

Analyzing the Ecosystem of Media and Information Literacy Education in Iran: A Synergistic Governance and Education Model

Sima Mirbakhsh¹, Mohammad Soltanifar², Bahareh Nasiri³

Received: 10 June 2025, Accepted: 16 June 2026

Doi: 10.22034/rcc.2026.2055790.1203

Extended Abstract

Purpose

Media and information literacy has increasingly evolved beyond a simple educational skill into a strategic component of communication governance, cognitive resilience, and social participation in the digital age. In contemporary societies, media and information literacy is no longer limited to teaching individuals how to access, interpret, and evaluate media content; rather, it has become a foundational capability that enables citizens to navigate complex information environments, resist misinformation, and engage meaningfully in democratic and cultural life. In Iran, although media literacy was formally introduced into the tenth-grade curriculum in 2016, the field continues to face major structural and organizational challenges. These include institutional fragmentation, weak coordination among responsible bodies, a lack of integration between policy formulation and practical implementation, and the absence of a coherent and sustainable educational ecosystem.

The present study addresses this gap by analyzing the ecosystem of media and information literacy education in Iran and proposing a strategic model for strengthening synergy between governance and education. The central concern of the study is that media and information literacy in Iran has not yet developed into a unified, coordinated, and stable system despite the presence of multiple policies, institutions, and initiatives. Instead of functioning as an integrated ecosystem, the field appears fragmented across different institutions with overlapping responsibilities and insufficient communication. This fragmentation has weakened the effectiveness of educational policies and limited the reach and impact of media literacy programs. As a result, the gap between policy and execution remains substantial, and educational efforts often occur in parallel rather than in coordination.

The study therefore seeks to explain why media and information literacy education in Iran has not transformed into a fully functional ecosystem and what kind of strategic

1. PhD student in Communication, Department of Communication and knowledge Sciences, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. Email: sima.mirbakhsh@yahoo.com

2. Professor, Department of Communication and Knowledge Sciences, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran (Corresponding Author). Email: m_soltanifar@srbiu.ac.ir

3. Associate Professor, Women and Family Studies Research Group, Social Studies Research Institute, Research Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, Tehran, Iran. Email: b.nasiri@ihcs.ac.ir

model can create synergy between cultural governance, formal education, and non-formal education. Methodologically, the research is qualitative and uses grounded theory with the Strauss and Corbin approach. This method was chosen because the study seeks to develop an explanatory model grounded in the lived experience and expert perspectives of those involved in media literacy, education, and policymaking. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 experts drawn from the fields of communication, education, policymaking, and media literacy. Purposeful and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify participants who had relevant knowledge and experience. The analysis followed the standard grounded theory stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, with data collection continuing until theoretical saturation was reached. This approach enabled the researcher to identify recurring categories, relationships among those categories, and the core phenomenon shaping the media literacy ecosystem in Iran. The findings show that the main challenge in the development of media and information literacy education in Iran is the lack of institutional synergy.

Although various organizations are involved in this field, including educational bodies, cultural institutions, and policy-making agencies, their roles are not sufficiently coordinated. Instead, the ecosystem is marked by duplication of effort, unclear division of responsibilities, and limited cooperation across institutional boundaries. One of the most important causal conditions identified in the study is the weak relationship between policy design and implementation. Policies may be developed at higher levels of governance, but they are not consistently translated into practical action in schools or other educational settings. This weak policy-to-practice linkage has produced a gap between official goals and actual educational outcomes. The study also identifies several contextual conditions that shape the ecosystem.

A centralized governance structure limits flexibility and slows the development of collaborative mechanisms. In addition, infrastructural weaknesses reduce the capacity of institutions to implement media literacy programs effectively. Intervening conditions further complicate the situation. These include managerial attitudes, unequal access to educational resources, and certain operational or technical orientations that influence how programs are adopted and carried out. Such conditions affect whether media literacy initiatives are treated as strategic priorities or merely as symbolic additions to the curriculum.

In response to these challenges, the study proposes a strategic model centered on network governance and institutional synergy. The model emphasizes that media and information literacy should not be seen as the responsibility of a single institution or a narrow educational unit. Instead, it should be managed through a coordinated network of actors whose roles are clearly defined and mutually reinforcing. A key element of the proposed approach is the division of labor among institutions so that responsibilities are not duplicated and resources are used more efficiently.

The model also highlights the need for feedback mechanisms between policymaking and implementation. Such mechanisms would allow experiences from schools, teachers, and local educational settings to inform future policy decisions, making the system more adaptive and responsive. Another major component of the proposed model is teacher empowerment. Since teachers are the primary agents of curriculum delivery, their professional development and media literacy competence are essential to the success of any educational reform. The study therefore stresses the importance of providing teach-

ers with training, resources, and institutional support so they can effectively teach media literacy concepts and skills.

In addition, the model calls for a structural connection between formal and non-formal education. Media literacy cannot be developed only within school classrooms; it must also be supported by extracurricular programs, community learning spaces, cultural initiatives, and media organizations. Such integration would broaden the reach of media literacy education and make it more relevant to real-world information environments.

The consequences identified in the study further illustrate the limitations of the current system. Because the ecosystem lacks coordination and synergy, institutionalization of media literacy remains uneven. Some initiatives may be more advanced than others, but there is no consistent national framework that ensures continuity and coherence. Parallel activities are common, and the gap between policy objectives and actual implementation persists. This situation weakens the long-term sustainability of media and information literacy efforts and prevents the formation of a mature, resilient educational ecosystem.

The study concludes that the sustainable development of media and information literacy in Iran requires a shift from fragmented, sectoral approaches toward a networked, participatory, and holistic model. Such a transformation would involve rethinking governance structures, strengthening inter-institutional cooperation, and aligning policy with educational practice. The proposed model underscores that media literacy should be understood not only as a curriculum topic, but also as an ecosystemic process involving governance, institutions, teachers, learners, and social structures.

By creating stronger links between formal education, non-formal education, and cultural policymaking, Iran can build a more coherent framework for media and information literacy education. In broader terms, the findings of this study suggest that media and information literacy should be integrated into the national educational and cultural agenda as a strategic priority. In an era marked by digital transformation, information overload, and the spread of misinformation, the ability to critically engage with media is essential for both individual empowerment and social resilience.

The Iranian case demonstrates that formal curriculum inclusion alone is insufficient unless it is supported by institutional coordination, policy consistency, and practical implementation capacity. Therefore, the future of media and information literacy education depends on developing a governance model that is collaborative, adaptive, and system-oriented.

Overall, the study contributes to the literature by offering an ecosystem-based understanding of media and information literacy education in Iran. It moves beyond isolated institutional analyses and frames the issue as a problem of governance, coordination, and educational design. The proposed model provides a useful foundation for policymakers, curriculum designers, educators, and cultural organizations seeking to strengthen media literacy in both formal and non-formal contexts. It also offers a conceptual basis for future research on how educational ecosystems can be structured to support cognitive resilience, critical thinking, and informed citizenship in the digital age.

Keywords: Media and Information Literacy, Educational Ecosystem, Institutional Synergy, Network Governance, Formal and Non-formal Education