circulation of outputs even more important. Frau-Meigs (2024) proposes bringing AI literacy and media literacy together while emphasizing user autonomy, data rights, and information reliability.

The materials addressing inclusion added another dimension to the debate. Sousa and Fujita (2026), Velho et al. (2026), and Santos et al. (2025) demonstrate that digital access, accessibility, education, and institutional conditions affect concrete opportunities for participation. Full digital citizenship cannot exist while individuals remain excluded by economic, technological, communicative, or educational barriers.

These findings also reinforce the school's role as a space for critical experimentation. Media education does not need to constitute a standalone subject in order to exist consistently, but it does require clear objectives and curricular continuity. Analyzing sources, checking information, producing content, discussing authorship, examining argumentative strategies, and understanding platforms are practices that can extend across different curricular components, provided they are not treated as an abstract responsibility belonging to "everyone" and, consequently, to no one.

Teacher education is therefore a decisive condition. Teachers need to understand information-evaluation strategies while also knowing how to transform them into pedagogical experiences that develop autonomy. It is not enough to identify which source is correct. The investigative path supporting that conclusion must be made visible, together with recognition of situations in which sufficient evidence is not yet available.

One limitation is that this chapter was based on bibliographic and documentary research and did not conduct its own empirical investigation with students or teachers. In addition, some of the international evidence was produced in distinct educational contexts, which precludes the automatic transfer of its findings to other settings. Future research may investigate how media literacy strategies are adopted at different stages of basic education, which competencies are retained over time, and how students transfer learned procedures to information situations not designed by the school.

It is concluded that developing media literacy in times of disinformation means educating individuals not merely to consume content more cautiously, but also to investigate, argue, create, and participate responsibly. In a society in which information circulates at increasing speed and can be produced by people, institutions, and automated systems, education assumes a fundamental role by providing tools that enable each student to construct their own judgments on the basis of evidence and dialogue.

In this sense, education for democracy does not mean teaching which political positions should be adopted. It consists of strengthening the intellectual, informational, and ethical conditions necessary for different individuals to participate autonomously in collective life, understand disagreements, demand evidence, recognize rights, and assume responsibility for what they produce and share. Media literacy thus becomes less an episodic defense against false content and more a permanent dimension of contemporary civic education.

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