The Interdependence of Socio-economic Factors and Media Literacy: Focus on Critical Media Content Analysis and Evaluation

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Abstract: *Media literacy is of fundamental importance for democracy, as it enables individuals to better navigate the complexity of digital media, critically evaluate media content and assess the trustworthiness of media representations. By promoting media literacy, societies can counter disinformation, misinformation, oversimplifications and manipulative practices in public discourse, thereby safeguarding principles of informed citizens' engagement. Structural position of the individual in the socio-economic environment affects their media literacy. As individuals navigate their behaviour, they often draw upon social norms, roles and expectations as reference points for what is considered appropriate conduct. Thus, while individuals exercise agency in their behaviour, their choices contribute to the maintenance and reinforcement of the social structure. In this article, we examine the relationship between socio-economic factors and media literacy, with a particular focus on how an individual's socio-economic standing influences their ability to critically analyse and evaluate media content. We emphasise that the socio-economic context not only impacts media literacy but also shapes social behaviour in ways that reinforces existing socio-economic boundaries.*

Keywords: *media literacy, critical thinking, social stratification, disinformation, media education*

Introduction

The abilities to use media, to critically analyse and understand digital messages (received and generated), and to develop a meaningful and realistic response to the changeable complex media environment have become indispensable competencies. Societies and individuals are massively faced with the question of how to keep pace with the rapid changes of digital media and how to shape upbringing and educational processes, both in the context of primary and secondary socialisations, and in the context of lifelong learning, which will enable people to form useful media habits, norms, values as well as digital-related professional and life-related competences. A meaningful media education promotes the socially beneficial use of new digital technologies, conveys relevant skills, competences and motivation for active participation in the economic and political processes. It guides people to active, responsible and competent use of the digital media and teaches them how to avoid the pitfalls and dangers that lurk in the digital environment (Rek 2021). By enhancing critical thinking, media education plays a pivotal role in equipping individuals with the tools necessary to counter the oversimplification, misinformation and emotional manipulation associated with populist discourse (Rek 2024). Both public discourse and scientific reflection highlight a series of possible negative or undesirable effects of the uncritical and uniformed use of digital media. Media literate persons are commonly defined as credibly informed, reflexive, critical persons, who are also able to participate in a digital environment actively and responsibly. They are better able to protect themselves and their families from harmful, inappropriate, inaccurate or offensive media content and can consciously choose and understand the characteristics of digital content and services. It is easier for them to actively take their own meaningful and responsible decisions regarding their digital use (as opposed to passive, uncritical, mass media influenced and guided decisions), also considering the context of the wider social, political and economic environment. They take full advantage of the opportunities offered by online digital media, but also understand the value and benefits of traditional media, such as books, and are also able to meaningfully incorporate traditional media in their lifestyles and reflections. Media literate persons are also able to adapt to the rapid pace of technological and media change (Golob et al 2024).

Media literacy plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's ability to critically analyse, comprehend and respond to media messages. It is significantly connected to the health and functionality of a democracy as it affects people's ability to access and critically assess credibility of information. It equips citizens with the tools to navigate the complexities of the media landscape, fostering an informed and critical citizen's engagement essential for the functioning of democratic societies (Ramiro Troitiño & Mazur 2024; Valič et al. 2023; Tomšič 2022). Media literacy can be acquired through the processes of

media education. In this article, media education refers to both formal and informal methods of teaching and raising awareness about media and its use. Media literacy can be an outcome of these processes – the knowledge, skills, behaviours and beliefs learners acquire (Buckingham 2013; Rek 2019). Many surveys on media education and literacy carried out over the last decade have highlighted the close link between socio-economic circumstances and people's media habits (see, for example, Bennett et al. 2020; Wartella et al. 2013; Helsper 2020, 2021; Rek & Kovačič 2018; Simoes & Santos 2020). Also, our previous research (Rek & Kovačič 2019; Rek 2019; Golob et al. 2023) and thorough study of the relevant literature guided us to the understanding that socio-economic stratification plays a significant role in the way media education as a pathway to media literacy is carried out.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory on social-economic distinctions provide a powerful framework for understanding how social inequalities are created and maintained. He introduces the concept of boundaries as invisible lines that separate different social groups based on factors like wealth, education and cultural tastes. These boundaries help define who belongs to what particular social class and who does not. Through the process of social reproduction, these boundaries can be maintained across generations (Bourdieu 2023). Social institutions such as education and family play a crucial role in passing down cultural capital – knowledge, skills and tastes – ensuring that social hierarchies are preserved (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). Bourdieu also highlights the importance of distinctions where people's preferences for certain cultural products, which may also be a specific form of media content, serve as markers of their social status. These distinctions are not just expressions of personal behaviour but are used to reinforce class boundaries by signalling one's social position. Furthermore, the interrelation between socio-economic factors and cultural practices perpetuates inequality, as individuals' behaviours and choices are shaped by their structural position in society (Bourdieu 2023). Bourdieu's theories offer a lens to understand how media habits not only reflect but also reinforce social class divisions (Wacquant 2018). Media consumption is shaped by cultural capital, habitus and social reproduction, leading to distinctions that perpetuate socio--economic inequalities. This makes media habits a crucial part of how individuals maintain and signal their social positions in society (Ignatov & Robinson 2017; Ragnedda 2018; Calderon Gomez 2021).

In this article, we use Bourdieu's theoretical framework to examine how social-economic factors affect critical analysis and evaluation of media content as a significant element of media literacy. Due to the importance of the role that the ability to critically analyse and evaluate media content plays in the issue of populism and the future of democratic discourse, we will devote crucial attention to this component of media literacy in this article. First, relying on Bourdieu's theoretical framework, we will apply a structural perspective and as-

sume that people living in structurally similar socio-economic circumstances develop similar media related behaviour, beliefs and norms. These starting points are based on the literature review on the topic presented in the first chapter. Second, we will aim to identify the distinctive processes of (re)production that establish new or maintain existing boundaries of social stratification, which may arise due to varying abilities in the critical analysis and evaluation of media content among individuals, using research results of own quantitative survey.

Socio-economic determinants of media literacy

Constantly changing and evolving technology requires individuals and society to constantly improve and develop new skills. The increase in the number of media outlets and platforms and their diversity also poses a challenge. Media literacy represents an individual's ability to access various media, to understand them and to be able to critically analyse and evaluate both media and media content. Hobbs (2010) explains that the key competences for media literacy are as follows:

- Access: defines an individual's ability to handle devices that allow us to access digital media, effective information seeking, listening and reading comprehension, etc.
- Analysis and evaluation: define an individual's ability to understand symbols, recognise the purpose and attitude of a particular message, judge the credibility and quality of a media contribution, etc.
- Creation: defines an individual's ability to recognise their own need for communication and self-expression, to be skilled in writing and speaking, to be able to collaborate with others, etc.
- Reflection: defines a person's ability to understand how differences in values, habits, experience and lifestyles shape people's media habits, understanding the risks and consequences of using digital media, etc.
- Action: defines an individual's ability to be an active citizen, participate in communities that are in the public interest, respect laws, etc. (Hobbs 2010,18)

Individuals are required to have a critical attitude towards media content and to have the ability to evaluate the information received (accuracy, verifiability, quality), ability to analyse and evaluate and to formulate arguments. Critical assessment of media messages therefore also includes an individual's ability to research, locate and select information that meets his individual needs, and to be able to evaluate the obtained information based on certain parameters, such as truthfulness, honesty, the interests of the creator of media content, etc. When decoding media messages, it is important to ask the following fundamental questions (among others): Who created this message? What techniques were used to

get my attention? Did others understand the message differently than I did? Which lifestyles, values and opinions were included, and which were ignored? Why was this message sent? With a critical perspective, individuals make sense of media message context. With the skill of interpreting media messages, they can recognise the difference between reality and the reality presented by the media. In addition to reading media messages, individuals who are critically media literate will also be able to identify and be aware of the sources of media messages in everyday life.

Given the increasing importance of media education and literacy, the amount of research concerning the digital media has been increasing since the 90s. The early research was often framed by diffusion theory, focusing on peoples' willingness to adopt and have access to ICT. With the development of the digital environment 'the information era has brought about new literacies' (Torres & Mercado 2006: 260), and one of the most important literacies in the 21st century in our digital societies is critical digital media literacy, which includes not only the possibility of having access to the media, but also – even to a significantly greater extent – the capacity to analyse, to evaluate and to create media content (Buckingham 2000; Livingstone 2012; Tilleul et al. 2015). Media education and literacy research today is highly multidisciplinary, drawing on insights from social studies of technology, information science and human-computer interaction, educational practice, media and communication research and audience studies. Recent developments in the media landscape, along with international collaborations in media education and literacy research, further broaden the range of multi- and interdisciplinary/approaches to media literacy, linking together literacies based on computer/ICT/digital skills and the capacities of critical understanding, creative expression, and political and civic participation, etc.

Extensive research findings have pointed to the conclusion that socio--economic positions influence access to – what Selwyn (2004) calls – the 'opportunity structure' of digital technologies. This reaches beyond just access to digital technology, highlighting that there are a range of experiences for those categorised as 'digitally included' (Clayton & MacDonald 2013; Yates & Lockley 2018). Other literature on access to and uses of the internet have made similar arguments. Grant (2007) clearly argues that economic capital alone is not a sufficient explanation of why people do or do not meaningfully engage with technology. Clayton and Macdonald (2013) drawing on Graham (2002) and Selwyn (2003) summarise this position as follows:

> The various forms of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997) individuals bring to technology in terms of their own socio-economic positions and internalized dispositions or habitus, is key in influencing the way in which technology might (or might not) be used as well as perceptions of benefits gained. (Clayton & Macdonald 2013: 948)

Staubhaar et al. (2012) note that social class affects citizens' exposure and willingness to invest in skills and knowledge and shapes their disposition toward and familiarity with technology. Clayton and MacDonald (2013) argue from their data that:

> Accumulation of legitimized forms of cultural capital, including knowledge, skills and customs which are invested in, inherited and embodied differentially by social groups, is crucial in determining the ability to appropriate technology for socially valued purposes... Without legitimate knowledge, connections or reasons to meaningfully engage, individuals may struggle to make what is seen to be appropriate use of technology within a society in which they do not dictate what is useful. (Clayton & MacDonald 2013: 949)

Media education, as the most commonly employed means of enabling media literacy can be understood as a social practice anchored in one's social environment as well as in the wider social-cultural and political contexts (Buckingham 2020; Hobbs 2011). Research contextualising media education processes in sociocultural terms explore new forms of digital exclusion (Buckingham 2013) and considerable inequalities in media literacy that largely reflect other forms of social disadvantage (Helsper 2020). Many studies have confirmed correlation between media education processes and forms of social inequality (see for instance Paus-Hasebrink et al. 2019; Holloway et al. 2013; Hesketh et al. 2013; Duch et al. 2013; Anand & Kroznik 2005; Rek & Kovačič 2018). It has been confirmed (see for instance Rideout & Hamel 2006; Wartella et al. 2013; Bittman et al. 2011) that media habits and competences children develop are related to level of education and socio-economic status of children's parents. Cultural reproduction theories highlight how families' unequal stock and transmission of cultural capital explain socio-economic status inequality in academic achievement (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990).

A literature review on the early roots of the digital divide provided by Passaretta and Gil-Hernández (2022) indicates that previous research has examined the following dimensions in the transmission of cultural capital between parents and children: reading habits (i.e. bedtime stories), educational material resources (i.e. books, educative games, computers), cultural communication (i.e. teaching them to be analytical, to reason and to be argumentative), and extracurricular activities (Jaeger & Breen 2016). Furthermore, parents with high cultural capital tend to follow an educational strategy of 'concerted cultivation' for their children (i.e. structured activities, supervision of homework) (Lareau & Weininger 2003), while working-class parents are more likely to follow a 'natural growth' strategy, which generally involves less supervision and organised time (Bodovski & Farkas 2008). This framework was also applied to examine inequality in ICT access, use and literacy through the lens

of digital capital (Drabowicz 2017; Ignatow & Robinson 2017). Parents with higher socio-economic status, and high cultural and digital capital use ICT more for informational purposes than parents with low socio-economic status (van Deursen & van Dijk 2014) and can maximise their children's learning opportunities arising from the use of technology.

Families with high socio-economic status tend to monitor their children's intake and the type of media devices they use by setting time rules and encouraging educational activities (i.e. using computers for doing homework and learning, retrieving information, reading news, emailing) (Nikken & Opree 2018; Notten & Becker 2017; OECD 2015; Chaudron 2015; Livingstone et al. 2015). Disadvantaged parents tend to be less involved in their children's media education, for multiple economic and social reasons. Even among parents of young children, lower income/lower educated parents are likely to experience a generational digital divide and feel less confident in their ability to guide children's use of touchscreens and prevent their exposure to risks. Consequently, they are reluctant to engage in parental mediation and scaffolding of their children's media literacy practices. Children are left to experiment on their own, learning by trial and error, or to seek out support from their older siblings (Mascheroni et al. 2018).

School also plays a significant role in media education. Research done by Ciboci and Labaš (2019) suggests that parents see schools as an important actor in transferring knowledge and providing information to parents on how to protect children in digital media; on the other hand, they think that teachers are, alongside parents, responsible for children's media education. However, schools differ significantly in their capacity to deliver media education – providing training for children, teachers and parents. Regarding ICT use, Passaretta and Gil-Hernández (2022) pointed out that although ICT is not a specific subject in many education systems, school learning environments may also shape socio-economic inequality in digital literacy. Schools' differences in average student ability and SES composition (Robinson et. al. 2018), as well as ICT infrastructures and staff training (Gerick 2018; Pinie & Redecker 2017) might account for a substantial share of socio-economic gaps in ICT literacy. Those in economically disadvantaged areas might have limited access to high-speed internet or updated technology, which impacts their exposure to diverse media and educational resources. Affluent communities may also have better access to libraries, educational programmes and community centres that support media literacy initiatives. These resources might be limited or less accessible in economically disadvantaged areas.

We can conclude that media literacy, but more specifically, the ability to critically approach media content can be influenced by various socio-economic factors. Income and economic status affect access to resources such as internet connectivity, digital devices or subscriptions to online information and news

resources. Low-income families may have limited access to these resources, which impacts their ability to develop media literacy skill. Also, higher levels of education often correlate with increased media literacy (Kovačič & Rek 2018). Access to quality education equips individuals with critical thinking skills, which are essential in understanding and evaluating media content as well as the media industry. Addressing these socio-economic determinants involves implementing policies that aim to bridge the digital divide, provide equal access to education and technology, promote media literacy programmes in underserved communities and support initiatives that empower individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to critically engage with media content.

Critical analysis and evaluation of media content reinforces social and economic capital

Based on the analysis of the literature, we can conclude that the structural position of the individual in the socio-economic environment is a factor of media literacy and their ability to critically engage with media content, which is an important element of media literacy. Individuals often reinforce the social structure when shaping their behaviour. They look to societal norms, roles and expectations as reference points for appropriate conduct. Consequently, an individual's behaviour contributes to the maintenance and reinforcement of social structure and plays a significant role in reinforcing one's position within the social structure (Giddens 1984).

In order to figure out whether the ability to critically analyse media content affects the economic and social position of an individual, we conducted a short online survey in Slovenia in June 2023 on a sample of 224 individuals. Social media platforms were used to target diverse respondents in a survey based on their age and education level. Education level is often used as a key predictor of socio-economic differences in many studies and analyses. While our sample size is substantial enough to meaningfully conduct a simple linear regression analysis, we acknowledge that this sample is small, and it is not representative of the broader population. Further research is needed that includes a more representative sample.

Most respondents belong to the 41–50 age group (28%), followed by respondents in the 31–40 age group (26%), 18–30 age group (22%), 51–60 age group (17%), with the fewest respondents in the 61 and older age group (7%). Most respondents have completed high school (32%), followed by those who have completed a bachelor's degree (27%), master's or doctorate (23%), completed vocational college (10%), and the fewest respondents have only completed primary schools or less (8%).

Salary is often considered a significant indicator of economic capital. Economic capital refers to the financial resources, wealth or assets an individual

possesses or has access to (Bourdieu 1997). A salary, as a regular payment received in exchange for work or services provided, is a direct representation of an individual's economic earnings and financial standing. In our survey the respondents had to determine on a 1–5 scale what their average monthly salary is, based on the Slovenian average salary (which in April 2023 was 1417.69 €/ net (SURS, 2023)), with the value 1 representing well below average and the value 5 well above average. Of the respondents, 43% chose the middle value, which means that they consider their monthly salary to be average based on the Slovenian average in April 2023. Of the respondents, 23% chose the value 4, which represents an above-average salary and 20% chose the value 2, which represents a below-average salary. Based on the results, it can also be seen that only 1% of the respondents rated their average salary as well above average, compared to the Slovenian average, and 13% chose option 1, meaning well below average.

The size of an individual's network of acquaintances can be considered an indicator of social capital. Social capital refers to the resources, benefits and advantages that individuals gain from their social networks, relationships and interactions (Bourdieu 1997). Respondents were asked to determine the size of their network of acquaintances on a 1–5 scale, with 1 representing a very small network of acquaintances and 5 representing a very large network of acquaintances. Of the respondents, 39% estimated that their network of acquaintances is neither large nor small. Another 28% rated their network of acquaintances as large, with 12% as very large; and 7% rated their network of acquaintances as very small, while 14% estimated that they have a small network of acquaintances.

Respondents were also asked to express their agreement with the statement: I analyse and evaluate media content critically on a 1–5 scale, where 1 means 'I don't agree at all' and 5 means 'I completely agree'. Of the respondents, 30% chose the answers *neither agree nor disagree* (3). Another 5% of respondents did not agree with this statement at all (1) and 7% disagreed (2). And 30% chose option 4 – agree with the statement and 28% fully agreed with the statement.

We used regression analysis to understand the relationship between the respondent's assessment of their income level, the size of network of acquaintances and respondents' assessment of their critical engagement with media content. We aimed to examine how changes in critical media content analysis and evaluation are associated with changes in salary or the size of an individual's network. In linear regression analysis, the calculated p-value associated with salary and critical engagement with media content was p=0,041<0,05 which suggests that critical engagement with media content has a statistically significant effect on salary. However, as the R square value explains only 2% of the variance of the dependent variable ($R^3 = 0,02$), we can see that an individual's ability to critically engage with media content accounts for a very small proportion of the variability observed in salary. The beta coefficients (b=0,12)

suggest a positive, though modest or relatively weak, effect of critical engagement with media content on salary. The effect size is relatively small.

The calculated p-values associated with the size of an individual's network of acquaintances and critical engagement with media content was p=0,028<0,05, which suggests that critical engagement with media content has a statistically significant effect on an individual's network of acquaintances. As the R square value again explains only 2% of the variance of the dependent variable ($R^3 = 0,02$), we can see that an individual's ability to critically engage with media content accounts for a very small proportion of the size of an individual's network of acquaintances. The beta coefficients (b=0,14) suggest a positive, though modest or relatively weak, effect of critical engagement with media content on the size of an individual's network of acquaintances. The effect size is relatively small.

Conclusion and discussion

Bourdieu (1984) discusses how social structures shape individual practices through the concept of habitus, which refers to the dispositions ingrained in individuals by their socio-economic conditions. He also highlights the ways individuals navigate and negotiate their social environments while also reinforcing or altering existing structures. The structure and agency theoretical framework posit that individuals are influenced by the social context, but they can also challenge, adapt to or change this structure through their actions. Thus, the dynamic interplay between structure and agency highlights how people both shape and are shaped by the socio-economic circumstances in which they live. Our analysis suggests that individuals' dispositions and practices, shaped by their socio-economic conditions, influence how they engage with media. Individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds may develop distinct media literacy skills based on their exposure to various media forms and their ability to access and critically analyse media content. From our literature review we can conclude that higher levels of education, which is often used as a key predictor of socio-economic differences, commonly correlate with increased media literacy. Access to quality education equips individuals with critical thinking skills, which are essential in understanding and evaluating media content. Income and economic status also affect access to resources such as internet connectivity, digital devices and subscriptions to credible news sources. People with lower income might have limited access to such resources, impacting their ability to develop media literacy skills. Digital divide is also highly influenced by socio-economic circumstances of the community and the overall development of the region or society. Affluent communities may have better access not only to digital infrastructure, but also to libraries, educational programmes and community centres that support media literacy initiatives. These resources can be limited or less accessible in poor areas.

The interplay of structure and agency indicates that individuals not only absorb media messages but also navigate their media environments (Rek 2019). This means that people can actively seek out information, challenge media narratives and adapt their media consumption habits based on their understanding and experience, as they possess the agency to challenge these structures through their media practices (Bourdieu 1984; Giddens 1984). Determining whether the ability to critically analyse media content affects an individual's economic and social position is highly relevant. If critical media analysis and evaluation is linked to improved economic and social outcomes, it underscores the importance of media literacy as a tool for empowerment. It increases the likelihood that individuals will use their media literacy skills to navigate their socio-economic circumstances effectively, make informed decisions and advocate for their rights. Critical media analysis also contributes to informed citizenship, enabling individuals to engage in civic activities, challenge misinformation and participate in public discourse. If this skill is correlated with better economic and social positions, it reinforces the argument that media literacy is essential for democratic participation and social cohesion.

The results of our research show that critical media content analysis and evaluation only modestly reinforces socio-economic circumstances of an individual, like their salary or the size of their network of acquaintances. Critical engagement with media content has a statistically significant effect on individuals' economic and social capital, but the effect size is relatively small. As the survey we conducted was very simple and conducted on a small sample, its major contribution can be seen in proving the point that there is a statistically significant effect of critical engagement with media content on certain determinants of economic and social capital. However, a more in-depth and large-scale research project, including a broader variety of indicators of economic and social capital, may provide a better understanding of the matter.

We were also surprised to see that the critical analysis and evaluation of media content plays only a minor role in the size of acquaintance networks. We assumed that it could play a more significant role in how people interact, communicate and build their relationships (especially online), both personally and professionally. Ability to critically assess digital media messages enables them to navigate the vast amount of information available online, leading to better informed, credible and impactful network effects. Further research on social capital combined with critical media analysis and evaluation could give us a better understanding of how individuals assess the quality and credibility of information shared within a network and how a critical understanding of the nuances and biases within media content helps individuals develop their online networking strategies and circumstances.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that capital is embodied in various forms, and its accumulation takes time. The capital that an individual possesses determines

the individual's position in society (Bourdieu 1986). There are many reasons for social inequality, and it appears that media literacy is not among the strongest determinants of a socio-economical divide. Nevertheless, we do see numerous interconnections between media literacy and social inequality. Just as we need time to master certain skills, or to gain the knowledge or wisdom of virtuous citizens, we also need time to accumulate capital, according to Bourdieu. By understanding and practicing critical analysis and evaluation of media messages there is less chance that someone would take advantage of us, and a greater chance that we can take advantage of the given information for new opportunities that the media world offers us, and with which we can strengthen our economic and social capital.

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