

Media and Information Literacy for Empowerment



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Greetings from Canada. Being able to join you virtually is a good example of how technology can make it possible for us to speak across continents and oceans. My theme today is 'Media and Information Literacy for Empowerment' and I have prepared this jointly with Dr Balasubramanian.

The Internet is a very powerful tool for socialisation. Unlike previous communication technologies, such as the telephone or radio, the internet enables communication between large numbers of people, both synchronously and asynchronously. We have seen the dominance of social media especially during the pandemic where the number of users doubled in the last five years. The average social media user engages with multiple platforms and spends about two and a half hours every day.

Social media penetration is very high in developed countries. In developing countries it is gaining prominence, with Nigeria at 13%, Ghana at 20% and South Africa at 37%. Social media usage is increasing every year in many of these countries by at least 1%, with India at the highest with 6%.

While widespread use of technologies and social media have kept people informed and connected during the pandemic, the spread of misinformation was amplified through digital platforms leading to health hazards and the undermining of global efforts.

That said, it is interesting to note that awareness of the issues related to fake news is high among the younger generations—but this awareness does not necessarily translate into action.

An MIT study shows that fake news spreads more rapidly on social media than real news does. According to this study false news stories are 70% more likely to be shared than true stories are. It also takes true stories about six times as long to reach 1,500 people as it does for false stories to reach the same number of people.

<https://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>

When used appropriately, social media can help to strengthen the bridging and bonding between people and communities. COL's study on the use of social media among farming communities found that social media used for connection, communication and collaboration can actually lead to stronger social relationships and social capital, both in online communities and in-person contexts.

The focus of media and information literacy in a post-pandemic world must be to help differentiate between the true and false, develop strategies for combating fake news and disseminating truth.

COL's approach has been to enable the community to 'domesticate' the technology and to use it for various literacies. While many functional literacy programmes usually operate at one level, the COL approach is to mobilise literacy strategies at three levels so that the learner acquires functional, interactive and critical skills. The acquisition of these skills can lead to empowerment.

During the pandemic COL worked in the area of health literacy using community radio.

Community radio was used to convey health messages to remote communities in Northeast India, where the focus was on converting the listener to an active learner.

But let me address the issue of Media and Information Literacy for Empowerment, using the example of one of COL's non-formal learning programmes, Lifelong Learning for Farmers (L3F), which uses technology to build the capacity of farmers, and links this capacity building process with social and financial capital. This project is being implemented in 11 countries, mostly in Asia and Africa, and has lifted thousands of people out of poverty.

L3F focuses on strengthening self-directed learning among the farmers using ICTs. It blends non-formal and informal learning. At the vertical level, the expert knowledge system interacts with the farming community. At the horizontal level, farmer to farmer learning is encouraged. It is at this horizontal level of farmer-to-farmer learning that social media plays a crucial role.

Studies have shown that such learning helped farmers to get better returns in agriculture and improve the quality of life. A study by the National Institute of Bank Management in India has shown that for every 1 Rs invested, the farming community got a return of Rs 16. Another study in Kenya showed that such self-directed learning leads to empowerment which in turn influences the profitability of small-scale agricultural enterprises run by marginalised women.

What lessons can we draw from this experience? The framework within which the programme has been implemented leads from information to knowledge, then wisdom and empowerment. All over the world, there has been a huge challenge in this progression during the pandemic.

The capacity building programme for marginalised farmers focused on building the skills to evaluate information, convert it into knowledge, transform the knowledge into wisdom and be empowered to make strategic life choices where this had been previously denied to them. This was done by posing nine questions which could guide the farmers to test and validate the information provided rather than accept facts unquestioningly.

How do the farmers process the information into learning using social media? First, the farmers in the network create and share the content based on their experience in social media as well as other sources and then test and verify in their fields over the next season. Other farmers, too, share their experiences to verify and validate based on the nine questions. If there is substantial evidence, they adopt the new practice. Various social media platforms play a crucial role in this process.

As empowerment is an expected outcome of this project, COL has developed tools to measure empowerment. In Uganda and Kenya, it conducted studies comparing L3F households with other control groups such as non-L3F households and villages. Studies revealed an interesting pattern. Empowerment scores were higher for the L3F village than the non-L3F village. What was more interesting was that women in the L3F villages have a higher mean empowerment score than men in the

non-L3F village. What is the lesson here? This was only possible because of the critical thinking practices among the farming communities strengthened through various capacity development programmes under the L3F. Farmers were facilitated to vet the information and knowledge shared through social media before sharing and adoption.

The sages in the past spent years in meditation and reflection to reach a stage of wisdom and empowerment. Today technologies can help us pass through these stages quickly through access to vast resources, global connections and capacity building. But as Tiruvalluvar said more than 1,000 years ago, to discern the truth in everything, by whomsoever spoken, is wisdom. When such wisdom is lacking, social media can be dangerous. On the other hand, it can be a strong development tool leading to empowerment when used with scientific and logical reasoning.

In the post pandemic phase we need to harness the positive and constructive aspects of technologies. The capacities for scientific and logical reasoning can be developed among stakeholders by using the simple framework of the nine questions and through the use of appropriate technologies. Governments and corporations can play a major role. Sharing authentic information on social media platforms can be encouraged through various regulations and motivational programmes. Governments and corporations should also focus on investing in more open-source online technologies for verifying and validating the information. I am sure the convergence of top-down and bottom-up interventions will help make the transition from digital literacy to digital empowerment.

Thank you.