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Political Literacy in the Digital Democracy Era: An Integrative Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Political literacy can no longer be understood solely as knowledge of political institutions, public affairs, and civic procedures. In digital democracy, citizens encounter political information through platforms, networked communication, algorithmic curation, data-driven systems, and artificial intelligence (AI)-mediated content. These conditions may expand participation but also intensify misinformation, manipulation, polarization, and unequal capacities to assess public information. This review article develops an integrative conceptual framework of political literacy for the digital democracy era. A narrative literature review and thematic synthesis were used to connect scholarship from political and citizenship education, media and information literacy, communication studies, and studies of digital platforms and emerging technologies. The synthesis identifies three mutually reinforcing dimensions: political literacy, media and information literacy, and complementary literacies. Political literacy provides democratic knowledge, judgment, values, and participatory orientation. Media and information literacy supports the critical access, analysis, verification, evaluation, creation, and communication of information. Complementary literacies, including digital, data, algorithm, AI, legal, historical, scientific, cultural, and global literacy, enable citizens to interpret the technological systems and contextual conditions through which political issues acquire meaning. The article argues that these dimensions should not be taught or studied as isolated competencies. Unlike established frameworks that primarily organize media, information, or digital competencies, the proposed framework explicitly anchors these capacities in a civic-democratic purpose by integrating political understanding, critical information engagement, and technological and contextual interpretation. Their integration supports informed judgment, critical engagement, civic resilience, and meaningful democratic participation. The framework contributes an interdisciplinary foundation for future research, citizenship education, media education, and policies intended to strengthen democratic capacity in digitally mediated societies.

Keywords: Political Literacy, Digital Democracy, Media and Information Literacy, Civic Education, Civic Resilience

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1. Introduction

Digital technologies have transformed how citizens access information, discuss public issues, form political judgments, and participate in democratic life. Political communication now occurs through social media, online news services, messaging applications, search engines, digital platforms, and algorithmically curated information systems. Citizens are not only recipients of political messages; they also create, share, comment on, and amplify political content within networked publics. These developments can widen access to information and participation, but they also create conditions in which misinformation, disinformation, manipulation, polarization, and information overload may undermine democratic deliberation [1, 2].

Political literacy has long been regarded as a central condition of democratic

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citizenship. It generally refers to the knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that enable individuals to understand political systems, interpret public issues, make reasoned judgments, and participate in public life [3, 4]. However, conventional political knowledge alone is insufficient when citizens encounter political claims in fragmented, emotionally charged, and technologically mediated information environments. Citizens must also assess the credibility of sources, distinguish evidence from opinion, recognize framing and bias, verify claims, and understand how digital systems influence information visibility and public attention.

These requirements underline the importance of media and information literacy (MIL). UNESCO defines MIL as a set of competencies that enables individuals to access, understand, evaluate, use, create, and share information and media content critically and ethically [5]. Related scholarship has further examined digital literacy in relation to online political behavior [7], alongside growing work on news literacy [18], data literacy [8], algorithm literacy [6], and AI literacy [27–29]. Such competencies help citizens examine not only the content of political communication but also the infrastructures, platforms, and automated systems through which information is selected, circulated, and prioritized.

Nevertheless, existing scholarship often treats political literacy, MIL, and related literacies as separate domains. Political literacy research has commonly emphasized civic knowledge, democratic values, and participation, whereas MIL research has focused on information evaluation, media analysis, and responsible communication. Studies of digital, data, algorithm, and AI literacy have concentrated on technological systems and computational environments. This conceptual separation limits understanding of the combined capacities citizens need to engage with political life in digital societies. This gap is not merely conceptual but is reflected in current global policy practice, where MIL is frequently implemented as a technical skill set disconnected from civic and democratic dimensions [9].

This article addresses this gap by proposing an integrative conceptual framework of political literacy for the digital democracy era. The framework synthesizes insights from political science, citizenship education, media and communication studies, information literacy, and research on digital platforms and emerging technologies. It conceptualizes political literacy as a multidimensional democratic capacity composed of three connected dimensions: political literacy, media and information literacy, and complementary literacies. The article aims to clarify their respective roles, explain their relationship, and identify implications for education, policy, and future research.

2. Review Approach

This study employed a narrative literature review combined with thematic synthesis. This approach is appropriate because the objective was not to provide an exhaustive statistical review of a single empirical field, but to integrate concepts and arguments across multiple disciplines. The review focused primarily on literature published between 2008 and 2025, with particular attention to recent empirical and conceptual studies published from 2020 onward, while earlier seminal works were retained where necessary to establish the conceptual foundations of political literacy and citizenship education.

Relevant sources were identified through Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and publications from major international organizations. Search terms included “political literacy,” “civic literacy,” “media and information literacy,” “digital literacy,” “news literacy,” “data literacy,” “algorithm literacy,” “AI literacy,” “digital citizenship,” and “digital democracy.” Priority

was given to peer-reviewed articles, influential conceptual works, and institutional reports relevant to democratic participation in digitally mediated environments. The literature was selected for detailed discussion based on its conceptual relevance, thematic coverage across the three literacy domains, and contribution to interdisciplinary framework development. The review incorporates recent empirical and conceptual studies to strengthen the evidence supporting the proposed framework.

The synthesis proceeded in four stages. First, the literature was examined to identify recurring definitions and debates concerning political literacy and related literacy domains. Second, concepts were grouped according to their principal function: democratic and civic understanding; critical engagement with media and information; and technological or contextual interpretation. Third, common themes and relationships across these domains were compared. Finally, the themes were synthesized into a three-dimensional framework. As a narrative review, this article does not claim exhaustive coverage of all literacy research; rather, it offers a conceptually coherent framework for understanding democratic competence under conditions of digital mediation.

3. Political Literacy in Digital Democracy

Political literacy concerns the capacity to understand political institutions, rights, responsibilities, public issues, and processes of collective decision-making. It also includes practical skills such as discussion, deliberation, critical judgment, decision-making, and participation, as well as democratic dispositions including tolerance, fairness, accountability, responsibility, and respect for pluralism [3, 4, 10].

Crick and Porter [3] described political literacy as learning about politics and learning how to become effective in public life through knowledge, skills, and values. This perspective remains important because democratic citizenship requires more than awareness of political facts. Citizens need to relate political knowledge to everyday social issues, assess competing arguments, communicate with others, and participate responsibly in democratic processes. Recent empirical research reinforces the continuing relevance of political literacy within citizenship education. Milliken and Smith's [11] study of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland illustrates how citizenship education can provide a context for developing political understanding and engaging young people with contemporary political issues. Similarly, Şan, Öztürk, and Katılmış [12] demonstrate through an action-research intervention with prospective social studies teachers that political literacy can be deliberately developed through educational practice. These studies underscore that political literacy involves not only political knowledge but also the capacities and dispositions needed to interpret public issues and engage with civic life. More recent theoretical work extends this tradition by framing political literacy as the capacity to address the fundamental civic question of what citizens should do when confronting problems of collective action, unproductive discourse, and social exclusion [13]. Educational practices such as civic discussion, citizenship-oriented learning, and simulated democratic activities can support these capacities [14, 15].

In digital democracy, however, political understanding is increasingly formed through mediated communication. Citizens may encounter political content through personalized feeds, short videos, memes, online debates, influencer communication, and AI-generated material. Political messages are often presented without adequate context, and their visibility may be shaped by engagement-based platform systems rather than by public importance or evidential quality. Therefore, political literacy remains the democratic foundation of citizenship, but it must be

strengthened by additional capacities for evaluating information and interpreting digital systems. This need is supported by empirical research on digital civic literacy. In a study of 2,216 upper-secondary students in Sweden, Nygren and Guath [16] found substantial differences in students' abilities to evaluate digital news through sourcing, evidence evaluation, and corroboration. Their findings point to a "digital civic literacy divide," highlighting the importance of capacities that connect civic understanding with the critical evaluation of online information.

Political literacy provides answers to questions such as: What public issue is being discussed? Which institutions, rights, responsibilities, or policy alternatives are involved? Who has authority and accountability? What are the democratic consequences of a political decision? These questions establish the civic purpose of democratic judgment. Yet citizens also need to determine whether the information on which they base such judgments is credible and how digital environments influence their exposure to that information.

4. Media and Information Literacy and Complementary Literacies

4.1 Media and Information Literacy

MIL is essential because democratic participation increasingly depends on citizens' ability to navigate complex media and information environments. It includes the ability to access information, assess sources, analyze media representations, verify claims, recognize bias and framing, use information ethically, and communicate responsibly [5]. In political contexts, MIL helps individuals assess whether a claim is supported by evidence, identify misleading or manipulative content, compare sources, and reflect on how messages may influence public opinion.

MIL supports political literacy by strengthening the informational basis of democratic judgment. Citizens may understand an electoral system or public policy in principle, but remain vulnerable to manipulation if they cannot distinguish reliable reporting from fabricated content or evaluate the interests behind political messages. Research on misinformation and political polarization has consequently highlighted media literacy as an important resource for democratic resilience [18, 19]. Recent experimental evidence further supports the potential of media literacy interventions. In randomized interventions conducted in the United States and India, Guess and colleagues [20] found that brief digital media literacy training improved participants' ability to distinguish between mainstream and false news headlines. The effects were evident across both national contexts, although their magnitude and persistence varied, suggesting that media literacy can strengthen information discernment while remaining sensitive to contextual conditions.

However, empirical evidence also indicates that media literacy interventions are not uniformly effective across political contexts. In a field experiment involving 1,224 participants during the 2019 Indian general election, Badrinathan [21] found that a media literacy intervention did not, on average, significantly improve participants' ability to identify misinformation. Moreover, the effects varied according to political predispositions, highlighting the role of motivated reasoning in shaping responses to political information. These findings suggest that information-evaluation skills alone may not be sufficient and should be understood in relation to citizens' broader political judgments and contextual understanding. Debunking and prebunking approaches—including fact-checking, source-verification training, and inoculation-based interventions—have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing susceptibility to political misinformation, although such

interventions must be carefully designed to avoid diminishing trust in credible information sources alongside false content [22]. Inoculation-based approaches typically operate through two components: a forewarning that individuals may encounter manipulative content, followed by exposure to a weakened, preemptive example of common misinformation techniques—such as impersonation of false experts, fear-based appeals, or conspiratorial framing—thereby building cognitive resistance before genuine exposure occurs, in a manner analogous to biological immunization [23].

MIL is not limited to the role of citizens as information consumers. In digital environments, citizens are also content creators and distributors. Sharing, reposting, commenting, editing, or generating content can affect public discourse. MIL therefore includes ethical communication, awareness of potential harm, respect for evidence, and responsibility for the consequences of one's communicative actions. These competencies are particularly important when political communication can travel rapidly across networks and reach audiences beyond its original context.

Recent synthesis further indicates that the effectiveness of MIL cannot be understood independently of the wider contexts in which communication occurs. Drawing on 101 studies, books, reports, and guides, Mansoor's [24] grounded meta-synthesis identifies MIL as an important resource for strengthening resistance to disinformation and supporting more balanced communication within society. At the same time, the study emphasizes that intervening conditions—including political, cultural, and legal structures—should not be disregarded. This broader perspective suggests that critical engagement with information requires not only media-related competencies but also capacities to interpret the institutional, technological, and contextual environments in which political information is produced and circulated.

4.2 Complementary Literacies

Complementary literacies refer to context-dependent competencies that extend political understanding beyond civic knowledge and information evaluation. They are not a fixed or exhaustive list of skills. Rather, they are activated according to the nature of a public issue and the systems through which that issue is communicated. Their primary function is to help citizens interpret the technological, institutional, social, and knowledge-based contexts of political life.

In the digital democracy era, technological-system literacies are particularly important. Digital literacy enables individuals to use digital tools effectively, safely, and responsibly, encompassing not only technical proficiency but also the capacity to discern credible information from fabricated content circulating online [25]. Data literacy supports the interpretation of statistics, indicators, graphs, and evidence-based claims. Algorithm literacy helps citizens recognize that recommendations, rankings, and search results are shaped by automated systems rather than neutral processes [6]. Empirical research illustrates why such literacy matters in everyday news consumption. Drawing on in-depth interviews, walk-throughs, and think-aloud protocols with 22 young people aged 16–26, Swart [26] found that understandings of algorithmic news curation were often context-specific and developed through users' everyday experiences with personalized media. Importantly, intuitive awareness of personalization did not necessarily translate into an ability to articulate how algorithms operate or to intervene in algorithmic decisions. These findings suggest that algorithmic literacy involves more than recognizing the existence of algorithms; it also requires critical awareness of how algorithmic selection shapes information exposure and users' capacity to respond to such processes.

AI literacy extends this capacity by encouraging critical reflection on machine-generated content, automated decision-making, synthetic media, and the social implications of AI systems [27]. Recent research further supports a multidimensional understanding of AI literacy. Chiu et al. [28] conceptualize AI literacy and competency through five interrelated components—technology, impact, ethics, collaboration, and self-reflection—highlighting that meaningful engagement with AI extends beyond technical knowledge to include ethical and reflective capacities. Empirical evidence also indicates that AI literacy varies across social and educational contexts. In a transnational survey of 1,800 university students from India, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, Mansoor et al. [29] found significant differences in AI literacy according to nationality, academic specialization, and academic degree. Taken together, these studies suggest that AI literacy should be understood not merely as technical proficiency but as a multidimensional and context-sensitive capacity for critically engaging with AI systems and their implications.

Contextual-domain literacies are also important. Legal literacy helps citizens interpret rights, laws, and institutional rules. Historical literacy places contemporary debates within longer-term social and political developments. Scientific literacy assists citizens in evaluating evidence in debates concerning public health, environmental policy, or technological risk. Cultural and global literacy support understanding of diversity, identity, inequality, transnational interdependence, and the different experiences that shape public life. These literacies are especially relevant because contemporary political issues—such as climate change, migration, public health, platform regulation, economic inequality, and freedom of expression—rarely belong to a single domain.

Complementary literacies should therefore be understood as enabling literacies rather than as separate additions to an unlimited checklist. For example, data and scientific literacy may be especially important in public-health or climate-policy debates, whereas legal and historical literacy may be more central to constitutional reform, human rights, or justice-related issues. Their relevance depends on the context of the political question being considered.

5. An Integrative Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework conceptualizes political literacy in the digital democracy era as an adaptive democratic capacity constituted by three interrelated dimensions. Political literacy provides democratic orientation; MIL provides critical information and communication capacities; and complementary literacies provide technological and contextual interpretation. Their integration is necessary because each dimension addresses a different but connected aspect of democratic citizenship.

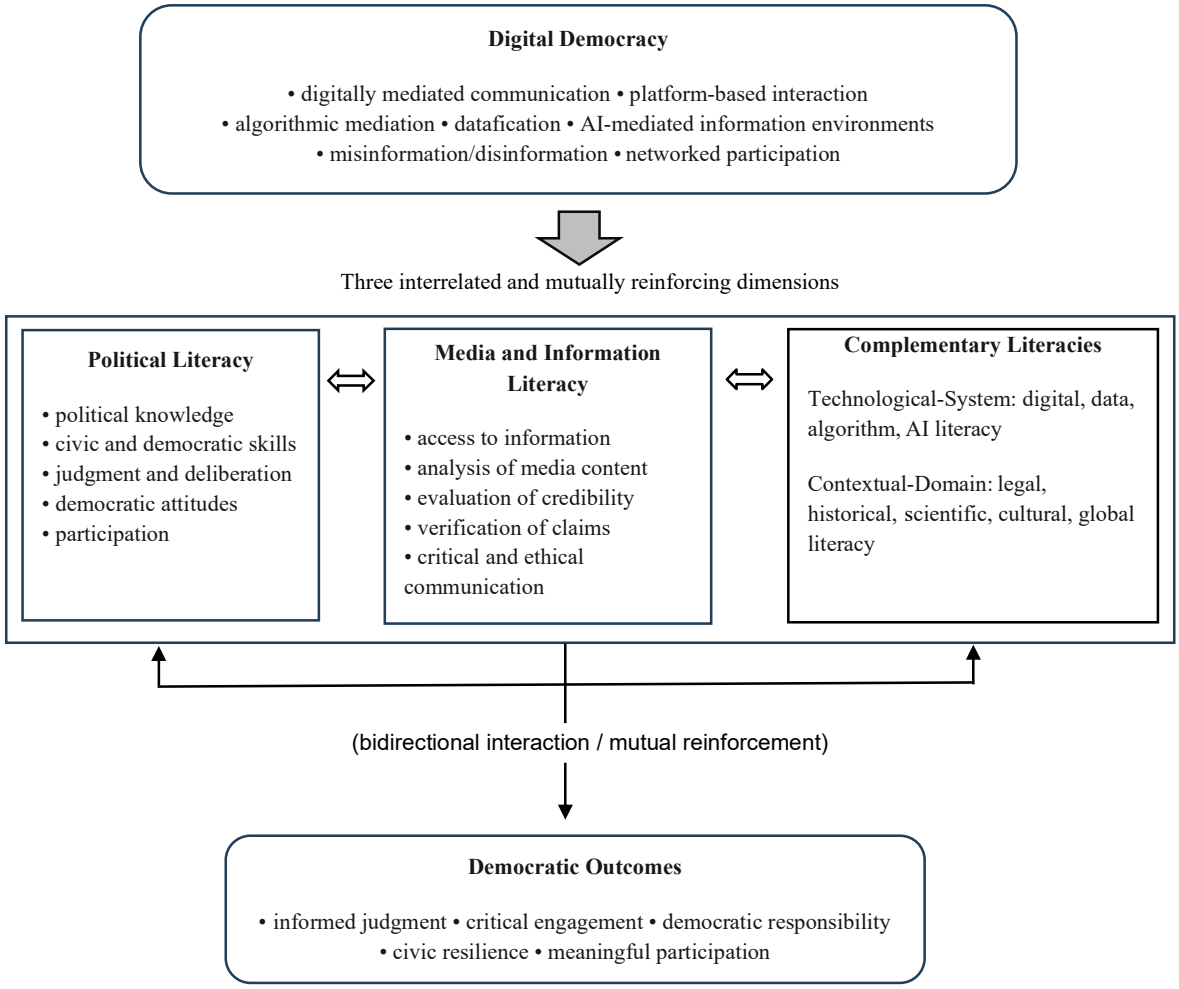


Figure 1. Integrative conceptual framework of political literacy in the digital democracy era.

Source: Developed by the author based on the thematic synthesis.

The figure situates political literacy within the broader context of digital democracy and conceptualizes political literacy, media and information literacy, and complementary literacies as three interrelated and mutually reinforcing dimensions—connected through bidirectional interaction and mutual reinforcement—that jointly support democratic outcomes. Complementary literacies are further organized into two functional clusters: technological-system literacies (digital, data, algorithm, and AI literacy) and contextual-domain literacies (legal, historical, scientific, cultural, and global literacy), reflecting their distinct but complementary roles in interpreting digitally mediated political life.

The relationship among these dimensions is dynamic rather than hierarchical. Political literacy without MIL may leave citizens vulnerable to misinformation, propaganda, and superficial engagement. MIL without political literacy may improve information processing but may not provide a clear democratic purpose or civic commitment. Complementary literacies without political and informational foundations may remain disconnected from public judgment and participation. When combined, however, the three dimensions support citizens in understanding political systems, evaluating mediated claims, recognizing the influence of

technological infrastructures, and interpreting public issues in context.

The framework thus positions political literacy as the democratic anchor concept. MIL is the critical interpretive dimension that enables citizens to assess the quality and credibility of political information. Complementary literacies extend this process by enabling citizens to understand how data, algorithms, AI, law, history, science, culture, and global conditions shape the meaning and consequences of public issues. Together, these dimensions support informed judgment, critical engagement, democratic responsibility, civic resilience, and meaningful participation.

This framework is explicitly interdisciplinary. It combines concepts from political and citizenship education, media and communication studies, information literacy, digital and data studies, and research on algorithms and AI. The central argument is that contemporary democratic competence cannot be adequately understood through any single discipline. Political problems are simultaneously institutional, informational, technological, historical, cultural, and ethical. Accordingly, political literacy must prepare citizens to interpret these overlapping conditions. Existing frameworks provide important but differently focused foundations for understanding contemporary literacy. UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy curriculum explicitly connects media and information competencies with citizenship, democratic participation, and fundamental rights [30], while the European DigComp framework organizes digital competence across areas that include information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, content creation, safety, problem solving, and engagement in citizenship through digital technologies [31]. Building on these foundations, the proposed framework makes political literacy the democratic anchor and systematically integrates it with MIL and complementary technological and contextual literacies. Its distinctive contribution therefore lies not in introducing these competencies individually, but in specifying how their interaction supports political judgment, civic resilience, and meaningful democratic participation in digitally mediated societies.

This distinction also has practical relevance. A recent UNESCO global analysis of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) policies and curricula across 194 Member States found that 171 countries referred to MIL or related competencies within national policy frameworks, while only 17 had developed substantive standalone MIL policies. The same analysis found that 84 of 194 countries (43%) had integrated elements of MIL, as conceptualized by UNESCO, into formal national education curricula [9]. These findings suggest that although MIL has gained substantial policy recognition, its systematic integration into education remains uneven, reinforcing the need for frameworks that connect information-related competencies with broader civic and democratic capacities.

5.1 Illustrative Application: A Case Vignette

To illustrate how the three dimensions operate together in practice, consider the following hypothetical but representative scenario grounded in contemporary digital political communication.

Box 1. Case Vignette: Encountering a Political Deepfake

Two days before a national election, a video circulates rapidly on social media showing a prominent candidate appearing to admit to a corruption scandal. The video accumulates millions of views within hours, amplified by platform recommendation algorithms that prioritize emotionally engaging content. A citizen encountering this video in her social media feed must navigate the situation using all three dimensions of the proposed framework:

- **Political literacy** activates first: the citizen recognizes the video's political significance—understanding how such content could influence electoral outcomes, and recalling her civic responsibility to avoid amplifying unverified claims before voting.
- **Media and information literacy** becomes essential as she evaluates the source of the video, checks whether credible news outlets have reported the same claim, and looks for signs of manipulation (inconsistent lip-syncing, unnatural lighting, or lack of corroborating coverage).
- **Complementary literacies** are required to complete the judgment: basic **AI literacy** helps her understand that deepfake technology can convincingly fabricate video evidence; **algorithm literacy** helps her recognize why the video appeared prominently in her feed (engagement-driven amplification rather than verified newsworthiness); and **legal literacy** informs her awareness that spreading unverified defamatory content may carry legal consequences.

Only through the interaction of all three dimensions—political judgment about stakes, media literacy skills for verification, and technical/legal literacy for understanding the underlying systems—can the citizen arrive at an informed, responsible decision: withholding judgment, reporting the content, and seeking verification from fact-checking organizations before forming or sharing a political opinion. This example demonstrates that the three dimensions are not independently sufficient; each compensates for the limitations of the others, consistent with the bidirectional interaction depicted in Figure 1.

Table 1. Application of the Integrative Framework in the Deepfake Vignette.

Dimension	Function in This Scenario
Political Literacy	Recognizes civic stakes; activates responsibility to avoid premature judgment
Media and Information Literacy	Evaluates source credibility; identifies manipulation cues
Technological-System Literacy (AI, Algorithm)	Understands deepfake technology and algorithmic amplification
Contextual-Domain Literacy (Legal)	Understands legal risks of spreading unverified content
Democratic Outcome	Informed, responsible civic judgment; prevention of misinformation spread

Source: Developed by the author.

6. Discussion and Implications

As illustrated in the case vignette above, translating this integrative framework into practice requires rethinking how citizenship and media education are currently structured. First, it suggests that political literacy should not be limited to teaching governmental structures, elections, rights, or civic duties. Although these are essential, democratic learning should also develop source evaluation, fact-checking, news analysis, digital ethics, data interpretation, and awareness of algorithmic and AI-mediated systems. At the same time, such interventions require careful design, since research indicates that media literacy interventions may also slightly reduce perceived accuracy of mainstream news even while improving overall discernment between mainstream and false news [20]. Educational approaches should therefore cultivate critical—rather than cynical—engagement with information. This approach better reflects how citizens actually experience political life in digital environments.

Second, educational institutions should avoid treating civic education and information-literacy development as unrelated curriculum areas, particularly because information literacy remains unevenly integrated into political

science teaching [17]. Interdisciplinary learning activities may connect a public issue with political institutions, media representations, evidence, digital-platform dynamics, and relevant historical or legal contexts. For example, a lesson on public-health policy can include analysis of governmental authority, scientific evidence, misinformation, data visualizations, platform circulation, and ethical communication. Such integration can help learners move from isolated knowledge toward contextual democratic judgment.

Third, the framework has relevance for public policy and civil society. Initiatives addressing misinformation or online harm—including those emerging in various democracies where platform-driven disinformation has increasingly shaped electoral discourse and public trust—should not focus solely on technical detection or content moderation. Strengthening democratic resilience also requires citizens to understand public institutions, recognize the political consequences of information disorder, and participate responsibly in public communication. Governments, universities, schools, journalists, libraries, and civil society organizations can therefore contribute to democratic capacity by supporting integrated literacy development.

The framework is conceptual and has limitations. It does not empirically test causal relationships among the three dimensions, and it does not establish a universal list of complementary literacies applicable to every society. The significance of particular literacies will vary according to political systems, cultural contexts, educational opportunities, technological access, and the nature of public issues. Future studies may operationalize the framework into measurable indicators, examine its applicability across different groups and countries, and investigate how the three dimensions relate to political efficacy, resistance to misinformation, civic participation, and democratic trust.

7. Conclusion

Political literacy in the digital democracy era should be understood as a multidimensional democratic capacity rather than as a narrow body of political knowledge. Citizens must understand political institutions and public issues, but they must also evaluate information critically, communicate ethically, and interpret the technological and contextual systems that shape contemporary public life.

This review integrated three dimensions—political literacy, media and information literacy, and complementary literacies—into a coherent framework in which democratic orientation, critical information assessment, and contextual interpretation jointly support informed judgment, civic resilience, and meaningful democratic participation in digitally mediated societies.

The framework contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by connecting fields that are often examined separately. It also provides a foundation for more comprehensive approaches to citizenship education, media education, curriculum development, and democratic policy. In societies where political life is increasingly mediated by platforms, automated systems, and rapidly circulating information, such an integrated understanding of political literacy is essential.

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