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Reproducing Media and Information Literacy in the Encyclicals of Pope Francis: A Discursive Strategy Analysis

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ABSTRACT

*This study investigates how Pope Francis reproduces principles of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in his social encyclicals—*Lumen Fidei* (2013), *Laudato Si'* (2015), and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020)—through distinct discursive strategies. Drawing on Mumby's discourse framework and intertextual analysis, the research identifies four primary modes of MIL reproduction: media discernment, dialogic communication, advocacy communication, and media sustainability. Through thematic coding and textual analysis, the study reveals that Pope Francis embeds MIL into theological and pastoral discourse by fostering critical media engagement, promoting inclusive dialogue, advocating for educational initiatives, and encouraging ethical, sustainable media systems. These findings demonstrate how papal teaching can function as a moral and pedagogical resource for navigating the contemporary information environment, particularly in countering misinformation, strengthening community dialogue, and shaping ethical communication. The study contributes to scholarship on religion and social communication by showing how faith-based leadership can influence media literacy discourses.*

Keywords: *Media and information literacy, Pope Francis, encyclicals, discursive strategies, Catholic communication, religious media education*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and what is often colloquially termed “fake news” has underscored the need for robust Media and Information Literacy (MIL) competencies. However, scholars and institutions such as UNESCO and First Draft caution against the use of “fake news” as an academic term, advocating instead for the concept of information disorder, a more nuanced framework that distinguishes between false content shared with intent to deceive (disinformation), without intent (misinformation), and harmful but accurate content (malinformation).¹ This reframing highlights the complexity of today’s media environment and reinforces the urgency of MIL as a tool for ethical discernment and civic resilience.

In an era marked by algorithmic manipulation, digital polarization, and the erosion of public trust, the global misinformation crisis has become not only a civic challenge but a moral and spiritual one. While secular MIL frameworks offer critical tools for evaluating media content and promoting democratic participation, they often lack the ethical depth and communal grounding that religious traditions can provide. Within Catholicism, theological discourse, especially through papal encyclicals, offers a rich reservoir of moral reasoning, relational ethics, and symbolic language that can deepen MIL’s transformative potential. Pope Francis’s encyclicals respond directly to this crisis by embedding MIL principles within theological reflections on truth, solidarity, and human dignity. This study argues that connecting MIL with theology is not merely relevant but urgent, as faith-based leadership can offer unique resources for cultivating ethical discernment, resisting manipulation, and fostering inclusive dialogue in today’s media-saturated world.

This article examines how Pope Francis reproduces MIL principles through discursive strategies in *Lumen Fidei* (2013), *Laudato Si’* (2015), and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020). These three encyclicals, while primarily theological and moral documents, contain recurrent themes that align closely with MIL frameworks: critical evaluation of media messages, the ethical responsibility of communicators, participatory dialogue, advocacy for media education, and sustainability in the communication environment.

The research draws from Mumby’s (1997) discourse framework, which treats communication as simultaneously constructive and political, and intertextual analysis to trace how MIL-related concepts are woven through papal discourse. By focusing on Pope Francis’ encyclicals as both pastoral and pedagogical texts, the study highlights the capacity of religious leadership to shape public understandings of responsible media engagement.

¹ Claire Wardle, “Understanding Information Disorder,” *First Draft News*, last modified September 22, 2020. <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/>

2. Limitations

While this study offers insights into how Pope Francis' encyclicals reproduce Media and Information Literacy (MIL) principles, its scope is limited to Catholic magisterial texts. The findings reflect theological and cultural patterns specific to the Catholic tradition and may not be directly generalizable to other religious or secular contexts. Future research could explore comparative frameworks across different faiths, denominations, or regional media literacy initiatives to assess the broader applicability of these discursive strategies.

3. Review of Literature

3.1. Media and Information Literacy: Definitions and Dimensions

UNESCO defines Media and Information Literacy as the set of competencies that enable individuals to “access, evaluate, and create information” across diverse media and platforms, with an emphasis on critical thinking, ethical use, and participation in democratic life.² While early MIL frameworks emphasized technical skills and message analysis, more recent models integrate civic engagement, intercultural understanding, and ethical considerations.³ These expansions reflect the recognition that literacy in the digital age requires both cognitive and affective competencies.

Recent scholarship has further emphasized MIL's role in countering algorithmic bias, navigating AI-generated content, and fostering digital resilience. Tiernan et al. (2023) argue that MIL must evolve to address the interpretive challenges posed by artificial intelligence, advocating for educational frameworks that include ethical reflection and systemic critique.⁴ Hulin (2025) calls for a “whole-of-society” approach to MIL, especially as youth increasingly rely on generative AI and social platforms for information, World Economic Forum.⁵ Meanwhile, recent work by Mihailidis and De Abreu (2022) highlights the importance of

² UNESCO, “Media and Information Literacy,” *UNESCO*, last accessed July 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy>.

³ Carolyn Wilson et al., *Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers* (Paris: UNESCO, 2011), 18–21.

⁴ Peter Tiernan et al. “Information and Media Literacy in the Age of AI.” *Education Sciences* 13, no. 9 (2023): 906. <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/13/9/906>

⁵ Hulin, Thierry. “Media and Information Literacy in the Age of AI: A Whole-of-Society Approach.” *World Economic Forum*, last modified October 24, 2025. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/10/media-information-literacy-ai/>

cultivating civic media literacies that empower individuals to engage critically and ethically with digital environments.⁶

Building on this, Wardle and Derakhshan's interdisciplinary framework for understanding information disorder emphasizes the need to address not only the content but also the emotional, political, and technological systems that enable its spread.⁷ This approach aligns with MIL's expanded focus on ethical reflection, systemic critique, and resilience against manipulation, especially relevant in theological contexts where truth and moral discernment are central.

3.2. MIL in Religious and Moral Education

Religious traditions have long engaged with the ethical dimensions of communication, often framing discernment and truth-telling as moral imperatives. Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes the dignity of the human person, solidarity, and the common good—principles that parallel MIL's focus on responsible, participatory, and truth-oriented communication.⁸ Scholars such as Pacatte argue that religious leaders can be pivotal agents in promoting media literacy, particularly within communities where faith authority carries moral weight.⁹

Within the Catholic Church, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications has issued documents such as *Ethics in Internet* (2002) and *The Church and Internet* (2002), which explicitly address the need for critical engagement with digital media. Pope Francis' pontificate has advanced this trajectory by integrating MIL-relevant language into high-level magisterial documents.

3.3. The Digital Papacy and Pope Francis

The concept of the "Digital Papacy" describes the increasing use of digital tools and platforms by the Vatican to reach a global audience. Scholars note that Pope Francis' approach is distinct from his predecessors in its emphasis on accessibility, pastoral tone, and engagement with issues such as misinformation, environmental justice, and global solidarity.¹⁰ His encyclicals function not only as

⁶ Mihailidis, Paul, and Belinha S. De Abreu. "Untangling Media Literacy, Information Literacy, and Digital Literacy." *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 14, no. 1 (2022): 1–14. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1344751.pdf>

⁷ Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*, (Council of Europe, 2017). <https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html>.

⁸ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), §. 160–208.

⁹ Rose Pacatte, *Media Mindfulness: Educating Teens about Faith and Media* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2007), 14–18.

¹⁰ Paul A. Soukup, "Pope Francis and the Digital World," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 39, no. 2 (2016): 42–60.

theological treatises but as interventions in the media ecosystem, calling for critical discernment, inclusive dialogue, and ethical communication practices.¹¹

In *Fratelli Tutti*, for example, Pope Francis warns against “a kind of communication that is a sham” and denounces the “manipulation, distortion, and concealment of truth” in digital spaces.¹² These critiques align closely with MIL’s call for individuals to question media sources, verify facts, and resist emotionally manipulative content. Similarly, in *Laudato Si’*, his reflection on the “rapidification” of communication technology critiques the ways in which speed can undermine depth, accuracy, and reflection—echoing MIL’s emphasis on slowing down to evaluate content critically.¹³

Pope Francis’ digital leadership has drawn scholarly attention for its ability to transcend Catholic audiences and engage broader publics through accessible, dialogic, and morally resonant messaging. Narbona (2025) highlights how Francis’ use of Twitter and other digital platforms exemplifies a form of “pastoral digital leadership,” characterized by simplicity, emotional resonance, and a focus on global solidarity.¹⁴ Unlike institutional or doctrinal communication, his digital presence fosters a sense of proximity and moral urgency that appeals to both religious and secular audiences. This aligns with MIL’s emphasis on inclusive, ethical, and participatory communication, suggesting that Francis’ digital strategy functions not only as evangelization but also as a model for ethical media engagement in pluralistic societies.

Twiplomacy studies by Burson-Marsteller (2013–2020) consistently rank Pope Francis as one of the most influential global leaders on Twitter, with exceptionally high engagement rates. His @Pontifex account, especially in Spanish, often surpasses political figures in retweets and reach. His later use of Instagram expanded this influence through visual storytelling. These platforms allow Francis to model ethical digital engagement, reinforcing MIL principles like inclusive dialogue and responsible content creation.

4. Study Framework

This study is anchored in Mumby’s Discourse of Understanding, which conceives communication as the process by which people create and negotiate

¹¹ David Löffler, “The Digital Papacy of Francis,” *Journal of Catholic Media Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021): 4–22.

¹² Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), §. 50.

¹³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), §. 18.

¹⁴ Narbona, José María. “Digital Leadership, Twitter and Pope Francis.” *The Journal of Social Media in Society* 4, no. 1 (2025): 1–15.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181307>.

shared meanings.¹⁵ In this view, meaning is not merely transmitted from sender to receiver but is actively constructed within particular cultural and social contexts. For Pope Francis' encyclicals, this means that the articulation of truth, moral responsibility, and ethical media engagement is inseparable from the lived experiences of believers and the broader global community.

The discourse of understanding is especially relevant to Media and Information Literacy (MIL) because it frames communication not as a neutral exchange of facts but as an interpretive process where context, relationship, and dialogue shape how messages are received and acted upon. In papal discourse, this manifests in the repeated emphasis on listening, dialogue, and communal discernment, key competencies in MIL.

Complementing this is Craig's Socio-Cultural Tradition, which situates communication as the production and reproduction of shared cultural patterns.¹⁶ From this perspective, MIL is not only a set of cognitive skills but a socially embedded practice. Pope Francis's teaching engages directly with this dimension by calling for communication that strengthens community bonds, promotes intercultural understanding, and nurtures global solidarity.

By integrating Mumby's and Craig's perspectives, this study examines the encyclicals as communicative acts that reproduce MIL principles both theologically, grounded in Catholic Social Teaching, and culturally, influencing and responding to the norms, values, and discourses of contemporary society.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design using discursive strategy analysis. Guided by Mumby's *Discourse of Understanding* and Craig's *Socio-Cultural Tradition*, the research focuses on how Pope Francis' encyclicals reproduce principles of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) through language that fosters shared meaning and reinforces cultural values.

5.2. Corpus and Delimitation

The primary texts analyzed are three encyclicals authored by Pope Francis:

- *Lumen Fidei* (2013) – co-authored in part with Pope Benedict XVI, focusing on faith as a light that guides understanding, including in the mediated world;

¹⁵ Dennis K. Mumby, "The Problem of Meaning in Organizational Communication," *Communication Monographs* 54, no. 1, (1997): 46–47.

¹⁶ Robert T. Craig, "Communication Theory as a Field," *Communication Theory* 9, no. 2 (1999): 144–145.

- *Laudato Si'* (2015) – centered on care for creation with a critique of “rapidification” in communication and its moral implications;
- *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) – dedicated to human fraternity and social friendship, containing direct critiques of misinformation, polarization, and manipulative communication.

The analysis is drawn solely from the findings chapter of the author’s dissertation, specifically the sections on MIL reproduction in these encyclicals. For this article, the material has been rewritten for originality, expanded with further literature integration, and formatted according to the journal’s guidelines.

5.3. Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Identification of MIL-related Passages – Reading each encyclical in full and marking passages that align with UNESCO’s MIL competencies (critical evaluation, ethical use of media, intercultural dialogue, participatory engagement).
2. Coding into Strategic Themes – Grouping passages under four strategic functions: Media Discernment, Dialogic Communication, Advocacy Communication, and Media Sustainability.
3. Interpretive Commentary – Applying Mumby’s and Craig’s frameworks to explain how these discursive strategies produce shared meaning and reinforce socio-cultural values relevant to MIL.

Tables summarizing each theme are embedded in the Findings section, with interpretive commentary explaining their theological and pedagogical significance.

6. Findings

This part examines the impact of Pope Francis’s theological discourses, communicative methods, and digital papacy on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) education, analyzing how his religious discourse, particularly as expressed in the social encyclicals, shapes the approach to Media Discernment, Dialogic Communication, Advocacy Communication, and Media Sustainability. Through an exploration of his teachings on contemporary challenges, denunciations of misinformation, and the transformative role of the Catholic Church in the digital era, this study investigates how his words and practices influence MIL curricula and encourage critical media engagement. It further considers how his digital

leadership, strategic use of media, and integration of media literacy with Catholic Social Teaching advance responsible media use and ethical practices in today’s context.

6.1. Media Discernment

Media discernment refers to the ability to critically evaluate information, understand the intentions and biases behind media messages, and make ethical decisions about communication practices. In the encyclicals, Pope Francis frames this not merely as a technical skill but as a moral and spiritual practice—an act of prudence, truth-seeking, and care for the common good.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, he warns against “a kind of communication that is a sham” and laments the spread of “fake news” that manipulates emotions and distorts reality.¹⁷ This aligns directly with UNESCO’s MIL competency of critical evaluation, but with a theological deepening: discernment is framed as a way to protect human dignity and build authentic relationships.

Table 1: Discursive Strategies for Media Discernment in Pope Francis’ Encyclicals

Encyclical	Quotation	MIL Competency Reproduced	Interpretive Notes
<i>Fratelli Tutti</i> (no. 50)	“Digital media can expose people to the risk of addiction, isolation, and loss of contact with reality.”	Critical evaluation of media impact	Frames media impact as a moral concern tied to human dignity.
<i>Laudato Si’</i> (no. 47)	“The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart... and the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures.”	Recognizing persuasive intent	Links consumerist media culture to moral and environmental harm.
<i>Lumen Fidei</i> (no. 25)	“Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey.”	Evaluating information through moral frameworks	Suggests that truth discernment involves humility and patience, countering the immediacy of digital “quick takes.”

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, § 50.

Source: Author's coding based on Pope Francis' encyclicals.

From the perspective of the Discourse of Understanding, these passages show how Francis reframes dialogue as a spiritual practice rooted in relational ethics with his audience about the nature of truth in a mediated environment.

This reflects Craig's view of communication as cultural reproduction by embedding MIL competencies in moral narratives and shared symbols (e.g., "light" as guidance, "common good" as purpose). Pope Francis aligns media discernment with deeply rooted Catholic cultural patterns. This not only aids comprehension among the faithful but also bridges religious and secular understandings of critical media literacy.

Literature in religious media education supports this approach. Pacatte emphasizes that media literacy in faith contexts should be "both analytical and contemplative," fostering skills while also shaping character.¹⁸ Similarly, Buckingham notes that critical media education is most effective when connected to learners' values and lived realities.¹⁹ Pope Francis's integration of MIL into theological discourse exemplifies this dual focus.

6.2. Dialogic Communication

Dialogic communication emphasizes mutual respect, openness to diverse perspectives, and a commitment to building understanding through dialogue. In Pope Francis' encyclicals, dialogue is not only a social virtue but also a theological imperative, rooted in the belief that truth is best discerned in community and that authentic communication builds bridges across divisions.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis insists on the importance of "face-to-face encounter" in an age where digital communication risks reducing others to abstractions or enemies.²⁰ He calls for dialogue that is patient, inclusive, and oriented toward reconciliation, a message that resonates strongly with MIL's emphasis on intercultural understanding and participatory communication.

Table 2: Discursive Strategies for Dialogic Communication in Pope Francis' Encyclicals

Encyclical	Quotation	MIL Competency Reproduced	Interpretive Notes
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¹⁸ Rose Pacatte, *Media Mindfulness: Educating Teens about Faith and Media* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2007), 17.

¹⁹ David Buckingham, *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 46.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 198.

<i>Fratelli Tutti</i> (no. 198)	“Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word ‘dialogue.’”	Intercultural dialogue	Encourages communicators to cultivate empathy and common ground across differences.
<i>Laudato Si'</i> (no. 14)	“I urgently appeal for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet.”	Participatory engagement	Frames environmental action as requiring inclusive public conversation.
<i>Lumen Fidei</i> (no. 34)	“Faith is passed on... by contact from one person to another, just as one candle is lit from another.”	Relational communication	Uses metaphor of light-sharing to describe the personal, dialogic nature of transmitting truth.

Source: Author’s coding based on Pope Francis’ encyclicals.

Through the lens of **Discourse of Understanding**, Pope Francis presents dialogue not as debate or persuasion but as a co-creative process. The verbs he uses, *approaching*, *speaking*, *listening*, and *looking at*, describe reciprocal actions, underscoring that meaning emerges in the relational exchange, not in unilateral proclamation.

From Craig’s **Socio-Cultural Tradition**, these dialogic appeals function to reproduce shared cultural norms of solidarity, hospitality, and mutual respect. In Catholic tradition, dialogue has been central to ecumenical and interfaith relations since Vatican II, and Pope Francis extends this heritage into contemporary socio-digital contexts.

Scholars in MIL education note that dialogic pedagogy fosters not only skill acquisition but also democratic citizenship. Freire’s concept of “dialogical action” stresses that authentic dialogue empowers participants to become co-authors of their own narratives.²¹ Similarly, De Abreu argues that dialogic approaches to MIL help learners critically engage with diverse viewpoints while maintaining respect for others’ dignity.²² Pope Francis’s encyclicals embody these principles by weaving together theological commitments with participatory communication ideals.

²¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88–92.
²² Belinha S. De Abreu, *Media Literacy Education in Action: Theoretical and Pedagogical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 61.

6.3. Advocacy Communication

Advocacy communication refers to the intentional use of communication to promote social change, mobilize communities, and influence public policy. Pope Francis’s encyclicals often move beyond description or moral exhortation to urge concrete action, educational initiatives, civic engagement, and political advocacy, that align with MIL principles.

In *Laudato Si’*, Francis frames environmental care as a civic and moral duty, calling for educational programs that equip people to challenge unsustainable practices.²³ In *Fratelli Tutti*, he warns against apathy in the face of injustice and urges citizens to use their voices constructively, particularly in the public sphere where media narratives shape policy debates.²⁴

Table 3: Discursive Strategies for Advocacy Communication in Pope Francis’ Encyclicals

Encyclical	Quotation	MIL Competency Reproduced	Interpretive Notes
<i>Laudato Si’</i> (no. 209)	“Environmental education has broadened its goals... it needs to include a critique of the ‘myths’ of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset.”	Media critique and analysis	Encourages questioning dominant narratives that legitimize ecological harm.
<i>Fratelli Tutti</i> (no. 15)	“The best way to dominate and gain control over people is to spread despair and discouragement, even under the guise of defending certain values.”	Countering dis-information	Calls for advocacy against manipulative narratives that weaken civic resolve.
<i>Lumen Fidei</i> (no. 54)	“Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives... it broadens the horizons of human existence.”	Inspiring public engagement	Frames advocacy as an act of hope that expands societal vision.

Source: Author’s coding based on Pope Francis’ encyclicals.

Francis’ advocacy-oriented passages place media literacy in an active, public dimension. He connects critical evaluation of narratives with the responsibility to respond—whether through education, community organizing, or influencing

²³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), §. 209.

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), §. 15.

policy. This reinforces the idea that MIL is not only about personal discernment but also about collective action.

Such integration of moral conviction with civic engagement echoes communication traditions that see meaning-making as inseparable from community transformation. The call to “critique the myths of modernity” reflects a socio-cultural understanding that dominant stories are not neutral; they shape the cultural environment in which people make decisions. By urging the faithful to contest harmful narratives, the Pope aligns MIL with broader movements for justice and sustainability.

What is particularly significant in these encyclicals is the reframing of advocacy as a shared moral obligation rather than a specialized task for activists or policymakers.²⁵ By addressing the entire Church and all people of goodwill, Pope Francis positions advocacy as part of everyday citizenship, rooted in the virtues of truthfulness, courage, and solidarity.²⁶ This inclusivity widens the scope of MIL by recognizing that every media consumer is also a potential media influencer and cultural participant.²⁷

Additionally, the Pope’s language reveals a deep awareness of media’s agenda-setting power.²⁸ His warning about spreading despair “under the guise of defending certain values” functions as a critique of propaganda that cloaks itself in moral language.²⁹ In the context of MIL, this becomes a call for citizens to interrogate not only the factual accuracy of media content but also the moral narratives and symbolic frames that accompany it.³⁰ Such discernment ensures that advocacy is informed, ethical, and resistant to manipulation.

Compared to secular MIL frameworks, which often emphasize technical competencies, civic participation, and fact-checking protocols, Pope Francis’ approach integrates moral discernment, relational ethics, and theological reflection. His encyclicals frame media engagement not merely as a skillset but as a spiritual and communal practice rooted in human dignity and solidarity. In contrast, Pope Benedict XVI’s writings, such as *Caritas in Veritate*, address communication ethics with a more doctrinal tone, focusing on truth as a metaphysical and theological principle. While Benedict emphasizes the ontological foundations of truth, Francis foregrounds its social consequences, particularly in the context of misinformation, polarization, and ecological degradation. This shift reflects a broader pastoral turn in papal discourse, aligning MIL with inclusive dialogue,

²⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88–92.

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 15.

²⁷ Renee Hobbs, *Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture and Classroom* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2011), 21.

²⁸ Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176–187.

²⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 15.

³⁰ Paul Mihailidis, *Civic Media Literacies: Re-Imagining Human Connection in an Age of Digital Abundance* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 19.

advocacy, and sustainability. By bridging theological insight with media ethics, Francis offers a model of MIL that is both spiritually grounded and socially responsive—an approach that complements but also challenges secular paradigms.

6.4. Media Sustainability

Media sustainability, in the context of Pope Francis’ encyclicals, refers to fostering communication systems that are ethically grounded, socially responsible, and capable of serving the common good over the long term. While the term “sustainability” is often applied to environmental issues, the Pope extends its scope to cultural and communicative life—underscoring the need for media ecosystems that nurture truth, inclusion, and solidarity rather than exploitation or fragmentation.

In *Laudato Si’*, Francis connects environmental and cultural degradation, arguing that the same profit-driven mindset that exploits nature also distorts human communication.³¹ A sustainable media environment, therefore, is one that resists the commodification of information and promotes narratives that strengthen, rather than erode, community bonds.

Fratelli Tutti warns against media systems that prioritize sensationalism and division over responsible reporting. Francis calls instead for a communication ethic that supports human dignity and the slow work of building trust.³² This vision aligns closely with Media and Information Literacy’s goal of equipping citizens to recognize, support, and create media that contribute to social cohesion.

Furthermore, media sustainability demands attention to the production side not just the consumption side of communication. Ethical journalism, equitable access to platforms, and community-based media production are part of the “ecology” Francis envisions.³³ In MIL terms, sustainability means ensuring that diverse voices have both the capacity and the opportunity to participate in public discourse without being drowned out by monopolistic or manipulative forces.

Table 4: Discursive Strategies for Media Sustainability in Pope Francis’ Encyclicals

Encyclical	Quotation	MIL Competency Reproduced	Interpretive Notes
<i>Laudato Si’</i> (no. 47)	“The social dimensions of global change	Media impact awareness	Links technological and media shifts to

³¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §. 47.
³² Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 201.
³³ De Abreu, *Media Literacy Education in Action: Theoretical and Pedagogical Perspectives*, 112.

	include the effects of technological innovations on employment, social exclusion, and the breakdown of social bonds.”		social fragmentation, urging sustainable alternatives.
<i>Fratelli Tutti</i> (no. 201)	“The media’s noisy potpourri of facts and opinions... can prevent people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply, and to love generously.”	Critical media consumption	Warns against information overload that hinders sustainable moral and civic growth.
<i>Lumen Fidei</i> (no. 32)	“Faith is born of an encounter... and should be passed on in every age by means of the language of the present.”	Adaptive communication strategies	Encourages sustainable faith transmission through culturally relevant yet enduring media forms.

Source: Author’s coding based on Pope Francis’ encyclicals.

Pope Francis’ framing of media sustainability links the ethics of communication to the broader ethics of environmental and cultural care. In *Laudato Si’*, the critique of technological excess is intertwined with the call to protect social bonds, suggesting that communication systems should be designed with long-term relational health in mind.³⁴ Such a vision challenges the short-term metrics of click-through rates and viral reach, replacing them with criteria like trust, community resilience, and inclusivity.

The Pope’s acknowledgment of “noisy potpourri” in *Fratelli Tutti* reflects a concern about informational saturation, a phenomenon well-documented in media studies as “information overload.”³⁵ In MIL terms, sustainability here means cultivating audiences who can navigate abundance without succumbing to fatigue, cynicism, or disengagement. This requires not only technical skills for filtering and evaluating information but also ethical dispositions toward truth-seeking and empathy.

Sustainable media, in Francis’ view, also demands equity in both access and representation. The socio-cultural tradition in communication theory reminds us that meaning is co-constructed; thus, when entire communities are excluded

³⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §. 47.
³⁵ David Bawden and Lyn Robinson, “The Dark Side of Information: Overload, Anxiety and Other Paradoxes and Pathologies,” *Journal of Information Science* 35, no. 2 (2009): 180–191.

from media production, the shared cultural narrative becomes impoverished.³⁶ By advocating for inclusive participation, Francis aligns himself with MIL's principle that diversity in media ownership and production is essential for a democratic public sphere.

Moreover, the encyclicals encourage adaptive communication strategies that honor tradition while remaining responsive to cultural change. This adaptability resonates with the concept of "resilient media systems" in MIL scholarship—systems that can withstand disruptive technologies and shifting audience behaviors without losing their ethical core.³⁷ Francis' call to use "the language of the present" for faith transmission underscores the need for media to be both relevant and rooted.

Finally, media sustainability is presented not as a technical problem but as a moral and cultural challenge. It requires citizens, educators, journalists, and policymakers to resist the commodification of attention and instead invest in communicative practices that build social trust over time. In this sense, the Pope's approach deepens MIL's scope by integrating it into the broader moral project of caring for our shared communicative home.³⁸

7. Discussion

The four thematic strands identified in this study, Ethical Use of Media, Critical Engagement, Advocacy Communication, and Media Sustainability, collectively illuminate the complex ways in which Pope Francis' encyclicals reproduce the principles of Media and Information Literacy (MIL). While each theme can be analyzed independently, their interplay reveals a coherent vision rooted in the socio-cultural tradition of communication as articulated by Robert T. Craig.³⁹ In this tradition, communication is not simply a vehicle for transmitting information; it is a constitutive process through which social reality is produced, maintained, and transformed.

In the encyclicals, communication is framed as a shared cultural practice that both shapes and is shaped by moral, spiritual, and social commitments. By embedding MIL competencies, such as critical thinking, media critique, ethical participation, and sustainable communication, into theological discourse, Francis affirms that literacy in the media age is inseparable from the moral and communal life of society. The socio-cultural lens thus enables us to see the encyclicals not

³⁶ Clifford G. Christians et al., *Communication Ethics and Universal Values* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 77.

³⁷ Sonia Livingstone, "Media Literacy and the Challenge of New Information and Communication Technologies," *The Communication Review* 7, no. 1 (2004): 3–14.

³⁸ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 201.

³⁹ Craig, "Communication Theory as a Field," 119–161.

merely as prescriptive texts but as dialogic interventions in the global conversation about media ethics and civic responsibility.

7.1. Ethical Use of Media: Moral Foundations of Communicative Life

The theme of ethical use of media, as found in *Laudato Si'*, *Fratelli Tutti*, and *Lumen Fidei*, situates MIL within a framework of moral accountability. Francis calls for truthfulness, respect, and responsibility in all communicative acts, aligning with the socio-cultural view that shared norms and values are co-constructed through interaction.⁴⁰ In this perspective, ethical media practices are not imposed from outside but emerge from ongoing negotiation within communities.

Craig's socio-cultural tradition emphasizes that communication both reflects and constructs social norms. The encyclicals' focus on truth-telling and mutual respect reinforces MIL's insistence that media consumers and producers alike are participants in a cultural system that depends on the credibility and integrity of its communicative exchanges.⁴¹ By grounding these competencies in theological anthropology, the belief that human beings are relational and communicative by nature, Francis expands the scope of MIL to include spiritual motivations for ethical communication.

In *Lumen Fidei*, Francis asserts, "Faith is passed on... by contact from one person to another, just as one candle is lighted from another candle."⁴² This metaphor captures the relational foundation of all communication and aligns perfectly with the socio-cultural tradition's view of meaning as emerging from interaction. In MIL terms, it suggests that ethical media use is not primarily about compliance with abstract rules but about sustaining communicative relationships in which truth and trust are shared resources. The Pope's emphasis on person-to-person transmission of values challenges the impersonality of algorithm-driven communication systems, reminding MIL practitioners that ethical use must be grounded in interpersonal accountability.

Moreover, the encyclicals' repeated insistence on truth as a social good echoes socio-cultural theorists' warnings against treating communication merely as a conduit for information. Truth, in this framing, is co-constructed and maintained through dialogue, making the ethical use of media inseparable from the cultivation of dialogic spaces where truth can flourish.⁴³ In this sense, Francis's vision resists both relativism and authoritarianism, instead advocating a participatory ethic in which all members of a community are responsible for the integrity of shared meaning.

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 20.

⁴¹ Christians et al., *Communication Ethics and Universal Values*, 77.

⁴² Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), §. 37.

⁴³ *Lumen Fidei*, §. 38.

7.2. Critical Engagement: Discernment in the Cultural Marketplace

The second theme, critical engagement, reveals how the encyclicals encourage believers to approach media not as passive consumers but as discerning interpreters of meaning. This competency is central to MIL, which frames critical engagement as the ability to evaluate media messages for accuracy, bias, and underlying values.⁴⁴

From a socio-cultural perspective, media are not neutral channels but sites where cultural meanings are negotiated. Francis' critique of "ideological colonization" in *Fratelli Tutti* echoes this insight, warning that unchecked media narratives can impose values that undermine cultural and spiritual integrity.⁴⁵ The socio-cultural tradition highlights that meaning is produced through interaction between media texts and audiences; thus, discernment is not only about decoding messages but also about recognizing one's own role in shaping their significance.

The call for discernment in *Fratelli Tutti*, particularly the warning against "the proliferation of fake news" and "distorted narratives,"⁴⁶ locates critical engagement firmly within a socio-cultural understanding of communication. Here, discernment is not a solitary mental act but a communal practice of weighing competing narratives against the standards of justice, solidarity, and the common good. MIL, when viewed through this lens, becomes a form of cultural stewardship in which communities safeguard their own interpretive agency.

Francis' critique of media sensationalism: "The media's noisy potpourri of facts and opinions... can prevent people from learning how to live wisely,"⁴⁷ highlights the danger of interpretive fragmentation. The socio-cultural tradition recognizes this as a breakdown in the shared symbolic environment that communication creates. Critical engagement, therefore, must be cultivated not only at the level of individual skill but also through institutional and cultural reforms that promote deliberative media practices.

By urging the faithful to question narratives that promote consumerism, relativism, or division, the encyclicals model the MIL skill of media critique. However, they go further by embedding this critique in a vision of human flourishing grounded in solidarity and the common good. This moves MIL beyond a technical skill set toward a mode of cultural participation that is ethically and spiritually informed.

7.3. Advocacy Communication: Participation in Cultural Change

The third theme, advocacy communication, expands MIL's traditional focus on analysis and evaluation to include active participation in shaping public

⁴⁴ Hobbs, *Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture and Classroom*, 21.

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 14.

⁴⁶ *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 45.

⁴⁷ *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 50.

discourse. Francis' call for citizens to counter falsehood, resist despair, and work for justice aligns with the socio-cultural tradition's emphasis on communication as a constitutive force in social life.⁴⁸

When Francis urges the faithful to “enter into the realities of other people's lives,”⁴⁹ he reframes advocacy not as a distant act of charity but as participatory co-creation of a shared world. This approach mirrors the socio-cultural view that communication does not merely describe social reality—it brings that reality into being. In MIL education, this insight transforms advocacy from a reactive stance against harmful narratives into a proactive process of generating alternative narratives rooted in justice and human dignity.

The encyclicals' integration of advocacy and dialogue aligns with Paulo Freire's conception of “*conscientização*” (critical consciousness), which emphasizes the dialogic process of naming the world together.⁵⁰ For the socio-cultural tradition, such advocacy is not simply about transmitting messages but about negotiating meaning in ways that reshape the structures of power and representation. This is why Francis' vision of advocacy is inseparable from his vision of community; both require sustained, reciprocal communication to succeed.

In Craig's framework, communication is both the medium and the process through which communities negotiate shared meanings and enact change. The encyclicals' advocacy dimension recognizes that media literacy without civic engagement risks becoming an insular skill set. To be fully realized, MIL must empower individuals and communities to use their communicative competence for collective transformation.

7.4. Media Sustainability: The Long View of Communication Ethics

The final theme, media sustainability, invites a long-term perspective on communicative life. By linking environmental, cultural, and media ecologies, Francis proposes a holistic vision in which sustainable communication systems are essential for human and ecological flourishing.⁵¹

By describing the “rapidification” of life and communication in *Laudato Si'*⁵², Francis introduces a temporal dimension to media sustainability that resonates with socio-cultural concerns about the pace of cultural change. Just as ecosystems require stability to thrive, communicative cultures require rhythms that allow for reflection, dialogue, and consensus-building. MIL's contribution here is to provide tools for slowing down interpretation—fact-checking, contextual reading, and deliberation, so that communities can resist the pull of immediacy that

⁴⁸ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88–92.

⁴⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 114.

⁵⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 72.

⁵¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §. 47.

⁵² *Laudato Si'*, §. 18.

undermines thoughtful engagement. Across all three encyclicals, Francis critiques speed, manipulation, and exclusion, calling for a media ethic rooted in patience, truth, and solidarity

Francis's insistence on using "the language of the present" for transmitting enduring truths⁵³ also bridges tradition and innovation. In socio-cultural terms, this adaptability is what allows communicative traditions to endure without becoming obsolete. A sustainable media culture, then, honors its roots while remaining responsive to the evolving symbolic landscape in which it operates.

The socio-cultural tradition's focus on co-constructed meaning underscores the need for media systems that sustain, rather than undermine, the conditions for constructive dialogue. In MIL terms, this means fostering both production and consumption practices that are equitable, inclusive, and oriented toward the common good. Media sustainability thus involves not only resisting harmful content but also building resilient communicative structures—community journalism, participatory media platforms, and ethical information networks that can endure technological and cultural shifts.

7.5. Integration: MIL as a Socio-Cultural Practice in the Encyclicals

When considered together, the four themes demonstrate how the encyclicals reproduce MIL competencies within a theological framework that is deeply consonant with socio-cultural communication theory. Each theme addresses a different dimension of communicative life, ethical grounding, critical discernment, civic participation, and sustainability, but all are united by a vision of communication as a shared cultural practice oriented toward the common good.

From the socio-cultural perspective, MIL is not a neutral, technical toolkit; it is a participatory process of meaning-making that is inseparable from identity, values, and community life.⁵⁴ Francis' encyclicals embody this understanding by embedding media literacy within the Church's mission of evangelization, social justice, and care for creation. In doing so, they extend MIL beyond secular education into the realm of moral and spiritual formation.

Moreover, the encyclicals reveal that the reproduction of MIL in religious discourse is not accidental. By addressing media ethics, critical engagement, advocacy, and sustainability together, Francis offers a comprehensive model for integrating MIL into the cultural fabric. This approach aligns with contemporary scholarship that sees media literacy as a lifelong, community-embedded practice rather than a discrete set of classroom skills.⁵⁵

⁵³ *Laudato Si'*, §. 158.

⁵⁴ Craig, "Communication Theory as a Field," 144.

⁵⁵ Mihailidis, *Civic Media Literacies: Re-Imagining Human Connection in an Age of Digital Abundance*, 19.

Ultimately, the socio-cultural lens makes visible the encyclicals' contribution to global MIL discourse: they demonstrate that media literacy is most powerful when it is both a personal capacity and a shared cultural ethic. This dual orientation, rooted in both individual discernment and collective responsibility, offers a valuable paradigm for educators, faith leaders, and policymakers seeking to foster more ethical, participatory, and sustainable communication systems.

8. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Pope Francis' encyclicals, *Laudato Si'*, *Fratelli Tutti*, and *Lumen Fidei*, reproduce key dimensions of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) through the lens of Craig's Socio-Cultural Tradition. By framing communication as a constitutive process through which communities build shared meaning, the socio-cultural perspective illuminates how the encyclicals embed MIL competencies into theological discourse.

Four thematic strands, ethical use of media, critical engagement, advocacy communication, and media sustainability, emerged from the analysis. Each of these themes reflects not only the Church's pastoral priorities but also a robust engagement with the challenges of communication in the digital age. Ethical use of media anchors MIL in a moral framework grounded in truthfulness and relational integrity.⁵⁶ Critical engagement positions discernment as both a personal skill and a communal responsibility, equipping citizens to resist manipulation and foster dialogue.⁵⁷ Advocacy communication extends MIL into active cultural participation, emphasizing the transformative potential of communicative action in pursuit of justice.⁵⁸ Finally, media sustainability integrates MIL into the long-term stewardship of communicative ecologies, recognizing the interdependence of technological, cultural, and environmental systems.⁵⁹

The integration of MIL into religious discourse highlights the adaptability of media literacy frameworks across cultural and institutional contexts. In Pope Francis' writings, MIL is not treated as a specialized field reserved for educators and media professionals; rather, it is presented as an essential competency for all who participate in social life. This democratization of MIL aligns with the socio-cultural understanding of communication as a shared, constitutive process. It also underscores the potential for religious institutions to serve as influential partners in promoting ethical, participatory, and sustainable communication practices.

In this way, the encyclicals offer a distinctive contribution to global MIL discourse: they position media literacy as a moral and spiritual responsibility,

⁵⁶ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 20.

⁵⁷ *Fratelli Tutti*, §. 45.

⁵⁸ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88–92.

⁵⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §. 47.

inseparable from the broader call to solidarity, justice, and care for creation. This contribution is particularly relevant in a time when digital communication shapes not only the flow of information but also the moral and cultural imagination of communities worldwide.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for different stakeholders in Media and Information Literacy (MIL) education, policy, and practice:

1. **For Educators and MIL Practitioners** — MIL programs should incorporate ethical, relational, and sustainability dimensions more explicitly, reflecting the integrated approach found in Pope Francis' encyclicals. This includes embedding dialogue-based learning that mirrors the interpersonal and communal ethos described in *Lumen Fidei*, integrating case studies from religious and cultural texts to broaden the scope of MIL beyond secular media, and encouraging students to practice critical engagement not only with media content but also with the socio-cultural contexts that shape it.
2. **For Religious Institutions** — Faith communities should recognize their role as spaces for MIL formation. They are encouraged to facilitate intergenerational dialogues on media ethics and digital citizenship, promote community-based media initiatives that embody principles of truth, participation, and sustainability, and partner with schools and civic organizations to address misinformation and polarization through shared values of solidarity and justice.
3. **For Policy Makers and Civil Society** — MIL policy frameworks should integrate insights from socio-cultural communication theory, emphasizing participatory governance of media platforms to ensure diverse cultural voices are included. Policy efforts should also support sustainable media infrastructures that can counter the destabilizing effects of rapid technological change, and implement legal and institutional measures that protect the moral and cultural agency of communities in the digital sphere.
4. **For Researchers** — Further research should explore how other religious or cultural traditions reproduce MIL competencies in their foundational texts, conduct comparative analyses between secular MIL frameworks and those grounded in theological or moral traditions, and develop MIL indicators that measure both individual skills and communal capacities, informed by the socio-cultural tradition.

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