

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of Media Literacy in Protecting Youth Consciousness in Uzbekistan

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VOLUME: Vol.06 Issue04 2026

PAGE: 36-39

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Abstract

This article analyzes the role of media literacy in protecting youth consciousness in Uzbekistan from various information attacks, manipulative content, and disinformation. In the context of the digital space, the impact of the information flow распространяющегося through social networks and online platforms on the worldview, values, and social activity of young people is highlighted. The importance of media literacy in developing critical thinking, as well as skills for analyzing and evaluating information, is substantiated.

KEY WORDS

Media literacy, protection of youth consciousness, digital space, information security, manipulation, disinformation, critical thinking, information policy, social networks, spiritual security.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, as a result of the rapid development of information technologies, all spheres of social life are being digitalized. The fact that the Internet and social networks have become an integral part of everyday life has further expanded the scale of influence on the consciousness of young people. Today, young people are considered one of the most active subjects of the digital space as the main consumers and distributors of information. Therefore, protecting their consciousness from various harmful ideas, manipulative information, and disinformation has become an urgent issue. In the process of globalization, the increase in the speed and volume of information flow, along with positive opportunities, is also creating certain risks and threats. Unfounded messages, hidden propaganda, and extremist or radical content distributed through social networks may have a negative impact on the worldview and values of young people. In particular, young people whose critical analysis skills are not sufficiently developed become more susceptible to various information manipulations.

In recent years, as a result of the expansion of digital infrastructure and the popularization of mobile Internet services in Uzbekistan, the number of Internet users has been steadily increasing. According to the data of the Ministry of Digital Technologies of the Republic of Uzbekistan, in 2023–2024 the number of Internet users in the country exceeded 30 million [1]. This indicator shows that the absolute majority of the population of Uzbekistan has been involved in the digital space. The expansion of Internet coverage is observed not only in large cities, but also in remote areas. The laying of fiber-optic communication lines, the increase in mobile Internet speed, and the relative reduction in tariffs have made it easier for all segments of the population to use online opportunities. In particular, young people, as the most active audience of the Internet, widely use social networks, messengers, online education platforms, and digital services. On the one hand, this process creates broad opportunities for education, entrepreneurship, and information exchange; on the other hand, it leads to a sharp increase in the volume of

various information flows affecting the consciousness of young people. Therefore, the growth in the number of Internet users is manifested not only as an indicator of technological progress, but also as an important factor determining the need to develop information security and media literacy. According to the data of the Statistics Agency, nearly 60 percent of the population in Uzbekistan consists of those under 30 years of age [2]. This demographic indicator makes it possible to characterize the country as a “state of youth” and shows that it is precisely young people who play a decisive role in social, political, and information processes. In the digital space as well, the most active layer is young people. They widely use platforms such as Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube mainly for daily communication, obtaining news, consuming entertainment content, and even in the educational process. The algorithmic recommendation systems of these platforms are distinguished by their ability to quickly deliver content corresponding to users’ interests. As a result, young people are exposed to a large volume of information flow in a short period of time. In such conditions, the rapid spread of information, often without sufficient verification, may also cause the wide dissemination of manipulative, one-sided, or false information. In particular, headlines affecting emotions, short videos rich in visual effects, or posts causing social resonance directly and rapidly influence the consciousness of young people. Therefore, the digital activity of young people, on the one hand, opens the door to broad opportunities, and on the other hand, turns them into a sensitive layer in relation to information attacks and manipulation.

Scientific studies conducted at the global level confirm that false and manipulative information spreads much faster and more widely on social networks than truthful information. In particular, according to the results of a study conducted in 2018 by scientists of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and published in the journal *Science*, false news reaches audiences on average 6 times faster than the truth and is shared by more users [3]. The study was carried out on the basis of an analysis of millions of posts during the period 2006–2017, and it was found that especially false news of a political nature spreads at a high speed. As the reason for this situation, the researchers point to the fact that false news often has sensational, emotionally rich, and unexpected content. Such content arouses strong emotions in users, such as surprise, fear, or anger, and prompts them to share it quickly. As a result, the verification of information falls into second place. This process is especially relevant for young

people, because they are the most active group on social networks and live in an environment of rapid information exchange. If critical thinking and media literacy skills are not sufficiently formed, manipulative messages may have a significant impact on the worldview, social position, and values of young people. Therefore, the results of this study scientifically substantiate that the development of media literacy is of strategic importance in protecting youth consciousness.

UNESCO recognizes media and information literacy (Media and Information Literacy — MIL) as one of the key competencies ensuring democratic stability, freedom of speech, and civic activity in modern society [4]. According to the MIL concept developed by the organization, a person should possess the skills to search for, analyze, evaluate, create, and responsibly disseminate information. These skills not only shape a culture of information consumption, but also serve the conscious and critical decision-making of citizens. It is especially emphasized in UNESCO recommendations that the most effective way to combat disinformation, hate speech, and manipulative content widely spread on digital platforms is not prohibition or restriction, but rather the development of the critical thinking ability of the population, especially young people. Through MIL programs, young people learn to verify the reliability of information sources, distinguish fact from opinion, and identify hidden purposes and ideological orientation. Media and information literacy is regarded not only as a pedagogical issue, but also as a factor of social stability and national security. The wide introduction of MIL skills among young people increases their resilience to digital manipulation and disinformation and forms a culture of responsible digital citizenship. In Uzbekistan, the issue of protecting young people from information threats is defined as one of the priority directions of state policy. This direction is an important component of the reforms being implemented in the country and envisages raising the spiritual and moral upbringing, information security, and digital culture of young people.

The Law “On the State Youth Policy,” adopted by the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan, specifically notes the necessity of protecting young people from harmful information [5]. This document establishes that protecting young people from information that negatively affects their physical, intellectual, and spiritual development, and safeguarding them from the influence of various extremist, violent, or destructive ideas, is an important task of the state and society. The

provisions of the law require strengthening preventive and educational measures in the system of working with youth, forming information culture in educational institutions, and developing skills for the rational use of the Internet. This makes it possible to consider media literacy not only as an educational initiative, but also as a systematic activity with a legal basis. Thus, the fact that the issue of protecting young people from harmful information has been reinforced at the level of state policy once again confirms the strategic importance of developing media literacy in Uzbekistan. In addition, programs aimed at developing digital competencies in the education system are being introduced step by step. The integration of media literacy elements into the curricula of schools and higher educational institutions serves to form young people's skills in critically analyzing information, verifying sources, and drawing objective conclusions.

Media literacy is not limited to a theoretical concept, but forms a system of practical skills directly applied in everyday life. For young people actively participating in the digital space, these skills are important in ensuring information security, consciously shaping their personal position, and feeling social responsibility.

Media literacy develops the following important competencies:

Identifying and verifying the source of information — this skill enables the user to determine from which source a message was obtained, assess whether it is official or unofficial, verify the reliability of the author, and analyze whether the information is based on evidence. For example, according to recent statistical data, 59% of false messages spread on social networks come from unknown or suspicious pages [6]. Also, according to a Pew Research Center study, only 27% of users check the source of messages on social networks.

Such indicators clearly show the rapid spread of fake news and disinformation; therefore, the skill of identifying and verifying the source of information is of vital importance for young people and the wider audience. For example, the international platforms used for fact-checking include:

Snopes.com — a leading source in checking and verifying fake news, which analyzed more than 25 thousand false reports in 2022;

FactCheck.org — checks news on political and social topics and reviews on average more than 10 thousand articles per year;

Google Fact Check Tools — allows users to quickly assess whether messages correspond to reality.

Identifying and verifying the source of information is considered one of the most effective means of protecting young people from disinformation, because it serves not only to detect false information, but also to form digital awareness.

Distinguishing fact from opinion — this skill enables the user to distinguish between objective, verified information (fact) and personal views, interpretations, or elements of propaganda (opinion). For example, according to a Pew Research Center study, approximately 40% of political posts distributed on social networks contain a mixture of fact and opinion, making them difficult for users to distinguish⁶. In addition, a study by the Stanford History Education Group showed that 82% of students, after reading a message on social networks, believe it without checking the source, and they often accept opinion as fact [7]. This situation demonstrates the need to develop young people's ability to draw independent conclusions. Therefore, the skill of distinguishing fact from opinion forms critical thinking, helps users identify manipulative messages, and assists them in developing their own views independently. As an example, international programs such as the "News Literacy Project" teach young people, through practical exercises, to analyze the content of news, verify the source, and distinguish opinion from fact.

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Understanding the impact of algorithmic recommendations — this skill enables the user to understand how algorithms on social networks work. For example, according to research by the MIT Media Lab, recommendation algorithms on social networks, by offering content corresponding to users' interests, lead them to remain within an "information bubble" on certain topics⁸. At the same time, algorithms serve to reinforce the user's existing views, as a result of which the opportunity to become familiar with different opinions decreases.

Also, a Pew Research Center study showed that 64% of social network users accept new content based on their algorithmic recommendations, but often its source and accuracy are not checked [6]. This situation may have a significant impact on the consciousness of young people, because in the rapid flow of information they do not always have the opportunity for critical evaluation. Therefore, the skill of understanding the impact of algorithmic recommendations is an important means of developing critical thinking and protecting users from digital manipulation and the danger of the information bubble. As an example, international programs such as the "Digital Literacy Lab" explain to users through practical exercises how algorithms work and teach them to evaluate content critically.

Forming a culture of responsible information sharing — this skill enables the user to develop a culture of digital citizenship by not sharing unverified or false information, observing ethical norms in online communication, and respecting the rights of others. For example, according to a Pew Research Center study, 59% of users on social networks shared unverified messages, as a result of which false news spread rapidly on a global scale [5]. According to European Commission data, among users who follow ethical rules in online communication, susceptibility to disinformation is significantly lower, that is, responsible information sharing strengthens digital culture [4]. In international practice, programs such as the "News Literacy Project" and "Digital Citizenship Lab" develop in young people the skills of verifying information, sharing it responsibly, and communicating respectfully on social networks. Thus, responsible information sharing not only ensures personal security, but also serves to create a healthy information environment in society.

Media literacy turns young people not only into passive consumers of information, but also into conscious and

responsible digital participants. This, in turn, serves as an important factor in forming a healthy information environment in society and protecting youth consciousness from various manipulative threats. Studies show that young people with critical thinking skills are less susceptible to extremist or radical ideas⁹. Therefore, media literacy is considered a means not only of information security, but also of ensuring spiritual and social stability.

The above facts and analyses show that under the conditions of the high number of young people in Uzbekistan and the expanding Internet audience, media literacy acquires strategic importance. At a time when the threats of manipulation and disinformation in the digital space are intensifying, the most effective way to protect youth consciousness is to develop systematic and continuous media education.

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