

Mass media as an instrument for political education of young generation: Opportunities and challenges in the digital era

Aris Riswandi Sanusi * 

* Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
arissanusi@upi.edu

Aim Abdulkarim 

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
aim.abdulkarim@upi.edu

Cecep Darmawan 

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
cecep darmawan@upi.edu

Syaifullah 

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
syaifulsyam@upi.edu

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract

In an era in which information flows freely across countless digital channels, understanding how mass media shapes young people's political consciousness has become increasingly vital. This study explores the intricate relationship between mass media—both traditional and digital—and political education among the youth, drawing from democratic theory and media literacy frameworks. Through a comprehensive examination of existing literature, we uncover a fascinating paradox: while today's young generation enjoys unprecedented access to political information and opportunities for civic discourse, they simultaneously face formidable challenges, including media manipulation, echo chambers, and a concerning erosion of trust in news institutions. Our findings reveal that the effectiveness of mass media as an educational tool is not straightforward. Rather, it is mediated by critical factors such as media literacy skills, socioeconomic contexts, and the quality of democratic institutions within which young people operate. In contexts where Indonesian youth navigate their political identities—from bustling cities to remote villages—these dynamics play out in unique ways that deserve careful attention. This research makes a compelling case that effective political education in the digital age requires more than just access to information. It demands integrated approaches that combine formal education, robust media literacy programs, and collaborative efforts among media organisations, educational institutions, and civic groups. The goal is not merely to create informed citizens, but to nurture a generation of young people who can think critically and meaningfully in democratic life. As we stand at this critical juncture, the choices we make today about media systems, education, and democratic culture will shape the quality of citizenship for generations to come.

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Introduction

The relationship between mass media and political education has evolved dramatically, becoming increasingly complex in our contemporary digital era. Today's young people inhabit an information ecosystem that would have been unimaginable just a generation ago—one characterised by multiple platforms, diverse content creators, and instantaneous communication channels that transcend geographical and social boundaries. This profound transformation carries significant implications for how the younger generation acquires political knowledge, develops civic identities, and ultimately participates in democratic processes (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017).

When we speak of mass media today, we refer to communication channels that reach large audiences simultaneously—a definition that encompasses both traditional outlets such as television, newspapers, and radio, as well as the burgeoning digital platforms including social media, online news sites, and streaming services (McQuail, 2010). These media serve as primary sources of political information for most citizens, particularly young people, playing a crucial role in shaping political attitudes, knowledge, and behaviour (Prior, 2007; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). In the Indonesian context, this landscape becomes even more complex as traditional and digital media coexist and interact in unique ways, creating distinct patterns of political socialisation among youth (Lim, 2018; Sukidin et al., 2025; Wahyuningroem et al., 2024).

Political education, in this context, goes beyond formal classroom civics instruction. It encompasses the broader process through which individuals acquire knowledge about political systems, develop skills for civic participation, and form values related to democratic citizenship (Galston, 2001; Levinson, 2014). Mass media serve as an informal yet remarkably powerful educational institution, complementing—and sometimes challenging—the formal civics education provided in schools and families (McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002; Neubaum et al., 2024; Schmitt et al., 2024; Slavtcheva, 2025). However, the educational function of media has been fundamentally transformed by digitalisation, raising important and urgent questions about information quality, media literacy, and democratic engagement among youth.

Research consistently indicates that young people increasingly rely on digital and social media for political news and information, marking a significant departure from previous generations (Xenos et al., 2014). Indonesian youth demonstrate high levels of social media engagement for political purposes, from following election campaigns to participating in online political discussions (Ida et al., 2020; Mustofa et al., 2024). This shift presents both exciting opportunities and sobering challenges for political education. On the one hand, digital media provides unprecedented access to diverse perspectives, enables direct interaction with political actors, and facilitates grassroots mobilisation in ways previously impossible (Loader et al., 2014). On the other hand, serious concerns have emerged about misinformation, echo chambers, declining traditional news consumption, and forms of political engagement that may be more performative than substantive (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Sunstein, 2017).

Despite extensive research on media effects and political socialisation, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how mass media function as an instrument for comprehensive political education in diverse contexts. Previous studies have often focused on single platforms or isolated effects, rather than examining the broader, more complex media ecosystem and its educational implications (Boulianne, 2019). Furthermore, much research has been conducted in Western democracies, with comparatively limited attention to how these dynamics operate in other political and cultural contexts, including Indonesia's vibrant yet challenging democratic landscape (Kurnia & Astuti, 2017).

This study addresses these gaps by examining how various forms of mass media contribute to political education among young people, identifying key opportunities and challenges in the digital era, and exploring the contextual factors that shape media's educational

impact. Drawing on both international scholarship and Indonesian research, this study aims to provide insights to inform educational policy, media practice, and civic engagement initiatives designed to enhance political literacy and democratic participation among the younger generation. Understanding these dynamics is not merely an academic exercise—it is crucial for strengthening democratic systems in an age where information flows are increasingly complex, contested, and consequential for the future of democracy itself.

Method

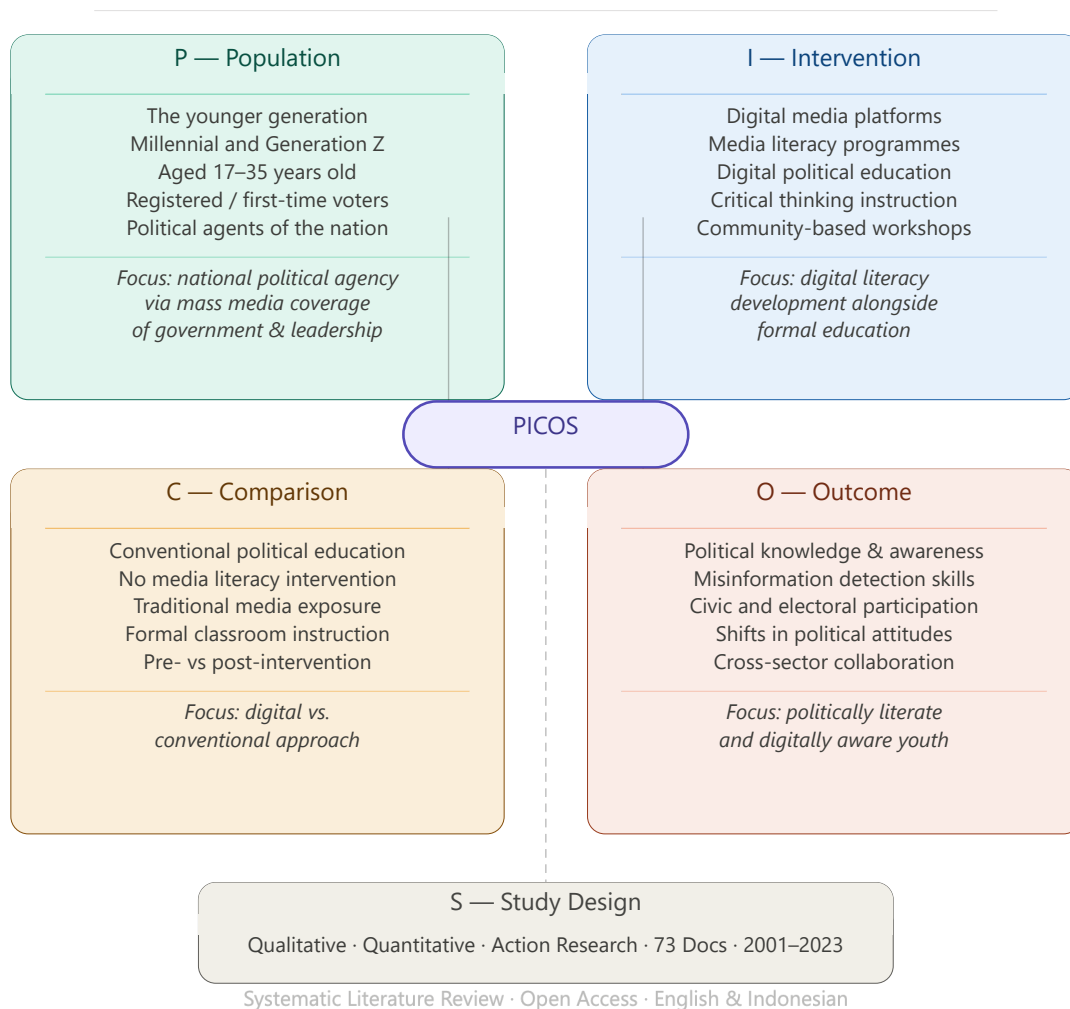
This study employs a comprehensive literature review and thematic analysis to examine the multifaceted role of mass media in the political education of young people. Rather than focusing on a single disciplinary lens, we adopted an interdisciplinary approach that draws upon insights from political science, communication studies, education, and sociology to capture the full complexity of this phenomenon.

PICOS Framework

The PICOS framework is a methodological approach that the author uses to improve the accuracy of identifying and analysing relevant literature (Higgins et al., 2019). Using PICOS is a valid option to reduce the number of articles retrieved by a search without losing relevant hits when time and/or resources are limited. This framework is used to systematically select and analyse literature, thereby enabling a structured review process. This framework includes Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, and Study design.

Figure 1.

PICOS Framework



Source: Data Generated by Cloude.ai. 2026.

1. **Population:** This research focuses on the role of mass media as an integral element in providing independent political education for the younger generation through news coverage of government programs, public leadership, and movements, thereby building the younger generation's role as agents of national politics.
2. **Intervention:** The actions taken by the mass media to provide political education in line with the times and the needs of the younger generation are through the use of digital media, which cannot be separated from the formal education process or the government's role. This involves using digital media for political education to improve digital literacy and to strengthen the younger generation's understanding of the nation's political situation.
3. **Comparison:** involving an evaluation of conventional political education with digital media-based education.
4. **Outcome:** The results of this study show that the mass media play a crucial role in shaping the younger generation into a politically and digitally literate generation of servants. However, in practice, the success of mass media political education also depends heavily on collaboration between all elements, including educational institutions, the government, and community groups, through an integrated approach.
5. **Study Design:** Studies are categorised by research design, including qualitative, quantitative, or action research methodologies. This categorisation allows for an in-depth examination of how different methodological approaches contribute to understanding the role of mass media as an instrument of political education for the younger generation.

Data Collection and Search Strategy

The main sources in this study were books and articles relevant to the research context, published both nationally and internationally. The literature search process yielded 243 pieces of literature, including books and articles. All articles were collected based on inclusion criteria to ensure relevance to the research focus. All literature collected ranged from 2001 to 2023. Based on the screening process, the literature selection yielded 73 pieces, selected for their relevance and alignment with the research focus.

Table 1.

Screening criteria summary

Screening Criteria	Description	Number of Documents
Search	Keywords Title (Political Education, Media Literacy, Mass Media, Digital, Young Generation, Civic Engagement, Civic Education, Social Media)	243
Year	2001 to 2023	174
Document Type	Book	53
	Article	97
Source title	Not selected	
Affiliation	Not selected	
Funding sponsor	Not selected	
Country/territory	Not selected	
Language	English and Indonesian	
Source type	Book	24
	Journal	49
Open access	All open access	73
Total	73 Book dan Journal	

Source: Research Data, 2025.

The systematic literature search began with keyword-based queries across relevant terms related to political education, media literacy, digital platforms, civic engagement, and social media, yielding an initial pool of 243 documents. After applying a year filter spanning from 2001 to 2023, the results were narrowed to 174 documents. Further refinement by document type reduced the pool to 53 books and 97 articles. Subsequent filtering by source type distinguished 24 books and 49 journals, and upon restricting the selection to open-access materials published in either English or Indonesian, the final dataset comprised 73 documents in total — consisting of both books and journals — which were deemed eligible for further review and analysis in this study.

PRISMA Guidelines

The literature selection process was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) standards, which are steps to document and facilitate clear reporting on document selection and screening, thereby producing documents that are clearly relevant to the research focus. The PRISMA standard process enables a robust synthesis. It provides an in-depth exploration of the political education process carried out by the mass media for the younger generation, as well as the opportunities and challenges of digital media-based political education faced by the current generation.

Table 1 shows that the literature used in this study includes books and journal articles published from 2001 to 2023. The literature used includes books and articles in Indonesian and English. Through this screening, 73 suitable, highly relevant pieces of literature were identified, making it easier for researchers to conduct a systematic, in-depth review.

Results and Discussion

Changing Media Landscape and Youth Political Information Seeking

The contemporary media environment has undergone a radical transformation, fundamentally altering how young people access and engage with political information. This is not merely a technological shift—it represents a profound change in the very nature of political communication and learning. Research consistently demonstrates a pronounced generational shift in media consumption, with younger cohorts increasingly favouring digital platforms over traditional broadcast and print media (Newman et al., 2023). According to the Pew Research Center (2021), approximately 48% of individuals aged 18-29 report that social media is their primary source of political news, compared to only 24% for television. In Indonesia, these patterns are even more pronounced, with studies showing that millennial and Gen Z voters rely heavily on social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp for political information (Hamid et al., 2022; Intyaswati et al., 2021; Suprihatin et al., 2024).

This transformation reflects broader changes in information-seeking behaviour characterised by on-demand access, personalisation, and interactivity. Unlike their parents, who gathered around television sets for evening news broadcasts, today's young people engage with political content through multiple touchpoints throughout their day—social media feeds, YouTube videos, podcasts, and mobile applications (Thorson & Wells, 2016). This fragmented yet omnipresent information environment contrasts sharply with the more centralised mass media system that characterised previous generations' political socialisation. Indonesian youth, navigating a diverse archipelago with varying levels of internet penetration and media access, experience these dynamics in particularly complex ways (Ida et al., 2020; Saud et al., 2025).

Table 2 illustrates shifting patterns of media consumption among young people, highlighting the dominance of digital platforms and the relative decline of traditional media. These patterns have significant implications for how political information is accessed, processed, and integrated into political understanding. What emerges is not simply a story of

old media being replaced by new media, but rather a complex hybrid media system in which different platforms serve different purposes and reach different audiences in different contexts (Chadwick, 2017).

Table 2.

Media Consumption Patterns Among Youth (Ages 18-29)

Media Type	Usage Rate (%)	Primary Political Functions
Social Media	68	News sharing, political discussion, activism
Online News Sites	52	In-depth information, fact-checking
Video Platforms	45	Educational content, political commentary
Television	24	Breaking news, live events
Print Media	8	Investigative reporting, opinion pieces

Source: Compiled from Newman et al. (2023) and Shearer & Mitchell (2021).

Opportunities for Political Education Through Mass Media

Mass media, particularly in their digital forms, offer significant and often inspiring opportunities to enhance political education among young people. These opportunities represent more than technological possibilities—they embody the potential for a younger generation that is more informed, engaged, and democratically active.

First— and perhaps most fundamentally —digital platforms dramatically expand access to political information, enabling youth from diverse backgrounds—including those in remote areas of Indonesia—to engage with political content that might otherwise be unavailable (Kahne et al., 2012). This democratisation of information access can help reduce knowledge gaps and promote more inclusive political discourse. A young person in rural Papua can now access the same political information as someone in Jakarta, challenging traditional geographical barriers to political knowledge.

Second, the interactive features of digital media facilitate participatory forms of political engagement that were simply impossible in the era of one-way mass communication. Young people can not only consume political information but also produce content, share perspectives, and organise collective action (Castells, 2015; Jenkins, 2006). Social media platforms enable horizontal communication networks that bypass traditional gatekeepers, empowering youth voices in political conversations. Studies demonstrate that online political participation can translate into offline civic engagement and strengthen democratic skills (Boulianne, 2019). Indonesian youth have leveraged these capabilities powerfully, from online anti-corruption campaigns to youth-led movements for environmental protection (Nugroho, 2025; Suwana, 2020).

Third, the multimedia formats available through digital platforms cater to diverse learning styles and can make political information more engaging and accessible. Video content, infographics, interactive visualisations, and podcasts offer alternatives to traditional text-based political communication, potentially reaching youth who might not engage with conventional news formats (Bode, 2016). Educational content creators increasingly utilise these formats to explain complex political concepts and current events in accessible ways, creating new pathways for political learning that resonate with digital-native youth.

Fourth, digital media enables personalised learning experiences in which individuals can explore political topics aligned with their interests and concerns. While personalisation presents challenges we will discuss later, it also creates opportunities for deeper engagement with specific political issues (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016). A young Indonesian interested in environmental policy can delve deeply into climate change debates. At the same time, another passionate about economic justice can explore labour rights and inequality—each following their own path toward political understanding.

Table 3.

Opportunities for Political Education Through Mass Media

Opportunity	Examples	Educational Outcomes
Expanded Access	Free online news, open-access political databases, livestreamed government proceedings	Increased political knowledge, reduced information inequality
Interactive Participation	Political discussions on social media, online petitions, citizen journalism	Enhanced civic skills, political efficacy, democratic participation
Diverse Formats	Political explainer videos, infographics, podcasts, interactive data visualizations	Improved comprehension, sustained engagement, multimodal learning
Global Perspectives	International news sources, cross-cultural political discussions, global activism networks	Cosmopolitan awareness, comparative political understanding

Source: Synthesised from multiple studies, 2025.

Challenges in Mass Media Political Education

Despite the exciting opportunities described above, the mass media present substantial and deeply concerning challenges for political education. These challenges are not merely technical problems to be solved, but represent fundamental tensions in how democracy operates in the digital age.

The most pressing concern is the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation across digital platforms at an alarming rate. Research indicates that false or misleading political content spreads rapidly on social media, often reaching more users than factual corrections (Vosoughi et al., 2018). In Indonesia, this challenge is particularly acute, with studies documenting widespread circulation of political hoaxes during election periods, often targeting young voters who may lack the skills to evaluate information critically (Neyazi et al., 2022; Syah et al., 2025). Young people, despite being digital natives who have grown up with technology, often struggle to evaluate source credibility and distinguish reliable information from propaganda or fabrication (Syah et al., 2025; Vosoughi et al., 2018; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016).

The phenomenon of echo chambers and filter bubbles poses another significant challenge to the very foundation of democratic deliberation. Algorithmic curation and selective exposure can create information environments where individuals encounter primarily viewpoints that reinforce existing beliefs (Pariser, 2011). This fragmentation undermines deliberative democracy and can lead to political polarisation, reducing opportunities for genuine political learning that requires exposure to diverse perspectives and a willingness to engage with challenging ideas (Sunstein, 2017).

Trust in media institutions has declined significantly, particularly among younger generations—a trend that has profound implications for political education. Surveys consistently show scepticism toward mainstream news organisations, with many young people questioning the objectivity and motivations of professional journalists (Newman et al., 2023). In Indonesia, this distrust is compounded by perceptions of media politicisation and concerns about journalistic integrity (Ahmad, 2022; Masduki & d’Haenens, 2022). This distrust, while sometimes warranted given legitimate concerns about media bias, can lead to cynicism that undermines political learning and engagement. Simultaneously, young people may place unwarranted trust in alternative media sources or individual content creators who lack journalistic training or accountability mechanisms, creating new vulnerabilities to manipulation.

The superficiality of much online political content poses additional concerns about the depth and quality of political learning. Social media platforms, driven by engagement metrics and advertising revenues, incentivise brief, emotionally provocative content over substantive analysis. Political discourse on these platforms often emphasises soundbites, memes, and viral moments rather than complex policy discussions or careful examination of institutional processes (Chadwick, 2017). This can produce a form of political engagement that is high in visibility but low in depth—youth may feel politically active through sharing posts and engaging in online debates, yet lack a deeper understanding of how political systems actually work.

Digital divides persist, creating inequalities in access to quality political information that can reinforce rather than reduce political knowledge gaps. While internet access has expanded dramatically across Indonesia, significant disparities persist by socioeconomic status, geography, and digital literacy (Rajagukguk et al., 2024; Yasmine et al., 2025). These divides are not simply about access to technology, but about the quality of access and the skills to use it effectively. Moreover, the quality of political information accessed varies substantially, with some youth consuming rigorous journalism. In contrast, others rely primarily on partisan sources or entertainment-focused political content, creating vastly different political learning experiences within the same generation.

The Critical Role of Media Literacy

Media literacy has emerged as the most crucial mediating factor determining whether mass media serves as an effective instrument for political education or becomes a source of confusion and manipulation. Media literacy encompasses the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media content—skills that have become as fundamental to citizenship as traditional literacy (Hunt, 2023; Isaias et al., 2013; Reddy et al., 2022). Research demonstrates strong associations among media literacy skills, political knowledge, critical thinking about politics, and the quality of civic engagement (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018).

Effective media literacy education for political purposes should include several interconnected components. *First*, understanding how media systems operate, including ownership structures, business models, and production processes that shape content in often invisible ways. Young people need to understand that media content does not simply appear—it is produced within particular economic and political contexts that influence what gets covered and how (Rajagukguk et al., 2024; Yasmine et al., 2025). *Second*, developing critical evaluation skills to assess source credibility, identify bias, and recognise manipulation techniques, from subtle framing to outright fabrication (Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Jones-Jang et al., 2021). *Third*, cultivating awareness of algorithmic curation and personalisation effects, understanding that what appears in their feeds has been selected by algorithms designed to maximise engagement rather than to inform (Adjin-Tettey, 2022). *Fourth*, building skills for constructive online political engagement and digital citizenship—learning not just to consume and critique, but to participate responsibly and ethically in digital political discourse (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013).

Educational initiatives integrating media literacy into civic education show promising results, suggesting pathways forward. Programs that combine critical media analysis with opportunities for student-created political content have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing both media competencies and political engagement (Martens & Hobbs, 2015). In the Indonesian context, various literacy movements have emerged, from community-based workshops to school-integrated programs, though implementation challenges persist (Ratri & Aiyanti, 2025). These challenges include insufficient teacher training, limited curriculum time, debates about appropriate pedagogical approaches, and the need to keep pace with rapidly evolving media technologies and practices.

Beyond formal education, multiple stakeholders can and must contribute to the development of media literacy. News organisations increasingly offer educational resources and transparency about journalistic processes, helping audiences understand how news is made. Technology platforms have introduced features to flag questionable content and provide context, though their effectiveness remains hotly debated, and concerns about censorship persist. Civil society organisations provide vital media literacy workshops and resources, often reaching communities underserved by formal education systems. These initiatives suggest that a broader ecosystem approach to media literacy is necessary—one that recognises that political education through media requires coordinated efforts across institutions, each playing complementary roles in building young people's capacity for critical media engagement.

The relationship between media literacy and active civic participation is among the most significant findings in contemporary communication research. Park et al. (2023) conducted a national survey of 3,510 Australian adults. They found that people who are more active online — interacting with content and other people — are more likely to be engaged in civic activities, and that those with greater confidence in their media abilities are more likely to participate in a broader range of civic activities.

These findings challenge the assumption that digital engagement and civic disengagement are inevitably linked, suggesting instead that the quality of media skills, rather than mere exposure to media, is the decisive variable. Drawing on cognitive mobilisation theory, several researchers argued that stronger media literacy helps citizens think more critically about the media, thereby improving their political knowledge, involvement, and contributions to social change (Ashley et al., 2017; Park et al., 2023). This evidence reinforces the argument that investing in media literacy is not merely an educational priority but a democratic necessity — one that equips citizens to move beyond passive consumption toward meaningful political participation.

A further dimension of media literacy's critical role lies in its capacity to defend democratic discourse against the growing threat of misinformation and disinformation. Adjin-Tetty (2022) conducted an experimental study and found that media and information literacy (MIL) training improved participants' capacity to assess information authenticity and reduced their intention to share inaccurate content. While these results are promising, scholars caution against overstating the effectiveness of any single intervention. The evidence points to the need for layered, sustained, and contextually sensitive media literacy programmes that address not only the intellectual but also the psychological dimensions of information consumption in politically charged digital environments.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the transformation of the media ecosystem through digitalisation has fundamentally altered how the younger generation accesses political information and develops as democratic citizens. While digital media platforms offer extraordinary opportunities such as expanded access to diverse political content, interactive forms of engagement, and multimedia learning experiences, serious challenges persist regarding misinformation, echo chambers, declining institutional trust, and superficial political discourse. The educational impact of media is heavily dependent on media literacy, the quality of democratic institutions, and socioeconomic contexts. To maximize the potential of mass media in political education, an integrated approach is required that involves educational systems prioritizing media literacy, media organizations strengthening journalistic integrity, technology platforms designing systems to promote quality information, policies supporting media literacy initiatives, and the role of civil society and families in developing critical media consumption capacity—because the patterns of learning and political engagement formed during youth will shape the quality of democratic citizenship for generations to come.

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