

Combating Misinformation and Polarization Through Civic Education at School in the Digital Era (Case Study in SMP Negeri 11 Samarinda)

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Abstract

In an era where misinformation spreads rapidly through digital platforms, civic education emerges as a crucial tool to foster media literacy, critical thinking, and democratic engagement. This study explores how civic education can be optimized to combat misinformation and social polarization among youth, particularly in educational settings. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, we examined civic education curricula, teaching strategies, and student responses in Indonesian secondary schools. The findings suggest that integrating media literacy into civic education lessons significantly increases students' ability to identify disinformation and engage in respectful discourse. Moreover, participatory pedagogies—such as deliberative discussions and project-based learning—help reduce polarization by promoting empathy, active listening, and collaboration. The paper concludes by offering a framework for redesigning civic education to be responsive to digital challenges while strengthening democratic values.

Keywords: misinformation, polarization, civic education.

Introduction

The Post-Truth era is a state where objective facts and empirical evidence diminish in their impact on public opinion, while emotions, personal convictions, and subjective interpretations gain greater prominence. In this age, truth is viewed as subjective and reliant on personal viewpoints, frequently overlooking factual evidence. This issue is intensified by developments in digital technology, especially social media, which enable the distribution of false or unverified information (Hovland et al., 1953). The rise of misinformation and digital polarization poses a threat to democratic societies. In Indonesia, as in many countries, the spread of fake news through social media has fueled division, distrust, and civic disengagement.

The digital era has brought about significant changes in communication patterns and the dissemination of information. Social media, online news portals, and other digital

platforms have become primary sources of information for the public, including students. However, this development also poses serious challenges in the form of rampant misinformation, disinformation, and hoaxes that are difficult to distinguish from factual news. This phenomenon is a hallmark of the Post-Truth era, where objective facts are often trumped by opinion and emotion in shaping public perception.

This situation has triggered increasingly sharp social polarization, especially among the younger generation who actively use social media. Polarization hinders the formation of healthy dialogue and weakens social cohesion, potentially threatening democratic values. Furthermore, many students still lack adequate media literacy skills to filter information critically and responsibly.

Education is an essential resource for fostering a constructive atmosphere and can act as a roadmap for improved transformation of a country (Jannah & Sulianti, 2021). Amid

the Post-Truth era, where misinformation and truth distortion frequently prevail in public discourse, Civic Education is essential for providing individuals with critical thinking abilities and this information assessment. The Post-Truth era has profoundly affected many facets of public life, such as politics and personal decision-making. Public confidence in democratic institutions, including traditional media and governmental bodies, has waned because of recurrent beliefs that they disseminate falsehoods or partial information (Buchanan & Kaye, 2022). Consequently, education serves as an essential instrument to cultivate citizens who are not only knowledgeable but also able to engage actively and responsibly in the democratic process, while addressing the challenges presented by the Post-Truth phenomenon.

Civic education, traditionally centered on knowledge of institutions and rights, must now respond to these challenges. This paper argues that civic education can and should be reimagined to directly address the digital information crisis by equipping learners with the skills to critically evaluate information, recognize biases, and foster inclusive dialogue.

In this context, Civics Education (PKn) plays a crucial role. PKn not only serves as a subject for understanding the rights and obligations of citizens, but must also be a vehicle for developing civic intelligence, namely the ability to think critically, behave ethically, and actively participate in democratic life. The integration of media literacy, digital ethics, and innovative learning strategies in Civics is a crucial solution to address the challenges of the digital era.

SMP Negeri 11 Samarinda is one school that has integrated media literacy into Civics learning. Through deliberative discussion methods, project-based learning, and a collaborative approach, this school strives to equip its students with the skills to navigate the massive flow of digital information. Therefore, this study focuses on how Civics contributes to shaping students' media literacy, digital ethics, and democratic attitudes in addressing misinformation and polarization.

Literature Review

Prior research highlights the importance of civic education in cultivating democratic values (Knowles, 2018; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). However, studies show that traditional approaches often lack the tools to address the complexities of the digital age (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). Media literacy and digital citizenship are increasingly emphasized as vital components (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017), with evidence suggesting they can counteract the effects of misinformation and echo chambers.

The Post-Truth Era refers to a state in which objective facts and empirical evidence cease to be the main foundation for shaping public opinion. Feelings, individual convictions, and personal interpretations have emerged as the primary elements shaping public sentiment (Hovland et al., 1953; Khairunisa & Damayanti, 2024). The situation is worsened by the rise of digital technology and social media, which hasten the dissemination of unverified information, promote polarization, and erode public confidence in democratic institutions (Buchanan & Kaye, 2022; Zuhriyah, 2025)

Polarization arises from the phenomena of echo chambers and filter bubbles on social media. Algorithms narrow the information horizon, exposing users only to perspectives that align with their preferences. As a result, public dialogue becomes narrower, biases become stronger, and socio-political gaps widen (Yuniarto et al., 2024). The consequences are not only social division, but also a decline in the quality of democracy and social cohesion.

Civics Education (PKn) plays a strategic role in equipping the younger generation with critical thinking skills, information literacy, ethical awareness, and democratic participation skills. PKn not only focuses on transferring knowledge about rights and obligations but must also be directed towards transforming 21st-century competencies, namely analytical, collaborative, creative, and responsible skills in the digital space (Murdiono et al., 2020; Henderson & Tudball, 2019). Tharuna Qalis Mula's (2025) study at SMP Negeri 11 Samarinda showed that integrating media literacy into PKn improved students' capacity to identify fake news while fostering a dialogical attitude. Through

deliberative discussions and project-based learning, students were trained to understand different perspectives, reduce prejudice, and develop argumentative skills based on democratic ethics.

Media literacy is the ability to critically access, analyze, evaluate, and produce information. In a digital context, this literacy is closely related to the ability to verify facts, recognize bias, and understand the socio-political context of information (Gaultney et al., 2022). Research shows that students and pupils still have difficulty distinguishing facts from hoaxes, so media literacy education is urgently needed to be implemented from the secondary school level.

Furthermore, digital ethics is also important for instilling awareness of the impacts of technology use. Zuhriyah (2025) emphasized that without digital ethics, media literacy risks becoming merely a technical skill without a balanced understanding of social responsibility. Damasceno (2021) proposes a multiliteracies approach that includes: (1) functional literacy – the technical ability to access and use information, (2) critical literacy – the ability to analyze the ideology and interests behind information, and (3) rhetorical literacy – the ability to communicate ethically in public dialogue with multiliteracies, learners are not only technically proficient, but also reflective and ethical.

For Civics to effectively face the challenges of the digital era, innovative learning strategies are needed, including using a Game-Based Learning – Chang et al. (2020) demonstrated the effectiveness of the game LAMBOOZLED! in improving news literacy skills. The fictional narrative in the game helps students focus on analytical skills without being distracted by political bias. Then, Simulations and Case Studies – Used to train students' skills in navigating information dilemmas and making data-based decisions (Khairunisa & Damayanti, 2024). Then, make such a Collaboration and Inclusive Dialogue – Education must be a safe space for bridging ideological differences. Muhtar et al. (2022) emphasized the role of schools in building inclusive communities that strengthen social cohesion and for sure with Integrating Digital Tools in Civics – Owen (2023) found that teachers frequently encounter misinformation

from digital media in the classroom. Therefore, the use of digital tools must be accompanied by critical literacy so that students are able to select sources and after all, Cultural Contextualization with Digital citizenship education must align with local cultural values to be relevant. Rizal et al. (2024) showed that cultural context influences the emphasis on collectivism or individualism in the digital citizenship curriculum.

From various literature, it can be concluded that the main challenges of the Post-Truth era are the rapid flow of misinformation and the strengthening of socio-political polarization. The students' media literacy and digital ethics are still low, increasing their vulnerability to information manipulation. For any Conventional Civic Education has not fully responded to the complexities of the digital era, necessitating innovation in curriculum and methods. The solution offered by the literature is using Integrating media literacy, multiliteracies, and digital ethics in the Civics curriculum and Implementation of deliberative discussion methods, project-based learning, simulations, and game-based learning to strengthening the role of educational institutions as democratic and inclusive spaces for building social cohesion.

Thus, Civics in the digital era needs to transform into a means of developing critical, ethical, and resilient citizens, capable of facing the challenges of misinformation and polarization, grounded in democratic values and local wisdom.

Method

Setting and Participant

This study employed a qualitative approach through document analysis and interviews with civic education teachers and eighth and ninth grade students in SMP Negeri 11 Samarinda, and the principal as a supporting party. The location was selected based on the consideration that this school has integrated media literacy into Civics learning. Data were collected over three months through classroom observations, lesson plan reviews, and semi-structured interviews. Thematic coding was used to analyze the data. This

approach was chosen because the focus of the research is to deeply understand the practice of Civics Education in addressing misinformation and polarization in secondary schools.

Primary data was obtained from classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and students, and documentation of learning activities. Secondary data was obtained from curriculum documents, lesson plans, student learning outcomes, as well as relevant journals and literature related to Civics, media literacy, and polarization.

Participant Observation – conducted to observe the Civics learning process, which included media literacy and deliberative discussions. Semi-Structured Interviews – conducted with Civics teachers, students, and the principal to explore their understanding, experiences, and strategies applied in addressing misinformation. Documentation – in the form of activity photos, learning notes, and curriculum documents.

Data Collection

Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman model, which includes: (1) data reduction, (2) data presentation, and (3) drawing conclusions/verification. Researchers conducted thematic coding to identify patterns related to Civics strategies in addressing misinformation and polarization. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (teachers, students, documents), method triangulation (observation, interviews, documentation), and member checking with informants. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through an audit trail of field notes. The Researchers Procedures was made by few steps that's requires such as Preparation with developing research instruments and obtaining research permits. Then the data collection using observation, interviews, and documentation, also with data analysis conducted simultaneously with data collection and drawing conclusions and compiling a research report.

This methodology is expected to explore in depth how civics learning plays a role in building media literacy, digital ethics, and reducing social polarization in the Post-Truth era.

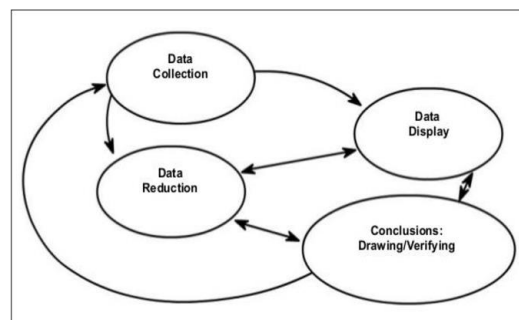


Figure 1. Interactive model of analysis

Result and Discussion

SMP Negeri 11 Samarinda is a public school with approximately 867 students, spread across grades VII through IX. The school's vision is to produce a generation with character, intelligence, and global competitiveness. Its curriculum includes Civics Education (PKn) as one of the subjects aimed at developing democratic, critical, and responsible citizens. Starting in the 2023/2024 academic year, the school began integrating media literacy into its Civics lessons in response to the rise of misinformation among students.

Classroom observations showed that Civics teachers actively used deliberative discussion and project-based learning methods. Students were presented with online news articles containing potential misinformation. They were asked to analyze the content, compare it with other sources, and present their analysis.

Observations showed that many students were not able to identify the difference between fact and opinion and students still have difficulties for began to develop a habit of using credible news sources as references so any classroom discussions not giving a fostered mutual respect for opinions. Interviews with Civics teachers revealed that the biggest challenge was students' initial lack of skills in evaluating online news. However, after several meetings, students began to show significant progress. Some key points from the interviews is the Civics teacher emphasized the importance of ongoing training for teachers to integrate media literacy, students felt more cautious about sharing information on social media, were more confident in questioning the authenticity of news, and were able to filter the information they received. The principal

emphasized that this program aligns with the school's vision and needs to be expanded to other subjects, not just Civics.

Data analysis revealed three main findings, first is Improved Media Literacy, integrating media literacy into Civics helps students understand the concepts of misinformation, hoaxes, and media bias. Second, strengthened Digital Ethics with students become more aware of the importance of social media responsibility. Third, reduced polarization with deliberative discussions encourage students to understand different viewpoints, thereby reducing exclusionary and intolerant attitudes.

The findings indicate that students often struggle to differentiate between factual information and misleading content without explicit instruction. Schools that integrated media literacy showed better student outcomes in critical thinking and civic reasoning. Teachers who used inquiry-based and deliberative methods fostered more open-mindedness and reduced signs of polarization. However, implementation challenges include limited training, lack of digital resources, and curriculum rigidity.

The results of this study align with various literature that emphasizes the importance of integrating media literacy and digital ethics in Civics Education. Several points that warrant further discussion are; First, Civics as a means of improving media literacy, The research findings indicate an increase in students' ability to distinguish fact from opinion and recognize credible sources. This is consistent with the findings of Gaultney et al. (2022) that even college students are still vulnerable to misinformation if they are not equipped with media literacy skills. Integrating media literacy into Civics has proven effective as a learning strategy in secondary schools. Second, Digital ethics as a pillar of learning with students' awareness to be more careful in sharing information indicates a growing digital ethics. Zuhriyah (2025) emphasized that without digital ethics, media literacy is merely technical. Therefore, Civics education at SMP Negeri 11 Samarinda has provided an important foundation for students to become responsible digital citizens. Third, strengthening democratic dialogue to reduce polarization, Deliberative discussions train students to listen to and appreciate

differences. These findings support the opinion of Muhtar et al. (2022) that schools are strategic spaces for building inclusive communities and bridging ideological differences. Therefore, Civics learning based on dialogue and collaboration contributes to reducing exclusive attitudes. Fourth, relevance of innovative Civics learning strategies with Project-based learning and discussion methods have been shown to increase active student participation. This finding aligns with Chang et al. (2020) who demonstrated the effectiveness of game-based learning in teaching news literacy. This suggests that innovative strategies based on active participation are more appropriate for facing the challenges of the digital era than conventional methods. Fifth, contribution to school vision and curriculum development the integration of media literacy in Civics supports the school's vision of producing a critical and globally competitive generation. This study also provides practical recommendations that the Civics curriculum should not stand alone but rather be integrated with other subjects for a more holistic approach.

Therefore, this study confirms that Civics Education in the digital era is not merely a transfer of knowledge, but also a transformation of media literacy competencies, digital ethics, and inclusive attitudes to address the challenges of misinformation and polarization.

Conclusion

Civic education, when enhanced with digital and media literacy, can be a powerful instrument to combat misinformation and reduce societal polarization. To realize this potential, educational stakeholders must invest in teacher capacity-building, curriculum reform, and inclusive digital pedagogy. The future of democracy depends on an informed, critical, and engaged citizenry.

Based on the research results and discussions regarding the role of Civics Education in addressing misinformation and polarization at SMP Negeri 11 Samarinda, the following conclusions can be drawn with Civics Education is effective in improving students' media literacy. Through deliberative

discussion methods and project-based learning, students are able to distinguish facts from opinions, use credible news sources, and become more critical of digital information. The integration of digital ethics strengthens students' responsibility in using social media. Students demonstrate increased awareness of the impacts of sharing information, leading to greater caution in spreading news and a habit of verifying content before sharing. Dialogue-based and collaborative learning contribute to reducing polarization. Discussion activities encourage students to understand and appreciate differences of opinion, ultimately strengthening the values of tolerance and social cohesion within the school environment. Innovative strategies in Civics Education support the achievement of 21st-century competencies. The application of active and participatory methods (deliberative discussions, project-based learning, and the potential use of game-based learning) forms students who are critical, creative, communicative, and reflective, in accordance with the demands of the digital era.

Based on the conclusions above, several suggestions can be made; for Schools, It is necessary to expand the integration of media literacy and digital ethics not only in Civics, but also in other subjects such as Indonesian, Social Studies, and Information Technology. Schools can provide regular training for teachers in the use of digital media and information literacy. For Civics Teachers, It is recommended to continue developing innovative learning strategies, including the use of simulations, case studies, and game-based learning, to actively engage students in the learning process. Teachers need to strengthen critical skills-based evaluation, not just cognitive aspects. For Students, Students need to cultivate digital literacy habits in their daily lives, such as fact-checking before sharing information. An attitude of tolerance and openness in discussions must be maintained and applied outside the school environment. For Future Researchers, Comparative research can be conducted in other schools to determine the effectiveness of media literacy strategies in different contexts. Further exploration of the use of digital technology, such as game-based learning platforms or educational social media, to

support Civics learning that is relevant to students' lives is needed.

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