



Department for  
Digital, Culture,  
Media & Sport

**ONLINE**

**MEDIA**

**LITERACY**

**STRATEGY**

JULY 2021

# MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

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**The digital world is increasingly entwined with the physical one; 87% of the UK population is online. We use the internet to connect with loved ones, to socialise, to engage in business and to deliver public services. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into sharp relief the integral and positive role the internet plays in our lives, and we have relied on the online world like never before.**

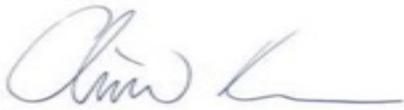
However, the pandemic has also highlighted the harms that can arise online. We saw a rise in misinformation and disinformation about the virus on social media and other online platforms. This caused confusion and fear for some, and enabled bad actors to stoke divisions. It manifested as physical harm as some tried dangerous, false curative measures to address COVID-19, whilst falsehoods about 5G saw instances of arson and vandalism of telephone masts. We have also seen a rise in online abuse, with research from the Community Security Trust showing 2020 had the second-highest annual total of antisemitic incidents occurring online. It is clear that tech companies need to be held accountable for the actions and harms that take place on their platforms. We are ensuring this

through our world-leading Online Safety Bill, which will establish a new duty of care to make companies take responsibility for the safety of their users. Alongside this new legislation, we want users to be able to make informed and safer decisions online, to make the most of all the good the internet has to offer. This Strategy is part of our plan to achieve this by supporting the education and empowerment of all internet users with the key skills and knowledge they need to be safe online – you could call it a Green Cross Code for the internet.

The UK already has a rich landscape of businesses, civil society and other organisations taking action to help users manage their online safety. We want to support these organisations to continue the excellent work they are doing to improve media literacy across the UK. By providing support and direction for the sector, we want to reach all users to empower them with the skills and knowledge they need to stay safe online. We want users to be able to critically evaluate the content they consume, understand that online actions can have offline consequences, and be able to contribute to a respectful and kind online environment.

This Strategy outlines a framework to guide these efforts, and highlights key challenges to provide focus for organisations across the sector. Alongside the Strategy, our accompanying first annual Outline Action Plan shows the steps government will take to start to act to harness the efforts of our domestic stakeholder landscape, to empower current and future generations to be better digital citizens, and support our ambition to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online.

**Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP**

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Oliver Dowden', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media,  
and Sport



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Research has found that users generally lack the key skills and knowledge they need to develop strong media literacy capabilities. This can lead to a population at high risk of suffering negative impacts of online harms due to limited understanding about online safety, and a limited ability to navigate the online environment in a safe way.

The UK already has a rich media literacy sector with over 170 organisations undertaking media literacy activity. However, extensive stakeholder engagement has highlighted key cross-sector challenges which act as barriers to improving user media literacy capabilities.

The objective of the Online Media Literacy Strategy is to support organisations to undertake media literacy activity in a more coordinated, wide-reaching, and high quality way over the next 3 years.

**The objective of the Online Media Literacy Strategy is to support organisations to undertake media literacy activity in a more coordinated, wide-reaching, and high quality way over the next 3 years.**

We believe that this will subsequently lead to improved media literacy capabilities for users in the UK. **The Strategy will support this objective in four ways:**

- **setting out a strategic direction for the future of media literacy in the UK**
- **ensuring a coordinated approach to media literacy activity**
- **addressing key gaps within the media literacy landscape**
- **reducing barriers and creating opportunities for organisations undertaking media literacy activity**

We have worked closely with a range of stakeholders and other government departments, such as the Department for Education and the Home Office, to ensure this Strategy complements the existing media literacy landscape.

## Media Literacy Framework

Media literacy encompasses a broad range of topics and issues relating to the online environment. This Strategy sets out a Media Literacy Knowledge and Skills Framework, which highlights **five principles** that support strong media literacy capabilities. Each principle is accompanied by actions we are encouraging online platforms to take to promote and stimulate media literacy for their users.

**The framework's five principles state that users should understand:**

- **the risks of sharing personal data online and how that data can be used by others, and be able to take action to protect their privacy online**
- **how the online environment operates and use this to inform decisions online**
- **how online content is generated, and be able to critically analyse the content they consume**

- **actions online have consequences offline, and use this understanding in their online interactions**
- **how to participate in online engagement and contribute to making the online environment positive, whilst understanding the risks of engaging with others**

## The Media Literacy Landscape

The media literacy sector encompasses a broad range of organisations including: online platforms, civil society organisations, news organisations, academia, public services, regulators, and government. Each stakeholder group plays a distinct role within the sector that we want to encourage and support. We also want to see increased coordination of the sector to bring together different stakeholder groups to collaborate and tackle key challenges.

We know that there are some notable gaps that need to be addressed by the sector, such as a lack of provisions for certain vulnerable users. We have set out key **strategic sector priorities** which highlight specific actions the sector can take to fill these gaps. We want to call the sector to actions to meet these strategic priorities and will be taking steps to support organisations to fill these gaps. A full list of the strategic sector priorities can be found in Annex A of the Strategy.

## Media Literacy and User Groups

Users can have a wide range of experiences online which may be shaped by certain factors or characteristics, such as age or gender. These characteristics can be used to categorise users into different 'user groups' that can help us better understand user experiences, for example, certain groups are more likely to experience online abuse.

## We have identified a number of factors which can act as barriers to some groups improving their media literacy rates.

- **Limited online experience:** users who spend less time online have less opportunity to apply and practise media literacy knowledge and skills. This is especially likely to impact those over the age of 65, and children if parents excessively control screen time.
- **Barriers to accessing technology:** some user groups have limited access to the internet, for example, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or disabled users without accessible technologies.
- **Limited access to education:** some users are excluded from mainstream education where they may have access to media literacy education.

This is particularly prevalent for disabled users with special educational needs.

Additionally, there are some user groups with particular media literacy requirements that need to be met, and challenges that need to be overcome, to have a safer online experience.

- **Users who are vulnerable to disproportionate abuse:** these users need to be supported and upskilled in the areas of media literacy that can protect them online.
- **Vulnerable users:** users who are already vulnerable to certain harms online need strengthened media literacy skills in those areas.
- **Inability to critically evaluate information:** 40% of users do not have the skills to critically assess online content, and need to be upskilled.
- **Online application of media literacy:** all user groups struggle to apply media literacy knowledge and skills to the online environment, and need support to do so.

## Misinformation and Disinformation

Information literacy is a subset of media literacy that supports users' critical thinking skills and understanding of the journalistic process. This is one of the key tools that governments have to tackle misinformation and disinformation. However, research has found that UK users lack the critical thinking skills required to spot online falsehoods.

The need to upskill users with information literacy has become increasingly evident as COVID-19 shone a light on the real-world harm online misinformation and disinformation can have. The pandemic saw a spike in dangerous online falsehoods, from the circulation of narratives promoting false and dangerous curative measures, to incitement to vandalise phone masts.

### Literacy by Design

'Platform design' refers to the design choices made by companies that shape a user's end-to-end experience of an online product or service. Good platform design choices can stimulate media literacy by including features which support users to make informed and safe choices (i.e. literacy by design).

We have started to see some online platforms implement 'literacy by design'. This has mostly been used to address the issue of misinformation and disinformation to enhance users' abilities to spot misleading or false information. These can include measures such as differentiating fact-checked content, or nudging users with prompts to consider accuracy. We want to see greater use of platform design as a tool to promote media literacy, and see it used to address harms beyond misinformation and disinformation.

The government is going to publish a 'Safety by Design' framework targeted at SMEs and start-ups in the form of guidance. The Safety by Design guidance sets out how companies can improve their users' safety through platform design. The Framework also sets out clear principles and practical advice on how companies can manage the risk of harm on their online service through platform design.

### The Role of Government and Ofcom in Promoting Media Literacy

Ofcom and the government have distinct roles in supporting media literacy programmes. However, both work together closely to ensure that our approaches are complementary and not duplicative. Currently, Ofcom has a legislative duty to promote media literacy which it discharges through a number of activities.

In May 2021, the government published the draft Online Safety Bill which included updated provisions on media literacy. The proposed Bill will build upon and strengthen the existing duty by charging Ofcom with additional responsibilities to promote media literacy. Ofcom is also the national regulatory body for UK-established Video Sharing Platforms. The legislation recognises that providing tools and information for users with the aim of improving their media literacy, and raising awareness of the same, is a measure which platforms can take to protect users from harmful material.

### The Media Literacy Challenges

Through research and extensive stakeholder engagement we have identified six key cross-sector challenges (below) which are barriers to improving media literacy rates in the UK.

Alongside the Media Literacy Strategy, we have also published an annual outline Online Media Literacy Action Plan, which sets out the government's plans to address these challenges. This can be found in Annex B of the Strategy. We have committed to publishing an Action Plan each Financial Year until 2024/2025, and we will seek to publish interim updates about the implementation of our media literacy initiatives on a quarterly basis.

**Government is committed to taking action to address these challenges over the next 3 years:**



1.

## Evaluation:

lack of sound evaluation data about which media literacy initiatives are effective.



2.

## Funding:

lack of long-term, stable funding available for many organisations delivering media literacy initiatives.



3.

## Hard to reach audiences:

reaching audiences who are less engaged with, and harder to reach through, traditional media literacy initiatives.



4.

## Vulnerable users:

gaps in the media literacy landscape for provisions targeted at vulnerable users; and lack of media literacy capabilities in the workforce that supports vulnerable users.



5.

## Building audience resilience to misinformation and disinformation:

using media literacy as a tool to reduce the harm of misinformation and disinformation.



6.

## Coordination:

lack of coordination within the media literacy sector.

Chapter 1

# MEDIA LITERACY



# MEDIA LITERACY



**The world we live in is rapidly changing, with digital technologies at the heart of it. The internet has radically altered the way we live our daily lives, from the way we access our news, to how we communicate with others, and it is continually evolving. Progressions in online technology present novel opportunities for individuals and our society.**

Being online can be a hugely positive experience. It can provide entertainment and means of participating in democratic debate. It can provide access to online communities which would otherwise not be possible through in-person interactions. It is important that users are encouraged and able to make the most of what the internet has to offer.

However, alongside these positives of the internet, there is a broad spectrum of harms that can arise online ranging from abuse, to self-harm, to election interference. The consequences of online harms can be serious and cause lasting physical and psychological damage to the lives of individuals. Harmful content can also cause damage to society as a whole by stoking divisions, and making abusive or hateful content appear more socially acceptable.

The proposed Online Safety Bill will introduce world-leading measures to tackle these risks and keep users safe online by introducing a new duty of care requiring online platforms to take action to address harmful content.

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However, limiting the exposure of users to harmful material through regulation cannot solve the problem alone. Users must be supported, educated and empowered to make informed and safe decisions online. It is critical to the safety of individuals and the fabric of our society that support is available for users, and that it is able to keep pace with the ever-changing landscape of the internet.

## **Media Literacy**

Globally, there is no universally recognised definition of media literacy. It has been described in multiple different ways, in part due to the fact it encompasses a broad range of topics and issues.

**The Draft Online Safety Bill sets out the following definition of media literacy:**

- **an understanding of the nature and characteristics of material published by means of the electronic media**
- **an awareness of the impact that such material may have (for example, the impact on the behaviour of those who receive it)**
- **an awareness and understanding of the processes by which such material is selected or made available for publication**

**an awareness of the available systems by which:**

- **the nature of such material may be established**
- **the reliability and accuracy of such material may be established**
- **personal information may be protected**
- **persons to whom such material is made available may control what is received**
- **an awareness of the uses to which the systems mentioned may be put**

**The UK's independent communications regulator, Ofcom, defines media literacy as the 'ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts.'**<sup>4</sup> There are numerous other frameworks, such as the UNESCO global Media and Information Literacy Framework,<sup>5</sup> which also provide further helpful definitions.

The UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS) Education Working Group has also published a framework to support children and young people's media and digital literacy. Education for a Connected World supports the delivery of online safety education in schools and sits alongside statutory curriculum requirements for online safety as part of Relationships and Sex, Health Education and Computing.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Case for Change**

Research has found that users globally tend to lack the key skills and knowledge required for them to have strong media literacy capabilities.<sup>7</sup> This creates a population at high risk of being impacted by online harms due to limited understanding about online safety, and a limited ability to navigate the online environment in a safe way. A lack of understanding about how online content is created may also have negative implications for the sustainability of the press sector and the quality of public interest news.

The UK has higher than average rates of media literacy compared to many other countries, ranking 10th out of 35 in the 2021 European Media Literacy Index.<sup>8</sup> However, research and studies have found there are still key gaps and issues in the UK's media literacy landscape that need to be addressed. Given the severity of the impact and consequences of online harms, it is clear that further action is required to improve media literacy rates.

## Media Literacy Capabilities

Numerous studies have explored the media literacy capabilities of users globally, and there is consistent demonstration that rates are low.



Compared to 2018, adult internet users are **less likely to check the source of information.**<sup>9</sup>



Only **13%** of European users were able to tell the difference between literal and satire content.<sup>10</sup>



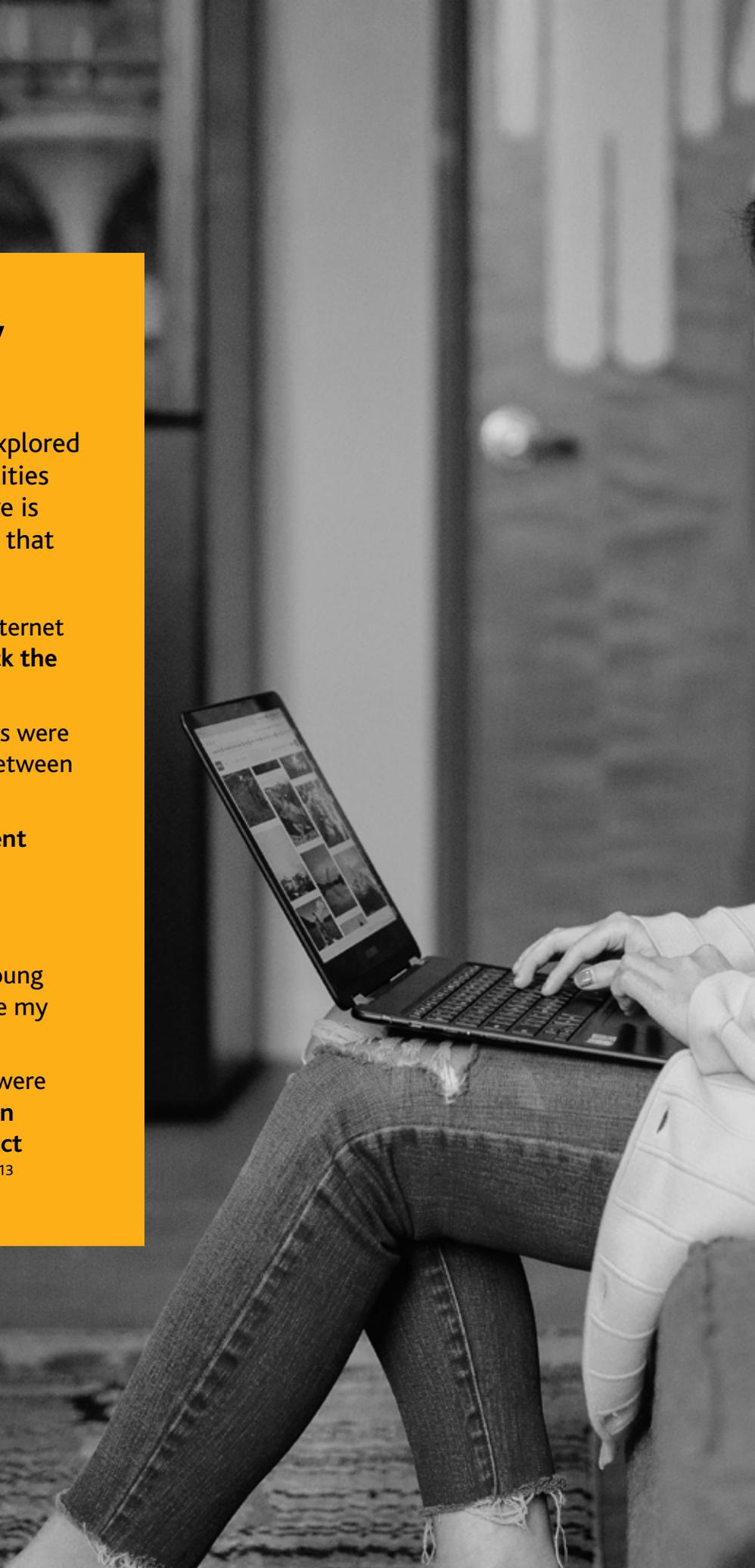
Adult users are **overconfident in their abilities** to identify advertisements and sponsored content.<sup>11</sup>



**27%** of care experienced young people say 'I cannot manage my life online'.<sup>12</sup>



Most [adult] internet users were **not aware of all the ways in which companies can collect their personal data online.**<sup>13</sup>



The UK has a rich media literacy sector with over 170 online platforms, academics, civil society organisations, news organisations, and education providers undertaking media literacy activity and research.<sup>14</sup> However, extensive stakeholder engagement has highlighted key cross-sector challenges which act as barriers to improving user media literacy capabilities. There is a common consensus that the government needs to do more to support these organisations in their media literacy activity, by addressing these barriers and challenges.

In 2019, the government published the Online Harms White Paper Consultation which eventually led to publication of the draft Online Safety Bill in May 2021. The consultation included questions about the role of the forthcoming online safety regulator (since confirmed to be Ofcom) in delivering media literacy education. Whilst some felt that regulators should not play a role in education, there was a general consensus that the online harms regulator should undertake media literacy activity. Some specific suggestions included overseeing industry activity and spend; creating an evaluation framework for assessing media literacy activity; and promoting awareness of online safety.

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## The Demand for Media Literacy

In early 2021, Ipsos MORI and Google undertook research into global users' attitudes and experiences of media literacy related to misinformation and disinformation. The report's overall message was that the demand for media literacy support is currently being unmet. Some of the key findings demonstrated that:

- 55% of users are interested in learning more about how to use tools to distinguish between true and false information online<sup>15</sup>
- only 9% of users had participated in media literacy training related to misinformation and disinformation
- 66% believed that it would be appropriate for internet and technology companies to provide training to improve users' critical thinking
- 61% of users felt they would be most interested in learning online

**The 2019 'Cairncross Review: a sustainable future for journalism' explored some of the challenges low media literacy rates pose to press sustainability. It recommended the development of an Online Media Literacy Strategy to identify 'gaps in provision and opportunities for more collaborative working' in relation to media literacy'.<sup>16</sup>**

It concluded that educating readers about news-gathering processes as well as the benefits of well-researched, accurate content could have a positive impact on the sustainability of journalism. Research from the Reuters Institute shows that people with higher levels of news literacy are more discerning, and have a (collective) sense of what brands are worth paying more attention to.<sup>17</sup>

The National Action plan<sup>18</sup> for the Safety of Journalists confirmed the government's commitment to supporting wider public understanding of the role of journalism through the Media Literacy Strategy. This acknowledged that an understanding of the role journalists play in our society may lead to a decrease in online threats and abuse against them.

### The Effectiveness of Media Literacy

There have been many academic studies worldwide which have explored the effectiveness of different media literacy techniques and have found a general positive correlation with users' ability to navigate technologies. However, evaluation techniques employed to assess the effectiveness of many media literacy activities are limited. This has created a gap in understanding about the efficacy of different media literacy interventions.

## IREX: Learn to Discern Programme<sup>19</sup>

Building a disinformation  
resilient population

Since 2013, Ukraine has been the subject of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns creating an information environment filled with propaganda and half-truths. The International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) set up the 'Learn to Discern' media literacy programme to help citizens recognise online falsehoods, and seek out reliable journalism.

IREX delivered intensive skilled-based seminars for citizens of all ages and backgrounds through existing community structures to create a higher level of trust in the programme. Trainers followed a curriculum which taught the users the markers of disinformation, and what information not to consume. Trainers were able to adapt the curriculum to suit the community they were working with.

The programme directly reached 15,000 citizens but is thought to have indirectly reached more than 90,000 indirectly through peer-to-peer learning. Evaluation of the participation of the course showed statistically significantly higher news literacy skills compared to a control group, even 18 months after the training took place.

Ofcom has a statutory duty to promote media literacy, which allows it to undertake a wide programme of activity. This includes a substantial body of research into UK adults' and children's media habits, attitudes and critical understanding. This has created a strong evidence base about the areas of media literacy that require further attention in order to improve capabilities in the UK. Further information about Ofcom's media literacy role can be found in chapter 3 and 9 of this Strategy.



## The Strategy

This Media Literacy Strategy will seek to stimulate media literacy activity in the UK to support online safety and encourage users to make the most of what the internet has to offer.

We recognise there is a significant amount of activity already taking place within the media literacy sector. This Strategy is intended to complement, not duplicate, the existing media literacy landscape. We believe that the government can have the greatest impact by working with the sector to improve and increase their media literacy activity, rather than targeting users directly. As such, this Strategy will be focused on **supporting organisations to undertake media literacy activity in a more coordinated, wide-reaching, and high quality way over the next 3 years.**

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We believe that this will subsequently lead to improved media literacy capabilities for users in the UK.

In meeting this primary objective, the Strategy will aim to do 4 things:

- **set out a strategic direction for the future of media literacy in the UK**
- **ensure a coordinated approach to media literacy activity**
- **address key gaps within the media literacy landscape**
- **reduce barriers and create opportunities for organisations undertaking media literacy activity**

The Strategy will explore the existing media literacy landscape, the specific needs of different user groups, the existing work ongoing across government, and the role of Ofcom as the future Online Safety Regulator. In particular, the Strategy will include 3 key elements:

### **The Media Literacy Framework**

- This Framework is made up of 5 principles setting out the key skills and knowledge required for strong user media literacy capabilities. The Framework further sets out steps online platforms can take to promote and support users' media literacy.

### **Strategic Sector Priorities**

- A set of priorities for the media literacy sector which the government will encourage organisations to address over the next 3 years.

### **The Media Literacy Challenges**

- Six key cross-sector challenges which have been identified as barriers to improving media literacy rates. The government commits to addressing these challenges over the next 3 years.

This Strategy is accompanied by the **Annual Online Media Literacy Action Plan** which sets out specific initiatives and action government plans to undertake over the Financial Year 2021/22. Further Action Plans will follow in future years. The Action Plan will tackle the Media Literacy Challenges which are explored throughout the Strategy. More information about the Action Plan can be seen in Chapter 7.

The issues explored in this Strategy cannot be solved by the government alone. The sector is made up of numerous organisations who each have a key role to play. Media literacy rates can only be improved on a widespread scale by the collaborative effort of the whole sector. The Strategy will explore the roles of different sector organisations, set out key priorities we want to see the sector address, and promote coordination and collaboration across a range of organisations.

## Stakeholder Engagement

Throughout the development of this Strategy we have engaged extensively with our stakeholders to ensure that we address the key issues in the sector, which will have the greatest impact in transforming the media literacy landscape.

This engagement has been across a broad range of stakeholders, convening representatives from tech companies, Ofcom, civil society, academia, media literacy organisations, news publishers, and youth forums. We have sought their views on the key barriers and challenges to improving media literacy rates, consulted on the most effective solutions, and sought challenges for our proposals. The findings from all of our engagement have been used to inform the Strategy.

## Scope of the Strategy

Media literacy is a devolved issue and, as such, this Strategy will only extend directly to England. However, we intend that its benefits will be felt across the whole UK. We have engaged with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to share our plans.

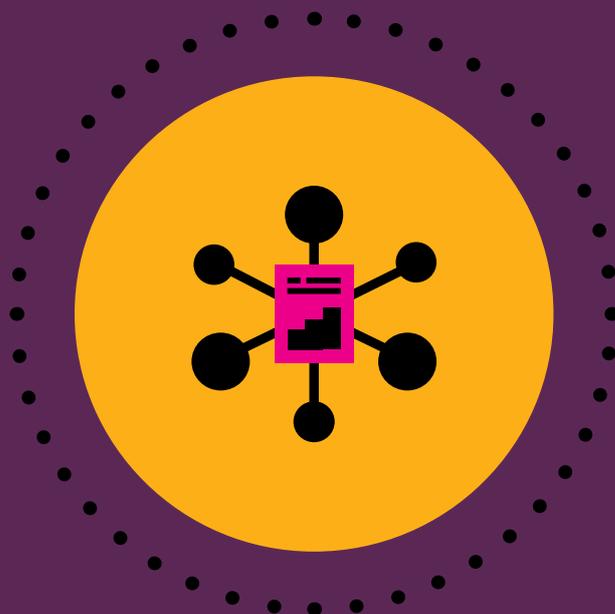
In addition to the Media Literacy Strategy, the proposed Online Safety Bill will include provisions on media literacy. These will build upon existing provisions in the Communications Act 2003 and will strengthen Ofcom's existing duty to promote media literacy by expanding its responsibilities and activity. Ahead of the implementation of the Online Safety Bill, the government is committed to taking action to address the issues set out in this Strategy.

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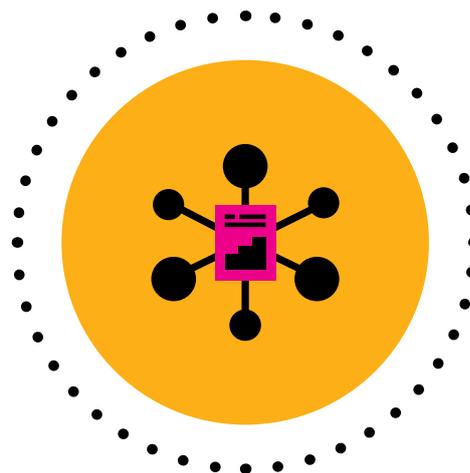


Chapter 2

**MEDIA  
LITERACY  
FRAMEWORK**



# MEDIA LITERACY FRAMEWORK



Media literacy encompasses a wide range of skills and knowledge relating to many different topics and online behaviours. We believe that strong media literacy capabilities depend on users having the right mix of knowledge and skills, and are able to independently apply them to their online environment.

We have identified five key areas of media literacy which are crucial for users to manage their safety online and make the most of what the internet has to offer. Through engagement and consultation with stakeholders, these areas have been developed into a framework of best practice principles which set out the key skills and knowledge that are necessary for strong media literacy capabilities.

This Framework is intended to inform the content and delivery of media literacy education provisions and indicate the outcomes organisations should expect to see through their media literacy activities.

## The Role of the Media Literacy Sector

There are many user skills and knowledge captured in this Framework. We recognise that they may place an unrealistic expectation on the average user. This is why we believe that users alone should not shoulder the responsibility of taking action to build their media literacy skills. Organisations within the media literacy sector, such as news organisations, civil society, education institutions and regulators also have a role in promoting media literacy to users. In particular, online platforms have a significant responsibility to media literacy to users to help prevent them from coming to harm on their platforms.

For each principle, we have included actions we encourage online platforms to take in order to stimulate greater media literacy among users. We would like to see increased efforts from online platforms to support users in this way. The role of online platforms in promoting media literacy is explored further in chapters 3 and 6 of this Strategy.

Platform design can be used to strengthen a user's media literacy, as set out in the following principles and further in chapter

6. The government's Safety by Design guidance, published 29 June 2021, sets out considerations for companies to help them assess the risk presented by the design of their platform and the voluntary steps they can take to make the design of their platforms safer for users and empower them to make safer and more informed decisions.

[An overview of the Media Literacy Principles and the topics that they address.](#)

Principle		Topic
<p>Principle 1</p> 	<p>Users should understand the risks of sharing personal data online, how that data can be used by others, and are able to take action to protect their privacy online.</p>	<p>Data and Privacy</p>
<p>Principle 2</p> 	<p>Users should understand how the online environment operates and use this to inform decisions online.</p>	<p>Online Environment</p>
<p>Principle 3</p> 	<p>Users should understand how online content is generated, and be able to critically analyse the content they consume.</p>	<p>Information Consumption</p>
<p>Principle 4</p> 	<p>Users should understand that actions online have consequences offline, and use this understanding in their online interactions.</p>	<p>Online Consequences</p>
<p>Principle 5</p> 	<p>Users are able to participate in online engagement and contribute to making the online environment positive, whilst understanding the risks of engaging with others.</p>	<p>Online Engagement</p>

# PRINCIPLE

# 1



**Users should understand the risks of sharing personal data online, how that data can be used by others, and are able to take action to protect their privacy online.**



**73%**

of users described themselves as 'very confident' or 'fairly confident' managing their data online, 44% of respondents who described themselves as confident were unaware that data could be collected through smartphone apps, and 20% were unaware of the existence of cookies altogether...<sup>20</sup>



## USER SKILLS

- Users are able to review and change their privacy settings
- Users are able to take down their own content
- Parents can utilise parental control tools to ensure children are accessing ageappropriate content
- Users are able to control who has access to their data

## BUSINESS EXPECTATIONS

- Protect children's data and privacy online
- Provide simple and easy mechanisms for users to review their privacy settings
- Design terms and conditions so they are easy for users to access, review, and understand
- Make it simple and intuitive for users to consider their privacy and data on platforms, including prompting users to regularly review privacy settings
- Provide transparent and easily accessible information for users about where and how their data is being used on online platforms

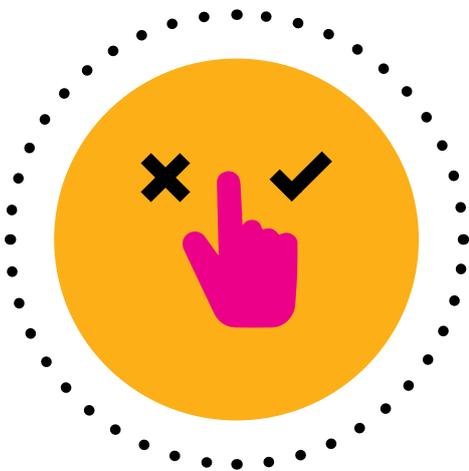
## USER KNOWLEDGE

- Understand how personal data posted online can be accessed and used by others including companies
- Understand the risks of posting personal information
- Understand the privacy terms and conditions of platforms they are using online
- Understand the ways personal data can be gathered by companies online through use of the internet
- Understand that content posted online leaves a digital footprint
- Understand the privacy implications of posting pictures of children online
- Understand that external websites that appear on online platforms may not have the same level of privacy and data protection as online platforms



# PRINCIPLE

# 2



**Users should understand how the online environment operates and use this to inform decisions online.**



**53%**

of users do not understand the role of algorithms in arranging the contents of their Facebook newsfeeds...<sup>21</sup>



## USER SKILLS

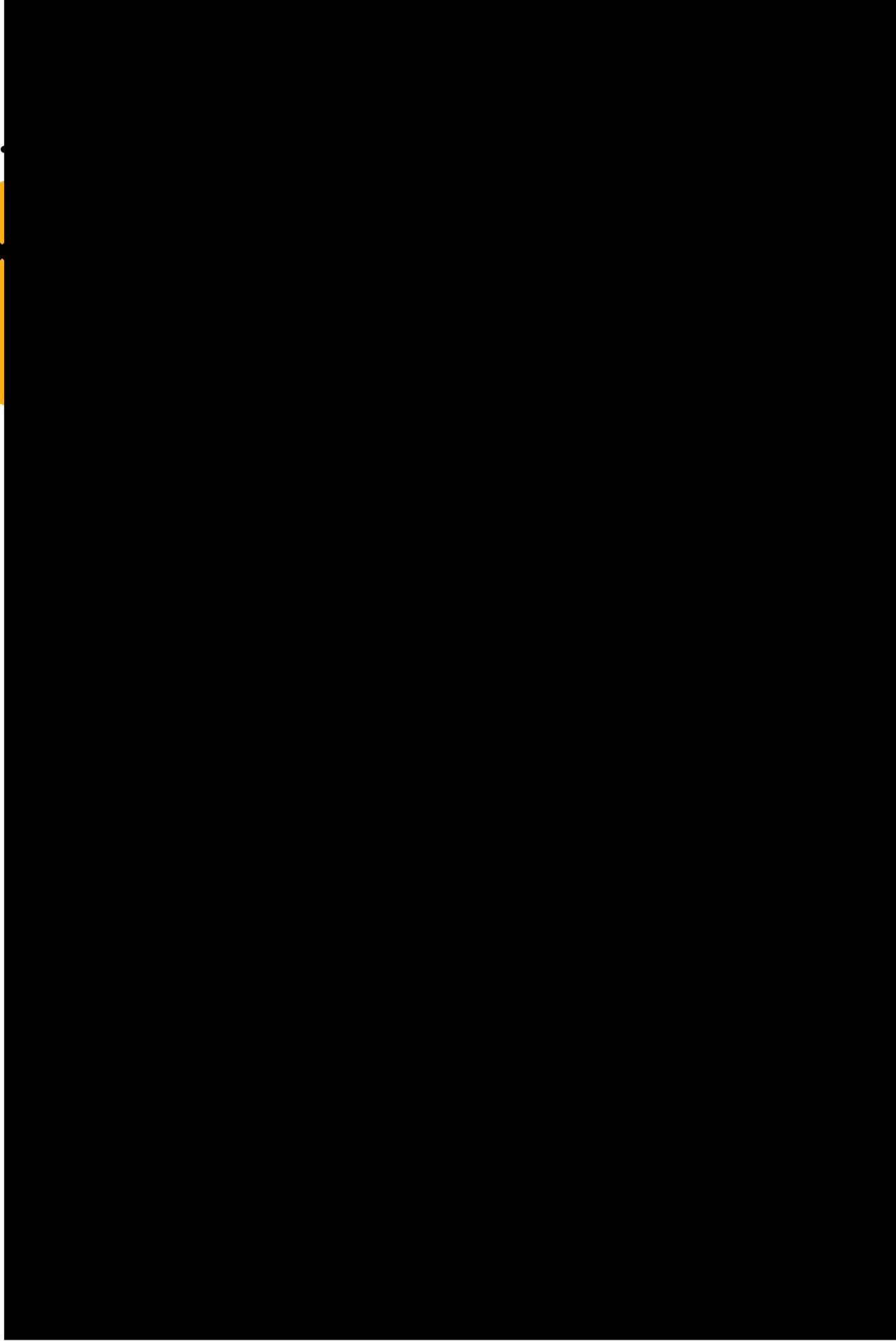
- Have the digital skills to access and navigate the online environment
- Identify sponsored content and advertisements online
- Identify filter bubbles and echo chambers in their own online environments
- Take action to become informed about other points of view

## BUSINESS EXPECTATIONS

- Provide users with transparency about how their data is used to operate their platforms
- Clearly highlight where content has originated from (e.g. user generated, sponsored)
- Make it easier for users to determine why certain pieces of content have been recommended
- Provide users viewing large amounts of auto-generated, recommended content with prompts to critically think about content, and about screen time
- Make it easy for users to access a diverse range of viewpoints about online content

## USER KNOWLEDGE

- Understand that user data is used to drive platform algorithm and online experiences
- Understand that algorithms and the platforms dictate the content presented to users (included auto generated recommended content), and that this differs between each user
- Understand the commercial motivations behind online platforms and certain types of content (e.g. sponsored ads)
- Understand the phenomena of filter bubbles and echo chambers, and how they can shape the online environment



# PRINCIPLE

# 3



**Users should understand how different content is created and be able to critically analyse the content they consume.**



“ Only **2%**

of children have the critical literacy skills needed to discern truthful content from false information...<sup>22</sup> ”

## USER SKILLS

- Ability to critically analyse online information
- Able to fact-check information and determine its veracity
- Rebut or report false content
- Able to identify misleading or doctored images
- Assess the reliability of a source of information
- Ability to differentiate between fact, opinion and satire

## BUSINESS EXPECTATIONS

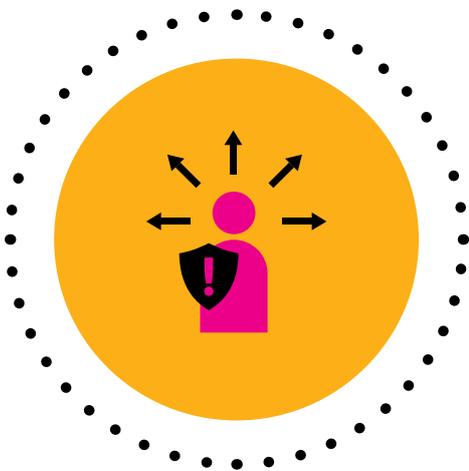
- Present information in a way that highlights the source and date to the user
- Clearly differentiate false content in an age-appropriate manner
- Provide users with prompts to critically think about information
- Make users aware when they are about to share content which has been disputed or found to be false
- Direct users to authoritative sources of information when they are searching for information known to be false or related to disinformation narratives
- Provide transparency to users about content moderation decisions

## USER KNOWLEDGE

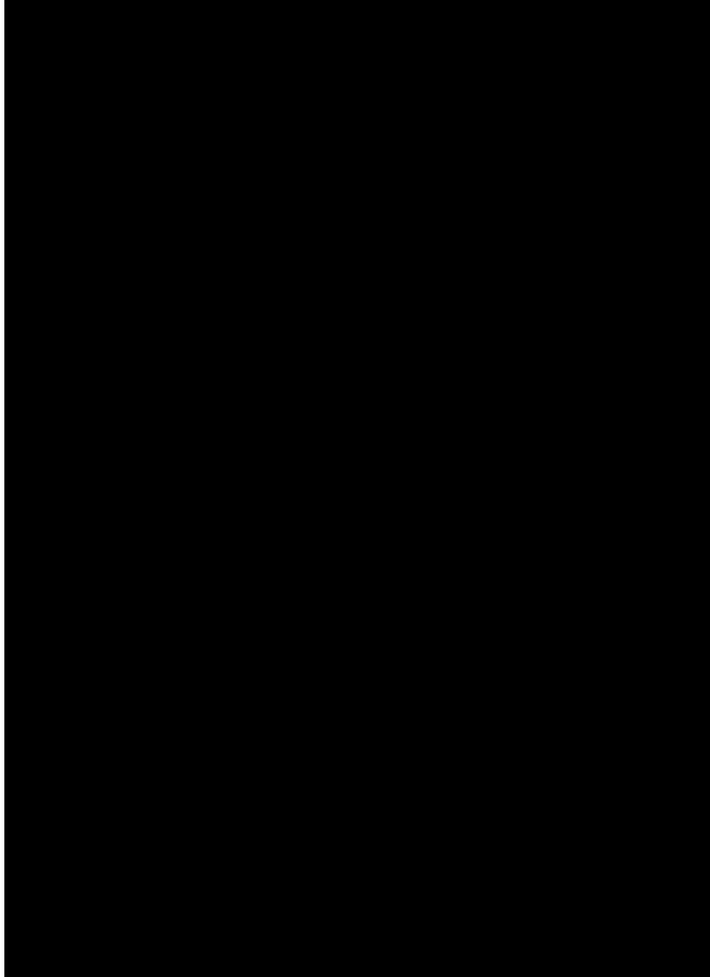
- Awareness of mis- and disinformation, including the different perpetrators and their motivations
- Understanding of what news is and how the news cycle operates, including how it is produced and collated
- Understand the process of journalism, and how sound journalistic content is developed
- Understand the role of journalism in society and democracy
- Know the key indicators of false information
- Know the signs of when to fact-check more a claim or news story to determine its veracity
- Understand the real-life consequences of sharing false information online
- Understand that the online environment is not reflective of reality

# PRINCIPLE

# 4



**Users should understand that actions online have consequences offline, and use this understanding in their online interactions.**



# Half

of children aged 12-15 have seen hateful content online in the past year, however, the majority (58%) chose to ignore it and took no action...<sup>23</sup>



## USER SKILLS

- Able to identify unwanted or hateful content
- Speak out about unwanted and hateful content witnessed online
- Able to report content across a number of platforms
- Self-regulation of screen time
- Able to filter out unwanted or hateful behaviour from online environments
- Can safely seek help online or offline if experiencing unwanted or hateful content

## BUSINESS EXPECTATIONS

- Provide guidance and support to users experiencing unwanted or hateful behaviour
- Provide users with prompts when sharing inflammatory or reactive content, to take a moment to think about the consequences of their actions before posting
- Provide users with prompts about screen-time and wellbeing if spending large amounts of time looking at damaging content (e.g. conspiracy theories, content promoting eating disorders)
- Help users to understand when content has been edited and does not reflect reality where it is not immediately evident

## USER KNOWLEDGE

- Understand what behaviour is and is not acceptable online
- Understand that content posted has a digital footprint, even if deleted
- Understand that the online environment does not always reflect reality
- Users understand the real-life consequences of online behaviours (eg. spreading disinformation, sexting, abuse)
- Understand the impact extended screen time can have on wellbeing
- Understand that anonymity online does not justify hateful or abusive behaviour
- Understand when content may cause harm to themselves or others
- Understand the mechanism to control in-app/platform spending

# PRINCIPLE

# 5



Users are able to participate in **online engagement** and contribute to making **a positive environment**, whilst **understanding the risks** of engaging with others.

 **43%**

of children speak to people they don't know in real-life online, with half of children aged 8-12 having friends or followers online that they don't know...<sup>24</sup>



## USER SKILLS

- Have the digital skills needed to create content online
- Engage in online conversations, including democratic debate
- Identify suspicious and dangerous situations online and take action to keep themselves safe
- Safely seek help if needed
- Able to control the online friends or followers who see content generated by the user
- Able to partake in online debate without exhibiting abusive or harmful behaviour
- Able to adjust online behaviour to protect and support mental health

## BUSINESS EXPECTATIONS

- Promote positive online citizenship behaviour on online platforms
- Target users with prompts and guidance about safe engagement with others, taking additional measures for vulnerable users
- Provide users with prompts about safe engagement with others when they make contact with someone unrelated to their online network
- Make it simple for users to report suspicious activity, or unsafe engagement with others

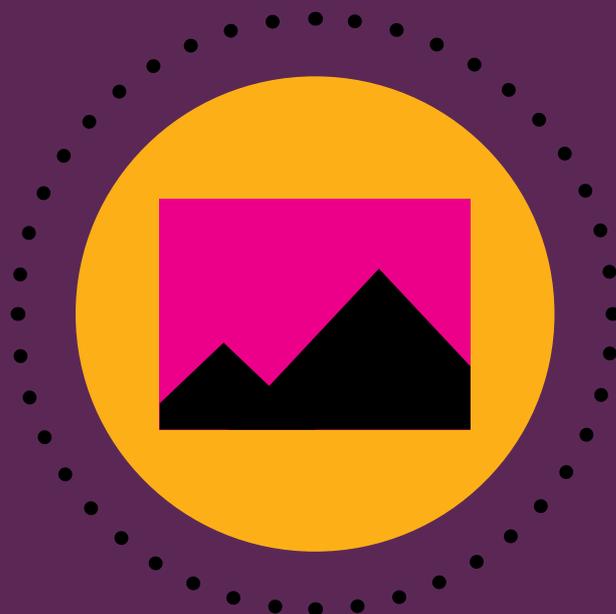
## USER KNOWLEDGE

- Understand the consequences of what they create online
- Understand the role they can play in positively supporting communities online
- Understand the risks of engaging with others online
- Understand what types of online engagement with others are unsafe
- Knowing the risks of having friends or followers online that they do not know
- Understand the role being online can play in mental health
- Know the importance of respecting others, even when they are very different from them

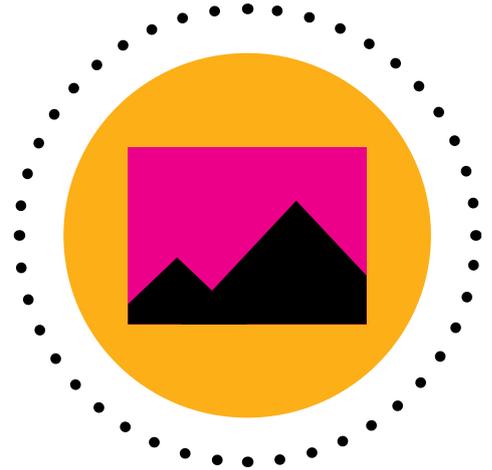


Chapter 3

**THE MEDIA  
LITERACY  
LANDSCAPE**



# THE MEDIA LITERACY LANDSCAPE



## The Media Literacy Landscape

The UK has a rich media literacy landscape with many organisations undertaking media literacy activity. In order to understand the landscape in greater detail, DCMS worked with the consultancy RSM to conduct a mapping exercise of the media literacy sector. This was delivered through a combination of desk research and interviews with organisations undertaking media literacy activities.

The key findings of the exercise have been outlined below. The full research report can be found on [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk).<sup>25</sup>

## Mapping Exercise: Key Findings



The mapping exercise identified and characterised 170 online safety and digital media literacy initiatives available in the UK.



Most initiatives are targeted at children, 38% of all initiatives had children as one of their target groups, and 19% of all initiatives targeted parents.



The most common type of organisation providing online media literacy initiatives were **charities** or foundations (32% of providers of total initiatives), followed by **media** organisations (19%), and **public sector** organisations.



Initiatives typically have multiple sources of funding. The most commonly reported main sources of funding were from the **government, charities** or foundations, and **private sector** companies.



The most common **delivery method** for initiatives is the provision of resources (such as online guides, videos, or games), with 85% of initiatives offering this.



The **skills** most likely to be covered by initiatives are: the ability to use media safely (75%); critical thinking, such as recognising and managing risks (70%); evaluating media content for reliability and value (42%); and questioning the motivations of content producers (42%).



Initiatives typically address **multiple issues**, and more than half address two main issues: 'Managing **privacy**, data, and the online footprint' (58%), and 'recognising **disinformation, misinformation**, hoaxes, fake news, and use of technology for deception' (51%).



All issues in our Framework are addressed by at least one initiative. Some user groups have a limited number of initiatives targeted at them, such as children in key transitional ages, and users whose first language is not English.



Some providers had taken steps to monitor their activities, such as user counts (24%) or webpage visitors (9%), but formal evaluation activity appears extremely rare. A study of the literature on this was carried out in Phase 2.



Nearly all (83%) initiatives ran on a continuous basis. The remaining 17% were either one-off initiatives (often due to the nature of their funding) or pilots.



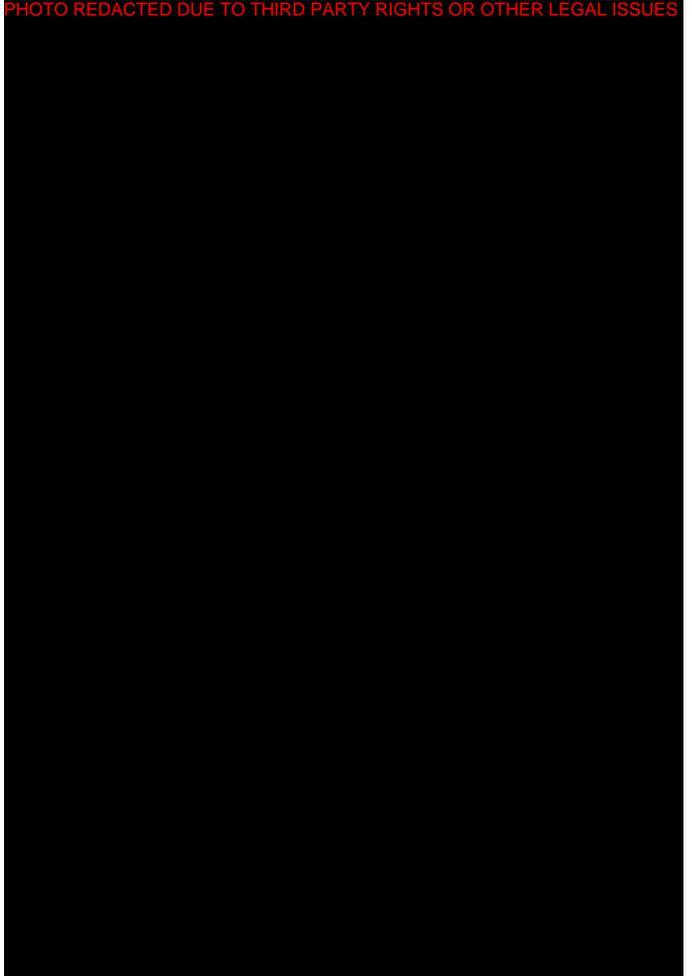
A large proportion of initiatives (81%) were available **throughout the UK**, typically as online resources. Some local initiatives were provided by councils and the police.

## Organisational Roles Across the Sector

As detailed in the research findings, the media literacy sector encompasses a broad range of organisations, with over 170 participating in the delivery of media literacy education. These organisations include: online platforms, civil society organisations, news organisations, academia, public services, regulators, and government.

The rest of this chapter will provide an overview of each key stakeholder group and their distinct role within the media literacy landscape. We also believe there are some key gaps that need to be addressed by the sector. We have set out key **strategic sector priorities** which highlight specific actions the sector can take to fill these gaps. We want to call the sector to action to meet these strategic priorities and will be taking steps to support organisations to fill these gaps.

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## Online Platforms

Many online platforms have the potential to directly or indirectly cause harm to users. As well as making their platforms safer environments for users, these organisations have a responsibility to help educate and empower users to make safer choices online. Some platforms have already started delivering media literacy education to users in the real world. For example, Google's Be Internet Legends Programme, Twitter's Handbook for Educators, and Facebook's Digital Literacy Library.

Case study:

## Google's Be Internet Legends

# GOOGLE LAUNCHED THEIR CHILDREN'S MEDIA LITERACY PROGRAMME 'BE INTERNET LEGENDS'

The campaign helps younger children to **use the web safely** and wisely so they can be confident in the online world. The campaign includes tips for children on how to be alert and tell the difference between what is real and what is not, as well as how they can make sure they are **aware of personal privacy and security on their devices**. The programme also provides materials to parents and teachers to help facilitate learning for children.

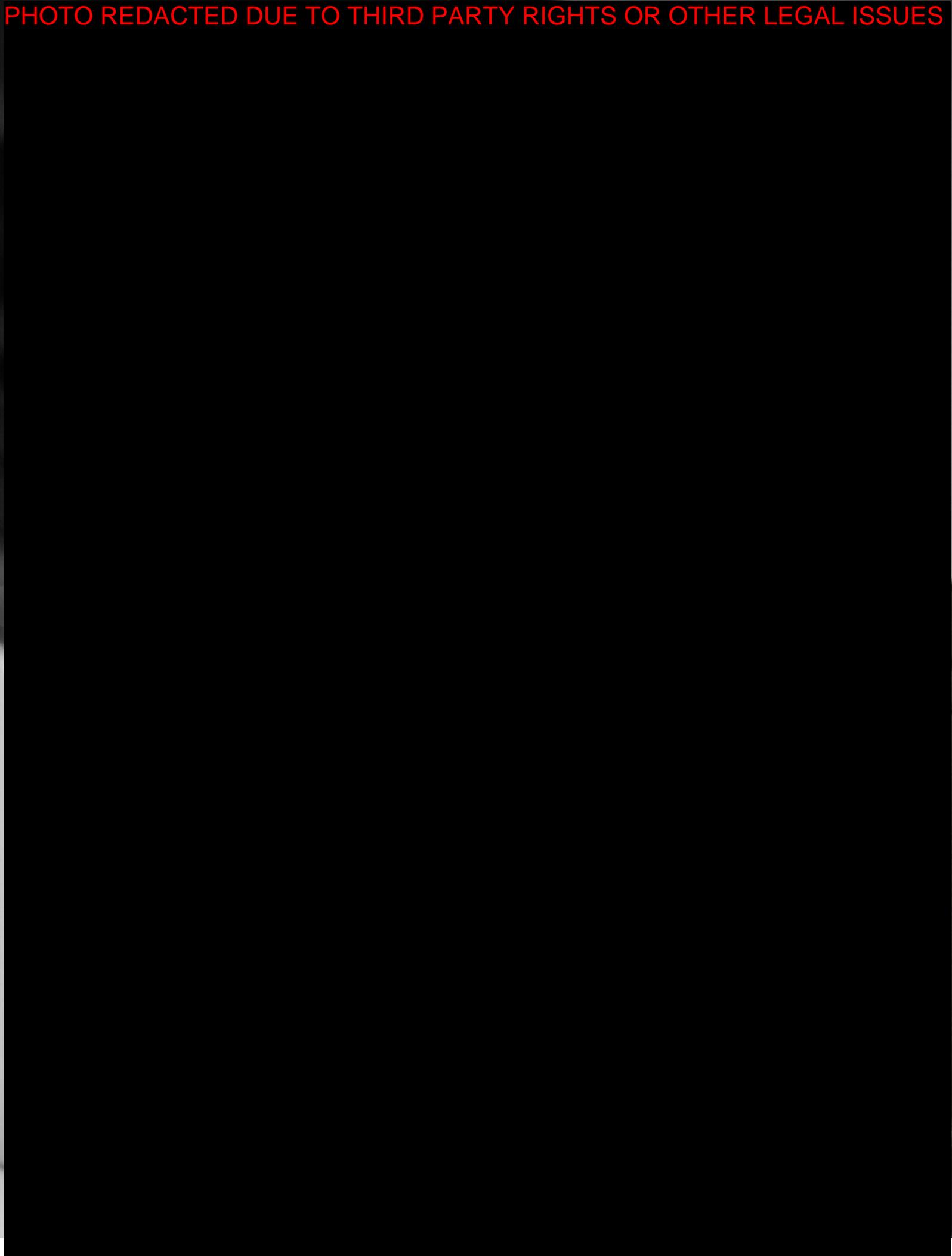
'Be Internet Legends' includes a game-based learning platform, 'Interland' which provides children with an engaging environment in which to **develop and apply their knowledge of safely navigating the online world**. Children embark on a series of missions aligned to the 'Be Internet Legends' Code, where they learn the key lessons of internet safety through four fun, challenging games. In one mission, pupils must tackle Cyber Bullies by spreading positive Vibes (Likes) to the Internauts, whilst blocking the Cyber Bullies to prevent them from spreading their negativity.

## DCMS Online Media Literacy Strategy

Through their websites and apps, online platforms have significant reach to users which is far greater than other organisations in the sector. Importantly, this reach extends to typically 'hard to reach' users who may not have access to, or engage with, more traditional education environments (e.g. school, university) where other forms of media literacy education may more often be delivered.

The design of platforms also has the potential to promote media literacy and media literate behaviour, through interventions such as using design to differentiate fact-checked content. This is called 'literacy by design' and is explored in more detail in chapter 6 of this Strategy.





## Civil Society Organisations

Our research has demonstrated that the majority of media literacy education is provided through civil society organisations,<sup>26</sup> making them the key delivery arm of the sector. These organisations have a significant amount of expertise about media literacy, making them well placed to conduct research and deliver education provisions.

Civil society organisations often focus on specific user groups (e.g. young people) or issues (e.g. hate speech). These organisations play an important role in advocating for these issues and groups by: ensuring their views are represented to government and regulators, and ensuring there are relevant resources available for these user groups.

Civil society is also well placed to deliver media literacy activity in areas that it might be inappropriate for the government to take action, such as political literacy, or during election periods.

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## Strategic Sector Priorities

### 3.

Advocacy for all user groups within the sector, particularly those where there are currently gaps in media literacy resources and provisions.

### 4.

Organisations should take action to promote political literacy, including knowledge about elections, as part of media literacy provisions.

This should include understanding the role of high-quality journalism in holding power to account, and encouraging users to participate further in democratic debate.

Case study:

## The Burnet News Club<sup>27</sup>

# IMPROVING STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF NEWS

The Burnet News Club provides teachers with resources to run news literacy sessions with school children which can be integrated into the curriculum or run as an extracurricular activity. The Club upskills students with key information on literacy skills focused on **building critical thinking skills, encouraging discussion** and debate, and inspiring creativity about current affairs. **The sessions follow a 'News Curriculum' which:**

- explores what news is;
- encourages critical thinking about information, such as the trustworthiness of sources, or biased writing;
- considers current news stories; and
- promotes making connections about news stories and concepts

As the Burnet News Club is run by the same teachers over a period of time, it allows for longitudinal evaluation of the development of information literacy skills. Recent evaluation found that 100% of the students said they had better conversations about news, and 88% of teachers saw improvement in students' knowledge about the news.

## News Organisations

There are a range of initiatives aimed at improving news media literacy which are part-funded or delivered by news publishers. **These schemes cover a broad remit: from targeting disinformation to educating users on journalistic processes and their value, for example:**

- The Telegraph, in partnership with The Careers Office, has launched a Media Literacy Programme for 16-18 year-olds about the importance of quality, edited news in society
- The Financial Times has partnered with education and media charity, The Student View, to help improve media literacy among young people by teaching students how to create articles and content, and helping them identify the difference between trusted and online falsehoods

We want to encourage the industry to continue this work. Given evidence showing a link between higher media literacy and willingness to pay for news, this work could have positive implications for press sustainability. Furthermore, better public understanding of the role of journalists could lessen the abuse and harassment that many face in the online space.

## Academia and Researchers

Research about media literacy is essential for building the sector's understanding about the effectiveness of media literacy activity. This critically underpins the sector's ability to build strong media literacy capabilities.

There are multiple knowledge gaps within the sector around evaluation, the effectiveness of different media literacy initiatives, platform design interventions, and vulnerabilities to disinformation.

It is essential that sound research is produced to fill these gaps and continue to build understanding. Other organisations delivering media literacy should look to this research and partnership with academics to ensure activity is as effective as possible.

As technologies continue to evolve there is potential for new harms to emerge. This could give rise to new areas of, and opportunities for, media literacy. It is important that academia and researchers continue to research emerging technologies and media literacy to ensure that the sector can be future-proof.

## Public and Community Services

There are many established public services and communities that could play a role in media literacy education, for example, libraries, schools, youth centres and faith groups. These establishments already have strong links to communities and the lives and welfare of many individuals. They have the potential to deliver targeted and meaningful media literacy education to the public to prevent or reduce online harms.

Upskilling workers in public services and community roles has the potential to create media literacy 'hubs': places that the public could go to access reliable and trusted media literacy support and resources. This has the potential to reach people in need, and typically hard-to-reach audiences. This would not only upskill individuals but build media literacy capabilities at a societal level.

## Regulator

Ofcom currently has a statutory duty to promote media literacy as set out in the Communications Act 2003. Through this, it undertakes a wide range of activities such as providing a substantial body of research

# Strategic Sector Priorities

## 5.

Cross-sector collaboration between researchers and delivery organisations to ensure research about the effectiveness of media literacy is integrated into real-life provisions.

## 6.

Researchers should:

Consider the impacts of emerging technologies and the future of tech on media literacy. This should cover both how they may create new areas of need for media literacy, and the opportunities they may create for delivering media literacy

Continue to explore what interventions are effective at building long-term media literacy capabilities in users

## 7.

Upskill community and public services workers about media literacy to:

Create strong societal media literacy capabilities

Help the workforce support users manage their online safety

into UK adults' and children's media habits, attitudes and critical understanding.

Ofcom is further building on these activities through its Making Sense of Media programme aimed at helping improve the online skills, knowledge and understanding of UK adults and children, through an expanded programme of research, and collaboration with/coordination of relevant stakeholders and their activities. It has created the Making Sense of Media Panel and Network with the aim of increasing collaboration, information-sharing and debate. Ofcom is also creating an evidence base of 'what works' in media literacy interventions in order to encourage better evaluation of interventions, and in turn help encourage media literacy interventions to be more effective.

The Online Safety Bill includes provisions intended to build upon Ofcom's existing media literacy duties, including with specific obligations to ascertain users' experiences of using regulated services and to issue guidance about the evaluation of educational initiatives designed to improve media literacy. More details on this can be found in chapter 9 of this Strategy.

Ofcom has been given powers to regulate UK-established Video Sharing Platforms. VSP regulation sets out to protect users of VSP services from specific types of harmful material in videos. The relevant legislation recognises that providing tools and information for users with the aim of improving their media literacy, and raising awareness of the same, is a measure which platforms can take to protect users from harmful material. Ofcom has been given powers to regulate UK-established VSPs.

## Government

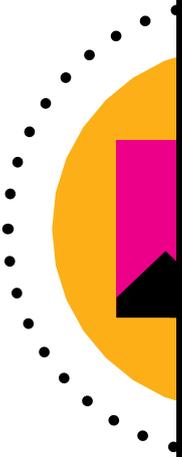
We believe that government can have the greatest impact in the media literacy sector by delivering 4 key aims:

- **Coordinate** – bringing together the key sector organisations to promote information – sharing and encourage collaboration to improve efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Raise Awareness** – using government’s wide-reaching communications channels and sector network to raise awareness, upskill and build resilience amongst the public about media literacy.
- **Facilitate** – to facilitate greater activity in the sector by addressing key barriers and making funding available.
- **Legislate** – create long-lasting legislation which will allow for the continuation of media literacy in the future.
- **International Cooperation** – working with international partners to exchange best practices and identify opportunities for collaboration.

## Cross-cutting Coordination and Collaboration across stakeholders

As well as each organisation taking individual action, there is also a need for collaboration across actors to most effectively promote media literacy. Some coordination already exists within the sector. For example, Ofcom has set up the Making Sense of Media Panel and wider Network in order to increase collaborative activity, information-sharing, and debate in relation to media literacy issues. Other forums exist to discuss specific elements of media literacy, for example, the News Literacy Network run by the National Literacy Trust which provides a platform for organisations to discuss news literacy.

These forums are valuable and provide a good basis for collaboration across the sector. However, despite these forums, some stakeholders describe the media literacy landscape as disparate and, in some areas, duplicative. We would like to see greater coordination and collaboration across the sector, building on the good work that already exists.



Chapter 4

**MEDIA  
LITERACY  
AND USER  
GROUPS**



# MEDIA LITERACY AND USER GROUPS



We know that the majority of children and adults use the internet on a regular basis.<sup>28,29</sup> Users can have a wide range of experiences online, both good and bad, which may be shaped by certain factors or characteristics, such as age or gender. These characteristics can be used to categorise users into different 'user groups' which can help us to better understand user experiences.

We know that certain groups are more likely to be exposed to specific online harms than others, for example, women and girls are over twice as likely to receive online abuse about their gender than men (11% v 5%).<sup>30</sup>

It is important to recognise that all users have unique experiences online that may or may not be impacted by protected characteristics or other parts of their identity. Some users may have multiple characteristics that may impact their online experience in an intersecting way.

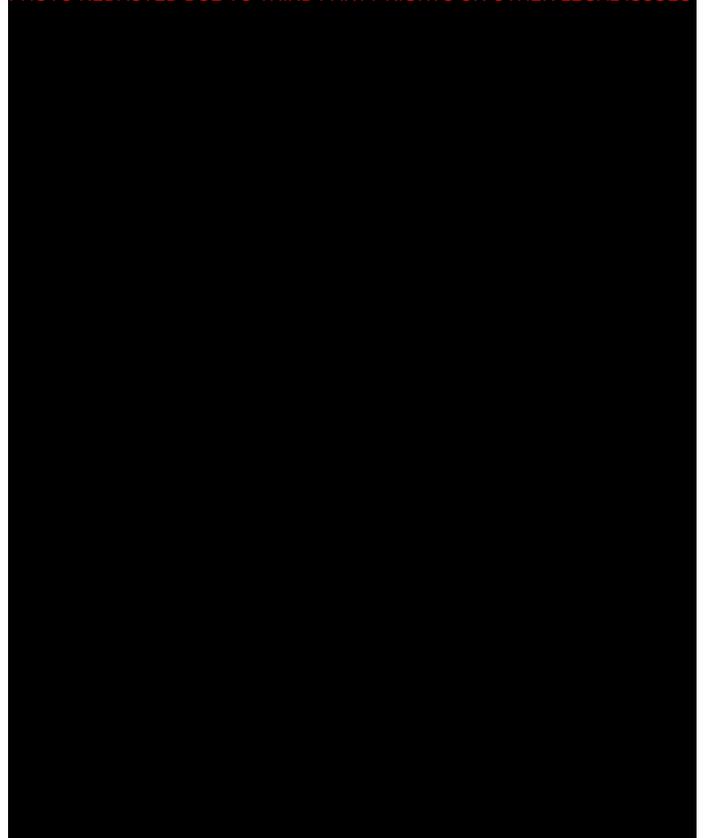
The experiences of different user groups may mean they have differing media literacy needs, but also that they may face differing barriers to accessing media literacy. To understand this further, DCMS worked with the consultancy RSM to explore further the barriers and needs of different user groups.

The full research has been published on the gov.uk website.<sup>31</sup>

## Media Literacy Barriers

Our research found that there were some key challenges faced by multiple user groups which acted as barriers to the development of strong media literacy capabilities.

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# BARRIER 1

## Limited Online Experience

A key factor which increases media literacy levels is ensuring users are able to apply skills and knowledge in the online environment. Users who have limited experience operating independently in the online environment have reduced opportunities to do this and consequently may have lower levels of media literacy.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, often digital and media literacy skills are developed through spending time online,<sup>33</sup> something else those with limited online experience miss out on.

This barrier is likely to impact **adults over 65** as 30% of those between 65-74, and 51% of those aged 75+, do not use the internet.<sup>34</sup>

This limits the exposure of these groups to risks in the online environment. However, if these user groups choose to start using the internet, they become vulnerable to online harms due to a low baseline of media literacy. This has been of particular concern in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as some essential services have only been available on the internet.

Stakeholders have cited that **parents** can excessively limit the amount of time their children can spend online. Whilst it is important to encourage children to manage the way they spend time online, these constraints can consequently limit children's online experience and inadvertently lead to lower media literacy levels.<sup>35</sup>

# BARRIER 2

## Limited Access to Technology

Users in the **socio-economic group D/E** (working class and non working) are less likely to be online, with 27% saying they

don't use the internet compared to the national average of 13%.<sup>36</sup>

Individuals from lower socio-economic groups may have limited access to technologies due to financial barriers which can limit their experience of the online environment.

Other users may also experience difficulties accessing the online space. For example, users with visual impairments may rely on specified hardware and software which may limit the online experience of the user (e.g. only be compatible with certain websites and apps) or be inaccessible due to cost. These types of limitations placed on users can restrict their experience online and in turn limit their media literacy levels.

# BARRIER 3

## Education Inequalities

Some users can experience exclusion from mainstream education where they would have had opportunities to access some media literacy education. This is particularly prevalent amongst some **disabled users** who have special educational needs.<sup>37</sup>

## Media Literacy Needs

The differing experiences of user groups online can mean that they have varying media literacy needs in order to empower them to have a safer online experience, and overcome certain challenges.

## Disproportionate Abuse

Online abuse is never acceptable. In recent years, there has been a concerning increase in online abuse. We know that certain user groups are subject to disproportionately higher levels of online abuse than the rest of the population.

## Disproportionate Abuse

- Recent reports from Jewish community groups have provided evidence that levels of antisemitism are on the rise. The Community Security Trust's recent report highlighted that, in the first six months of 2020, they saw the highest number of online antisemitic incidents recorded in the first half of a year.
- An online survey of girls and young woman found that one in eight girls aged 11-21 have experienced bullying while playing online games and those who identify as LGBT are more likely to experience mean comments (36% vs 21%), sexist comments (36% vs 13%) and bullying (24% vs 12%) compared to girls who do not identify this way.<sup>38</sup>
- Electoral candidates who are female, from ethnic minority backgrounds or LGBT are disproportionately likely to be the targets of intimidation and abuse both online and offline. Based on evidence presented to the Committee on Standards in Public Life by Amnesty International in 2017, Black and Asian women MPs – despite representing only 11% of all women in Westminster – received 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs.<sup>39</sup>

There is some evidence to suggest that users who experience high levels of online abuse are more likely to feel unsafe being online and avoid accessing online platforms altogether. For example, journalists who are subject to frequent online abuse may choose to self-censor, and limit the news they post online. Another example is that footballer Thierry Henry recently deleted his social media accounts due to racist online abuse.<sup>40</sup> Experiences such as these can contribute to the media literacy barrier of limited user experience online.

In particular, those who experience high levels of online abuse need to be supported and upskilled in aspects of media literacy that can help to protect them online, for example to:

- report unwanted and hateful content;
- filter the content they see online;
- identify and avoid individuals or groups that may generate harmful content;
- access support; and
- express themselves online.

Our mapping research demonstrated that there were very few (<4%) existing media literacy provisions that provided targeted and specific support for individuals experiencing disproportionate online abuse. We encourage organisations delivering media literacy education to consider and fill this gap.

An essential part of media literacy is being respectful online and tolerating legitimate opinions from others. What is sometimes called “cancel culture” refers to the withdrawal of support from public figures in response to those who have different opinions or have acted in a way deemed socially unacceptable.

If cancel culture occurs can be harmful as it can have a significant impact on an individuals mental health and offline experience, and can lead to intimidatory behaviour and abuse of individuals, and can suppress the legitimate expression of free speech. Users should be encouraged to treat everyone with respect online, regardless of differences with other users, and online platforms should consider the importance of protecting freedom of expression and freedom of association on their services.

## Vulnerable Users

Users who are already vulnerable to certain harms online need strengthened

literacy skills in those areas. There are many different user groups this can apply to, including individuals who are vulnerable to: grooming, body image issues, self-harm, suicide, addiction, as well as other groups, such as refugees and those with learning disabilities. These individuals need targeted support to help them stay safe online.

The sector is leading research and developing expertise to support these individuals online. The UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS) Vulnerable Users Working Group, who support children and other vulnerable users online, recently published a Digital Passport. This resource provides foster carers with support for keeping children safer online and recording any safeguarding incidents.

There is also a distinct lack of provision specifically targeted at disabled users (4%).<sup>42</sup> As the term 'disabled' encompasses a wide range of conditions and abilities, there may be many users who identify as disabled and do not require targeted media literacy support. However, particular attention should be given to users with moderate to severe learning disabilities who may require specialised media literacy activity which is both age and ability-appropriate.

### Inability to Critically Evaluate Online Situations

A key aspect of media literacy is the ability to critically evaluate content and situations online. This can help users to understand where content may be false, consider the consequences of their actions, and understand when online situations may be dangerous. However, around **40% of internet users** do not have the critical thinking skills needed for this discernment.<sup>43</sup>

This issue is particularly relevant for **children up to the age of 15** who can often struggle to critically evaluate online content or context as their brains are still developing.<sup>44</sup> Studies have found that just 2% of children

have the critical thinking skills needed to tell fact from fiction online.<sup>45</sup> This skills gap, combined with the high number of children accessing the online space, can leave children of this age vulnerable to harm.

### Online Application of Media Literacy

Research has found that across all user groups there is a general inability to independently apply media literacy understanding and skills to the online environment.<sup>46</sup> Whilst individuals may have some understanding or awareness of different online safety issues, they are unable to enact this when accessing the online space.

This creates a large barrier for all user groups in achieving higher media literacy rates. Media literacy education provisions need to take action to encourage learning to be carried forward into a user's daily use of the internet.

### Addressing Needs and Barriers

There is a clear role for the media literacy sector to take action to address these gaps in provisions, barriers, and specific needs. In order to make progress and strengthen user media literacy rates, it is important that the whole sector works collaboratively to address these issues by meeting the Strategic Sector Priorities, and media literacy challenges (set out in chapter 7).

## Strategic Sector Priorities

### 9.

Create an inclusive media literacy landscape by filling gaps in provisions for certain user groups and those experiencing disproportionate online abuse.

Chapter 5

**DISINFORMATION  
AND  
MISINFORMATION**



# DISINFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION



## The Challenge

Online spaces contribute greatly to our information environments, with 65% of users using the internet to access their news and 45% of UK adults getting their news from social media.<sup>47</sup> Social media provides good opportunities for users to keep up with the news where they may otherwise be disengaged, and to participate in public and democratic debate. However, this type of news consumption also creates opportunities for misinformation and disinformation to spread, and 'pollute' information environments.

## Definitions

When discussing misinformation and disinformation there are some key definitions to be aware of:

- **Disinformation** is the deliberate creation and/or sharing of false or manipulated information with the **intention** to deceive or mislead audiences.
- **Misinformation** is the **inadvertent** sharing of false information.

The term '**fake news**' has become a common phrase whilst discussing public and political discourse, and in everyday life. It is often used synonymously with the term '**disinformation**', however, '**fake news**' has become used to describe so many things that its meaning is lost and the term is best avoided.

Online misinformation and disinformation have the potential to cause significant harm to both individuals and society. Globally, we have seen the potential of online falsehoods to influence elections,<sup>48</sup> stoke racial divisions and abuse,<sup>49</sup> and incite violence and rioting.<sup>50</sup>

Globally and in the UK, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a significant rise in health-related misinformation and disinformation. Research found that in April 2020, 49% of people in the UK were using social media as a news source about the virus.<sup>51</sup> This COVID-19 information environment threw into sharp relief the real-world harm that can be associated with misinformation and disinformation.

Some of these narratives directly promoted dangerous action that had the potential to cause harm to individuals, and propel the spread of COVID-19. An indirect impact of all these narratives, including those which seem innocuous, is that they create a confused and contradictory information environment, making it more challenging for users to discern the veracity of information, and access reliable sources of news.

## Many narratives about COVID-19 have circulated in the UK, including those about:

- the causes and severity of the virus;
- false curative measures, including those which are harmful or even fatal;
- false links between 5G and COVID-19;
- government measures to counteract its spread, such as lockdowns and mask wearing; and
- false allegations of dangers posed by COVID-19 vaccines.

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## COVID-19, 5G, and Vaccines

### The real-world impact of disinformation

Even before the COVID-19 Pandemic, the roll-out of 5G has been the subject of conspiracy theories about its supposed impact on the health of the general public,<sup>52</sup> despite no supporting evidence or scientific coherence.

In the first weeks of January 2020, false narratives started to emerge online on social media linking the roll-out of 5G infrastructures and networks to the emergence of COVID-19. The narratives gained significant traction and were trending on Twitter and YouTube in the UK, contributing to a confusing landscape of information about COVID-19.<sup>53</sup>

The conspiracy theories became so severe that in some instances they are believed to have incited vandalism and arson. Phone masts were set alight in both Merseyside and Birmingham,<sup>54</sup> including those serving the Birmingham Nightingale Hospital.<sup>55</sup> The Communications Workers Union also reported related cases of abuse towards telecoms engineers who have been subject to harassment and even received death threats.<sup>56</sup> These claims were, of course, palpably false and without merit.

The online nature of this type of misinformation and disinformation, such as on social media platforms, presents specific challenges. Online content is able to spread quickly to wide and often global audiences, and to jump across different platforms. This makes narratives challenging to contain through action such as content moderation. The mechanics of the online environment, such as algorithms, can also contribute to the amplification and spread of falsehoods, leading to phenomena such as echo chambers<sup>57</sup> in users' news feeds. This can create an environment in which a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own, so that their existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered. In turn, this can stoke social divisions, polarisation and, in extreme instances, contribute to radicalisation.

The government is taking steps to tackle misinformation and disinformation in the UK, including through establishing the Counter-Disinformation Unit, and working closely with social media platforms and other stakeholders, such as academics and fact checkers. It also runs nationwide communications campaigns to build the public's resilience through online behaviour change.

These interventions are essential for responding to crises, and creating a long-term infrastructure that is resilient to online falsehoods. However, these interventions will not be able to create online information environments that are entirely free of misinformation and disinformation. We must also empower users with the skills they need to discern the veracity of information they see online.

## Information Literacy

Building audience resilience to mis- and disinformation is one of the most critical tools available for tackling the challenge. This is addressed through information literacy, a subset of media literacy.

**Information literacy covers the skills and knowledge users specifically need to consume content online. This links to Principle 3 of the Media Literacy Framework outlined in chapter 2 of this Strategy. Namely, information literacy includes:**

- critical thinking;
- understanding news;
- understanding the value of journalism;
- understanding how the online environment operates; and
- awareness that not everything they encounter in the online environment is true or reflective of reality.

Beyond just being able to identify mis- and disinformation, it is key that users have a wider understanding of how journalism and the news cycle operate and the thorough process that goes into reporting credible news. This has positive implications for the sustainability of journalism and democratic debate, as research has found a correlation between higher levels of media literacy and propensity or willingness to pay for online news. Research has also found that areas with higher levels of local newspaper circulation report higher local election turnout, indicating high levels of engagement with democratic issues.

## User Capabilities

In the UK, research has consistently found that users do not have the information literacy skills needed to stem the spread of mis- and disinformation online.

There are many reasons why users may struggle to identify false information when it is presented to them online.<sup>65</sup> There are many factors that contribute to why an individual may believe online falsehoods, many of which are not well understood.

## UK Information Literacy Levels

- 26% of social media users do not check the truthfulness of news they encounter on these platforms.<sup>59</sup>
- Compared to 2018, adult internet users are less likely to check the source of information.<sup>60</sup>
- Only 2% of children have the critical literacy skills they need to tell if a news story is real or fake.<sup>61</sup>
- Half of children (49.9%) are worried about not being able to spot online falsehoods.<sup>62</sup>
- 62% of UK citizens don't realise their social networks can affect the news they see.<sup>63</sup>
- Only 30% of individuals are confident that fellow UK citizens are able to spot online falsehoods.<sup>64</sup>

## Preliminary research by FCDO indicates that some key factors include:

- **lack of awareness of the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation;**  
A lack of awareness can mean that users are not taking steps to identify and avoid online falsehoods.
- **emotionally biased reasoning;**  
False narratives often evoke strong emotional reactions which can bypass a user's critical thinking skills when assessing the veracity of information.
- **limited critical thinking skills;**  
Users with limited critical thinking skills may find it difficult to assess the veracity of information, and may become more susceptible to believing or sharing online falsehoods.

## Government Research on Misinformation and Disinformation

The government is carrying out research to help boost UK citizens' resilience to dis- and misinformation in the UK. The research aims to identify what makes people more vulnerable to misinformation, including psychological factors, the kinds of content that people are most likely to engage with and how the online environment influences people's interaction with that content.

As part of this work, we are exploring ways to increase audience resilience and help people make informed decisions online. The findings will inform ongoing work in government and among partners in industry and civil society to build users' critical thinking skills and help them resist online dis- and misinformation.

We are also developing ways to assess UK citizens' resilience and the effectiveness of interventions in the future. This will give us a clearer understanding of the potential impact of dis- and misinformation on people in the UK and allow us to see what works best in tackling it.

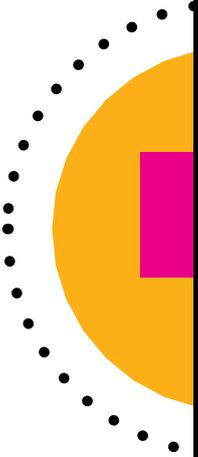


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## Strategic Sector Priorities

### 10.

Increase our understanding of user vulnerabilities to mis- and disinformation, and integrate this into information literacy provisions.

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## Existing Provisions

Our mapping research showed that a high proportion of media literacy initiatives in the UK had a strong emphasis on misinformation and disinformation (51%).<sup>66</sup> However, many of these initiatives had limited and likely inaccurate evaluation which relied heavily on users' self-assessment of media literacy. As such, we do not have a clear understanding of how effective these measures are at building strong information literacy capabilities.<sup>67</sup>

Information literacy is also supported by networks for education providers. For example, the National Literacy Trust set up the **News Literacy Network** to bring together organisations to discuss current issues and share best practice.

The Ofcom **Making Sense of Media panel** similarly brings together experts to discuss key media literacy issues including misinformation and disinformation.

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Case study:

**Go Viral!<sup>68</sup>**

## **EDUCATION THROUGH GAMING**

Go Viral! is a game developed by the University of Cambridge in collaboration with media agency DROG and the UK Cabinet Office. The game aims to demystify how disinformation is produced, giving players an idea of the techniques and motivations behind the spread of COVID -19 related disinformation; and pre emptively exposing people to the methods used to disseminate online falsehoods.

**The short game introduces players to the basics of online manipulation and acts as a simple guide to common techniques such as:**

- using emotionally charged language to stoke outrage and fear;
- deploying fake experts to sow doubt;
- and mining conspiracies for social media 'Likes'.

Players find out how real news gets discredited through promoting fake doctors and remedies, and how false narratives, such as 5G conspiracy theories, get promoted. By providing people with ideas of the techniques used to spread misinformation on social media, it intends to increase the user's ability to identify and disregard disinformation in the future.

Chapter 6

**LITERACY  
BY DESIGN**



# LITERACY BY DESIGN



**'Platform design' refers to the design choices made by companies that shape a user's end-to-end experience of an online product or service. The way in which online platforms are designed can directly impact a user's experience and behaviour online.**

## Improving Media Literacy Through Platform Design

Good platform design can strengthen media literacy through the inclusion of features which support users to make more informed and safer choices online. For example, by prompting users to pause and consider the possible risks posed by content they are sharing before they do so. These types of interventions have been termed 'literacy by design'. Conversely, platforms which are not designed with users in mind can contribute to a less safe online environment and increase the potential online harms. This often has a disproportionate impact on vulnerable users and children.

We have seen multiple online platforms take action to implement literacy by design measures, particularly in addressing mis- and disinformation by encouraging users to critically think about online content.

Design choices can be used to enhance users' ability to spot misleading or false sources or information and prevent them from spreading. These design measures can include visually differentiating disputed or fact-checked content; introducing 'nudges' which encourage users to consider the quality and accuracy of content they are engaging with; and personalised feedback which informs users about their online behaviour.

Literacy by design interventions can be made at a number of points along a user's online journey. DCMS worked with the behavioural science organisations the 'Behavioural Insights Team' to explore in greater detail how platform design choices could be used to strengthen a user's media literacy. The work used misinformation and disinformation as a case study. This identified a 5-stage model setting out where in the 'user journey' design interventions had the potential to be impactful.

Case study:

## Facebook, Correct the Record

# COUNTERING MIS- AND DISINFORMATION THROUGH PLATFORM DESIGN

In response to high volumes of COVID-19 related misinformation and disinformation, Facebook introduced 'Correct the Record' pop-up messages. These messages are sent to those users who had commented or directly interacted with COVID-19 mis- and disinformation content which has subsequently been removed by Facebook. Users are directed by the pop-up messages to authoritative sources of information on COVID-19, such as the World Health Organization's myth-busting page, which provides them with factual and credible information about the virus.

## Five Stages of User Engagement and Intervention

Pre-engagement:

**1.**

**Educate and inoculate:** Education about how to spot mis- and disinformation can lead to 'inoculation' against such content prior to accessing it. This stage can happen either offline or when a user joins or sets up an account on a service.

**2.**

**Reduce exposure:** Exposure to misinformation and disinformation can be reduced by changes to algorithm design and content feeds.

During engagement:

**3.**

**Support interpretation:** Users' interpretation of information can be supported through platform design interventions, such as quality cues and accuracy prompts.

**4.**

**Influence actions:** Users' critical engagement with content, including misinformation and disinformation, can be influenced by encouraging users to pause before sharing, or restricting their ability to share.

Post-engagement:

**5.**

**Feedback and reflections:** Users can be provided with feedback which informs them about their engagement with content that has been classified mis- and disinformation (e.g. by an independent fact checker) on a longer-term basis. This may encourage a change in user behaviour.

So far, literacy by design efforts have mostly been focused on reducing the spread of misinformation and disinformation. However, there is a clear potential for literacy by design to prevent and tackle other types of online harms.

We are keen to see online platforms experiment with and implement literacy by design provisions which go beyond just tackling misinformation and disinformation.

## The Effectiveness of Literacy by Design

The research and data available about the effectiveness of media literacy is relatively limited as this is a field which is its infancy. However, the studies that have been conducted have demonstrated positive findings about the effectiveness of interventions, such as inoculation games,<sup>69</sup> and cues about the quality of information.<sup>70</sup> This gives us reason to be optimistic about the potential effectiveness of a wider range of literacy by design interventions.

## Commercial Benefits of Implementing 'Literacy by Design'

As well as creating the potential benefits of promoting media literacy and tackling harms, literacy by design interventions have the potential to bring commercial benefits to the platforms that implement them.

Research is starting to indicate the nature and scale of these potential benefits. Users who feel safe when using an online platform are more likely to engage with it more regularly than those who feel unsafe on online platforms. For example, the largest global survey about online violence demonstrated that one in five girls across the world either significantly reduced their use of or left a social media platform when they had been subjected to abuse or harassment.<sup>71</sup>

Companies may find that their reliance on reactive safety measures, such as content take-down and moderation, may reduce as they take steps to increase user media literacy rates. Users with strong media literacy capabilities are more likely to have an increased awareness of online harms. They might also have a greater understanding of how to avoid incidents online, which may ultimately lead to

a reduction in incidents of harm on a platform.

## Strategic Sector Priorities

### 11.

Create an evidence base about the effectiveness of a wide range of literacy by design interventions that go beyond just addressing mis- and disinformation; and promote uptake from online platforms.

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Case study:

## BBC 'Own It' App

# IMPROVING CHILD SAFETY THROUGH LITERACY BY DESIGN

In September 2019, the BBC [launched](#) the 'Own It' App aimed at children. The app features a special keyboard that offers **real-time feedback** and support based on what the user is typing. For example, if a message contains explicit language, the keyboard will encourage or 'nudge' the user to reflect on whether they should send it. The app will also offer advice to a user if harmful topics, such as bullying, are mentioned in a chat. Using machine learning, the app maintains a diary of the user's emotions which enables children to log how they are feeling and offers support in response.

## The Safety by Design Framework

An approach that embeds safety at the design stage of a platform is integral to tackling online harms and delivering greater online safety to users. Accordingly, the Full Government Response to the Online Harms White Paper Consultation confirmed our commitment to publishing a 'Safety by Design' framework targeted at SMEs and start-ups in the form of guidance. The Safety by Design guidance sets out how companies can improve their users' safety through platform design. The adoption of a Safety by Design approach will be important for companies in the context of the forthcoming Online Safety Bill.

The Framework also sets out clear principles and practical advice on how companies can manage the risk of harm on their online service through platform design. The guidance was published on 29 June 2021 and has been developed in collaboration with SMEs and start-ups, industry bodies and civil society. The guidance will be continually developed and it is expected to incorporate media literacy principles and a framework for businesses in future iterations.

## Age Appropriate Design Code

The Age Appropriate Design Code (known commonly as the Children's Code) is a statutory data protection code of practice for online services, such as apps, online games, and web and social media sites, which are likely to be accessed by children. Companies in scope will have to comply with its requirements from September 2021.

The Code provides practical guidance about how to ensure online services are designed to appropriately safeguard children's personal data and recognises that personal data relating to children is afforded special protection in the UK General Data Protection Regulation. The Code sets out 15 standards of age-appropriate design.

### **In practical terms, this includes:**

- settings must be 'high privacy' by default;
- only the minimum amount of personal data should be collected and retained;
- children's data should not usually be shared unless you can demonstrate a compelling reason to do so, taking into account the best interests of the child; and
- geolocation services should be switched off by default.

Chapter 7

**MEDIA  
LITERACY  
CHALLENGES**



# MEDIA LITERACY CHALLENGES



Research and extensive stakeholder engagement have highlighted that there are a number of barriers and challenges within the media literacy sector which are blockers to improving media literacy rates in the UK.

We have identified 6 key challenges which we believe need to be addressed in order to create change within the sector and improve media literacy outcomes for users.

**1.**

Evaluation

**2.**

Funding

**3.**

Hard to Reach Audiences

**4.**

Vulnerable Users

**5.**

Building Audience Resilience to Misinformation and Disinformation

**6.**

Coordination

The government is committed to taking action to tackle these challenges. This chapter will explore each of these challenges and set out a vision for creating change within the sector.

# CHALLENGE 1

## Evaluation

Research has found that there is a distinct lack of robust evaluation of media literacy provisions.<sup>72</sup> Where there are evaluation measures, they are often very limited, using metrics such as reach, number of events, quotes from participants, or participant self-assessment. This makes it challenging to assess whether provisions are actually effective at improving media literacy capabilities on a long-term basis.

There are a number of factors that contribute to limited evaluation. Stakeholders have highlighted that media literacy providers often do not have sufficient funding to be able to deliver sound monitoring and evaluation alongside education provisions. Additionally, many organisations are funded by larger companies to provide services on their behalf. This can create limited space to deliver a robust evaluation if companies are motivated to deliver a 'good outcome' to ensure continuation of funding.

Many media literacy interventions operate on a short-term basis and do not facilitate working with the same users over a period of time. This can make it challenging to determine how much users have actually learnt and whether provisions have been effective.

Many aspects of media literacy are cemented in behavioural change which can be challenging and costly to effectively measure. This is furthered by the challenge of assessing whether users are able to independently apply learnings to the 'real' online environment, rather than just under supervision.

# CHALLENGE 2

## Funding

Media literacy education providers frequently face issues related to funding for their programmes. The majority of providers are charities or foundations, and are often reliant on external sources of funding. Stakeholders cited that funding rarely extends beyond 2 years, making it difficult for organisations to work with students over a longer period of time, and to make longer term plans.

In order to produce strong media literacy outcomes for users, it is important that there is consistent investment and funding in media literacy activity. Within this, funding should allow for experimental approaches to media literacy, even where there is a limited evidence base.

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## CHALLENGE 3

### Hard to Reach Audiences

Whilst there are a large number of media literacy interventions delivered to audiences in the UK, there are some groups who are particularly challenging to reach and upskill. This often includes users who:

- are disengaged with the issue of online safety;
- are overconfident in their media literacy capabilities;
- do not have access to formal education settings where media literacy education may take place; and
- do not regularly use technology or have limited access to the internet.

Schools are often highlighted as 'easy' places for media literacy organisations to deliver educational programmes to upskill students. However, providers have cited that they face difficulties in being able to deliver through schools due to funding and timing constraints.

It is essential to establish channels to reach these audiences and support them to develop strong media literacy capabilities. This is likely to require cross-sector collaboration to ensure there is a wide reach, create trusted relationships, and tailor education materials to different audiences.

## CHALLENGE 4

### Vulnerable Users

#### **Lack of Provision**

The media literacy landscape mapping exercise<sup>73</sup> undertaken by DCMS found that there was a lack of media literacy provision for many vulnerable user groups. As different groups are more vulnerable to certain types of online harms (e.g. online abuse) than others, it is crucial that there are specific and targeted media literacy provision made available for these audiences.

#### **Institutional Support**

Vulnerable users often receive professional support from a range of sources, such as social workers, carers, and youth workers who provide safeguarding and help to support wellbeing. However, often these workers are unable to extend this support to individuals' online lives. The previously mentioned UKCIS Digital Passport will help to fill this gap, however, we still believe more can be done to address this issue.

**Anecdotally, we have heard workers may struggle with this issue for a number of reasons:**

- many professionals providing support do not feel confident to lead these conversations, or have the media literacy skills to provide sound advice;
- standard discussions with users may not encourage the consideration of online lives; and
- even if professionals discuss online life with users, they may have nowhere appropriate to store that information.

We want to upskill these professionals and embed the consideration of online safety into safeguarding practices to help them support users and make early interventions to prevent online harms.

## An Overview of the Percentage of UK Media Literacy Initiatives and Resources Which are Targeted at Vulnerable User Groups<sup>74</sup>

<b>Group</b>	<b>Percentage of Initiatives</b> (100% = 170)
Children who have been in care	7%
Older people	6%
Disabled people	4%
Women/girls	3%
Disadvantaged socio-economic background	3%
BAME	2%
LGBT	1%
Users from religious groups	0%
Users who have undergone gender reassignment	0%
New users	0%

## CHALLENGE 5

### Building Audience Resilience to Misinformation and Disinformation

Mis- and disinformation poses a large risk to national security, the welfare of our citizens, and the maintenance of democracy. The UK government is taking measures to address the threat of mis- and disinformation through a number of routes, including the Cross-Whitehall Counter Disinformation Unit and through the Online Safety Bill.

The Counter Disinformation Unit was set up on 5 March 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing together cross-government monitoring and analysis capabilities. Its primary function is to provide a comprehensive picture of the extent, scope and the reach of mis- and disinformation linked to COVID-19, and to work with partners to stamp it out.

The Online Safety Bill will introduce duties of care requiring companies to address content that could harm individuals on their online platforms, including mis- and disinformation. The new laws will have robust and proportionate measures to deal with mis- and disinformation that could cause significant physical or psychological harm to an individual, such as anti-vaccination content and falsehoods about COVID-19.

These interventions are essential, however, they cannot ensure mis- and disinformation is entirely removed from the UK's information environment.

Consequently, building audience resilience to mis- and disinformation through media literacy is one of the strongest tools governments have to tackle online mis- and disinformation. A population where citizens

have strong critical thinking skills and can independently discern between fact, opinion, satire and falsehoods online, will protect against the harms of misinformation.

However, this is a big challenge with no simple solution; especially as it intersects with the other media literacy challenges. The government is committed to continuing to work with a range of organisations to tackle the issues and find solutions. **This may include exploring activity to boost audience resilience, such as:**

- tech solutions;
- building online and offline critical thinking skills;
- raising awareness through comms campaigns; and
- promoting education about the journalistic process.

## CHALLENGE 6

### Coordination

#### Sector Coordination

As discussed in Chapter 3 of this Strategy, the media literacy sector is composed of multiple different organisations who each have a distinct role to play in increasing media literacy rates. Many of the media literacy challenges we have identified cannot be solved by any one actor alone, and require cross-sector coordination and collaboration in order to create effective solutions.

There are already efforts to stimulate coordination and collaboration across the sector. For example, the Ofcom Making Sense of Media Panel and wider network,

UKCIS working groups, the News Literacy Network, and consortium organisations, such as Internet Matters or the Safer Internet Centre. These forums have created a solid baseline on which to build further coordination.

However, despite the existence of these forums, stakeholders cite that the media literacy sector often seems disparate and duplicative. **This is likely due to a number of different factors, such as:**

- an oversaturated market with many organisations competing to deliver the same material;
- lack of central oversight; and
- a lack of common ownership and purpose amongst organisations.

We want to create greater coordination and collaboration within the sector that brings together stakeholders working towards the same goals, and take collective action to improve UK media literacy capabilities.

### **Coordination for Users**

The large number of media literacy provisions available in the UK promotes healthy competition within the market, however, can present challenges for consumers. Stakeholders have highlighted that, when choosing provisions to use, consumers can experience 'choice overload' which may put them off accessing media literacy resources at all. It can also be challenging for consumers to know where to access the resources that can support them.

It is important to make it as easy as possible for users to access the resources that they need, when they need them.

## **Media Literacy Action Plan**

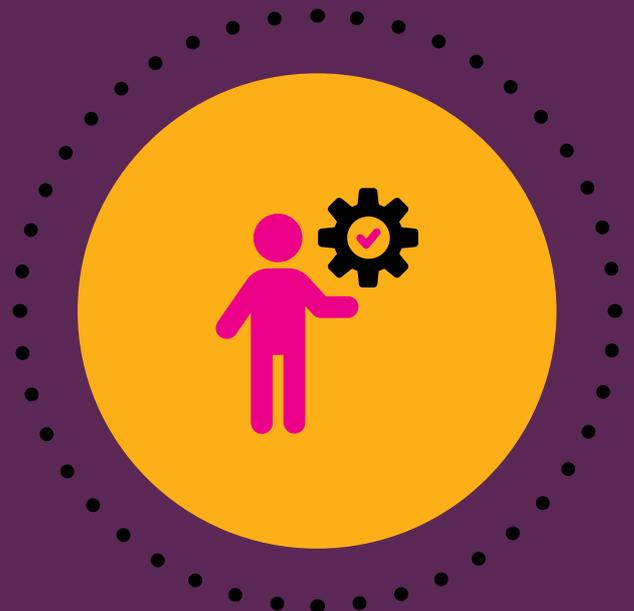
The government is committed to taking action and investing in tackling these challenges. This is why we will be publishing an annual Media Literacy Action Plan each Financial Year until at least 2024/25. Each Media Literacy Action Plan will set out government-led and funded initiatives which will be delivered over the forthcoming Financial Year.

These initiatives will take action against these challenges and the Strategic Sector Priorities set out in this Strategy.

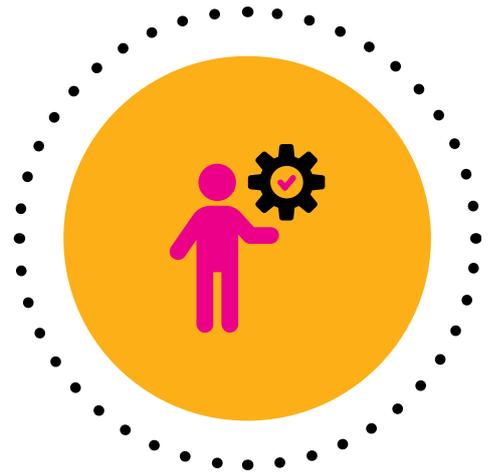
- This approach will enable us to take an agile approach to the initiatives we plan to fund and deliver; and respond to new and emerging research, trends and needs within the media literacy sector. It will also allow us to report on our progress in meeting our media literacy challenges.
- The first Action Plan will cover the 2021/22 Financial Year and has been published alongside this Strategy.

Chapter 8

**ACTIVITY  
ACROSS  
GOVERNMENT**



# ACTIVITY ACROSS GOVERNMENT



Due to its broad nature, media literacy overlaps across the work of multiple government departments, such as – alongside DCMS – the Home Office and the Department for Education. These Departments have collaborated and worked closely to develop this Strategy to ensure there is a joined-up approach to media literacy across government.

**Departments have collaborated and worked closely to develop this Strategy to ensure there is a joined-up approach to media literacy across government.**

As we move forward to deliver this Strategy, we will continue to work collaboratively to tackle the Media Literacy Challenges and meet the objectives set out in the introduction.

Across these Departments, there is already a range of media literacy activity taking place. This chapter seeks to set out some of this work which has already been delivered, and highlights the opportunities for future activity. These strands of activity will all be aligned through this Strategy.

## The National Curriculum

Whilst the national curriculum does not include media literacy specifically, aspects of media literacy are covered within a range of different subjects.

The computing curriculum, introduced in September 2014, aims to ensure that all students are responsible, competent, confident and creative users of information and communication technology. From Key Stage 1, students are taught how to use technology safely and respectfully, how to keep personal information private, and where to go for help if they have concerns – for example, about content they find in

or contact they encounter. As they move through the Key Stages, the computing curriculum content reflects the different levels of engagement students may have with technology as they get older. There is an increased focus on using technology responsibly and securely, and recognising what is acceptable and unacceptable content, conduct and behaviour. At Key Stage 2, students are also taught how to use search technologies effectively, appreciate how results are selected and ranked, and be discerning in evaluating digital content.

Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) covers topics such as internet safety and harms, online relationships and online and media. The content specified in the RSHE statutory guidance covers a number of areas, including rationing time online; understanding how information from searches on the internet is ranked, selected and targeted; being a discerning consumer of information; unhealthy comparison with others online; and understanding how people may curate a specific image of their life online. The Department for Education has developed online training materials<sup>75</sup> to assist teachers in delivering this content.

Media literacy is also particularly relevant in the Citizenship part of the curriculum which covers: safeguarding democracy and a free media to develop informed and responsible citizens; promoting understanding of the role of responsible journalism in democratic society; and countering the effects of negative and harmful news, events, and information.

Throughout the English programmes of study, students are expected to read and discuss a wide range of texts for both pleasure and information. In Key Stage 2, Year 5 and 6 students are expected to distinguish between statements of fact and opinion and make comparisons between texts. This critical reading of texts is built upon in Key Stage 3, where students are

expected to make critical comparisons across texts and understand increasingly difficult texts by making inferences and referring to evidence in the text. At Key Stage 4, students are expected to distinguish between statements that are supported by evidence and those that are not, and identify bias and misuse of evidence. They are also expected to make critical comparisons, refer to context and draw on knowledge and skills from wider reading to help them understand and critically evaluate texts.

All state-maintained schools must teach the national curriculum, and free schools and academies can use it as an exemplar.

## Misinformation and Disinformation

The government takes the threats of misinformation and disinformation very seriously and recognises the significant role media literacy can play to tackle the challenge.

The government has developed the [SHARE checklist](#) which aims to build audience resilience to mis- and disinformation online. The checklist provides the public with five easy steps to identify false content, encouraging users to stop and think before they share content online.

In response to increased COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in vulnerable communities, the government developed a toolkit based around the SHARE checklist principles with content designed to be shared via WhatsApp and Facebook community groups, as well as Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, to tackle false information spread through private channels.

The campaign was fronted by trusted local community figures, including imams, pastors and clinicians in short, shareable videos which signpost to the NHS website for the

## DCMS Online Media Literacy Strategy

best source of information and include simple tips on how to spot misinformation and what to do to stop its spread.

We are committed to taking further action in this space to continue to raise awareness amongst the public about false and misleading content online and help media literacy organisations better reach users.

### Gender and Body Image

In 2016, The Government Equalities Office developed a new resource to provide guidance for teachers and parents to improve primary school children's understanding of body image and build their resilience to negative content. These are PSHE accredited materials that come in the form of teacher resources and a guide for parents aimed at body image and advertising. The resource is still regularly used today and aims to improve critical thinking skills online.

### Internet Watch Foundation Campaigns

The Home Office is currently funding the Internet Watch Foundation to deliver a campaign helping both children and parents to understand the risks which can be posed online, specifically around youth-produced sexual imagery. The campaign has two strands.

The first campaign, 'Home Truths', is focused on parents and carers. It is being run on Facebook, Twitter, Google display and YouTube. The second campaign, 'Girls Out Loud', has a target audience of teenage girls (11-13+). It will be run on Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube and Google Display.

The campaign uses social content to give an awareness of grooming techniques, such as 'scattergun', to help girls spot the tactics online. The aim is to help them become

aware and empower them. The key message is: 'Block. Report. Tell someone you trust.'

### Digital Inclusion for Adults

In March 2021, DCMS launched its 10 Tech Priorities. The priorities outline how DCMS intends to deploy digital tech to build back better, safer, and stronger from COVID-19, and shape a new 'golden age' for tech in the UK. Tech Priority 3 focuses on building a 'tech savvy nation', which aims to ensure that every adult has a base level of digital and cyber skills so that nobody is left behind by the digital revolution.

The government has introduced a digital entitlement for adults with no or low digital skills. Adults can undertake specified digital qualifications, up to 'level one', free of charge. Essential Digital Skills Qualifications (EDSQs), introduced alongside the digital entitlement, are based on new national standards which set out the digital skills people need to get on in life and work.

DCMS launched the £2.5m Digital Lifeline Fund in early 2021 to help people with learning disabilities get online. The Fund, which is being delivered by the Good Things Foundation, in partnership with disability and digital inclusion charities, is providing devices, data and digital support to over 5,500 people with learning disabilities who cannot afford to get online.

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## The Role of Libraries

Libraries play an important role in all communities. They are a source of objective and accurate information to help guide users through the evolving information landscape and help build the skills needed to thrive in a changing world.

Public libraries offer free resources for study and learning. This includes media literacy skills, through channels such as online courses and information sources, and providing quiet spaces for study and reflection that people may not have at home. Libraries also provide opportunities for people to develop core online skills, such as the ability to analyse information confidently and safely.

Library staff are specialists that help point users towards the best sources of information, and help them understand how to assess and handle it. This includes educating the public about issues such as online safety and privacy, increasingly important in the digital world.

DCMS and the Local Government Association have published the 'Libraries Deliver: Ambition Strategy'. This document has seven strategic outcomes, including supporting 'digital skills and access' through using online information safely and competently, and understanding how to assess information sources and credibility.

## Cairncross Review Recommendations

The Cairncross Review into sustainable journalism recommended that the government should develop a media literacy strategy to identify gaps in existing provision and also opportunities for more collaborative working. It noted that, in particular, more could be done to improve adults' critical thinking skills.

The Cairncross Review makes a clear link between the proper functioning of democracy and the ability for readers to understand the origins of different types of content; distinguish accurate reporting from disinformation; and have an awareness of why reports on the same story might come with different facts or biases.

Educating readers about news-gathering processes, as well as the benefits of well researched and accurate content, could also have a positive impact on the sustainability of journalism. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 found evidence that readers are shifting towards publishers considered to be more reputable as disinformation becomes a bigger concern for the public,<sup>76</sup> whilst the Digital News Report 2018 found a correlation between higher levels of media literacy and propensity or willingness to pay for online news.<sup>79</sup>

Using media literacy to enable a better understanding of journalistic processes, and their value to the public, could also benefit journalists' safety. In the National Action plan for the Safety of Journalists, we confirmed we would publish an Online Media Literacy Strategy which will include supporting wider public understanding of the role of journalism. The aim of this will be for citizens to develop an understanding of the role of journalists in democratic debate, to reduce attacks and threats against them.

### **Media Literacy Taskforce**

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## Cyber Security and Digital Identity

DCMS' work on cyber security and digital identity contribute to the government's objectives to make the UK one of the safest places to live and work online.

Good cyber security enables the public to have trust in the use of technology and provides the confidence for citizens and organisations to operate online. Users need to be assured their accounts, their data and their money are secure when using online services. The interventions and programmes delivered by the government seek to secure devices and services, secure business' practices to ensure resilience against cyber risks and threats, and to empower citizens to be secure online.

DCMS works with the National Cyber Security Centre and other government departments to develop and embed a range of guidance, support and initiatives that look to secure the technologies individuals use (e.g. assurance of Internet of Things devices), broaden general cyber awareness in the population to stay secure online (e.g. Cyber Aware campaign) and ensure a steady and diverse supply of cyber security professionals into the industry both now and in the future (e.g. CyberFirst). Having the knowledge and critical abilities to operate securely online is essential, and will support and complement the improvement of media literacy skills. It also provides a secure underpinning to a digital economy that continues to grow, accelerated in part by the COVID-19 pandemic.

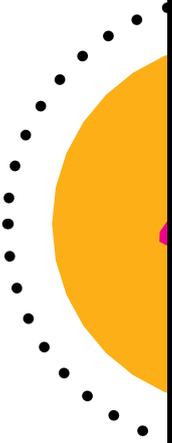
## International Collaboration

The challenges related to media literacy are global, and we believe it is important to collaborate with international partners to find solutions.

In April 2021, under the UK's presidency of the G7, member states endorsed a set of [G7 Internet Safety Principles](#). This included a principle highlighting the G7's joint commitment to media literacy:

We believe that governments, companies, civil society, academia and other interested stakeholders need to educate and empower people of all ages with the skills, digital competence, access and knowledge they need to make informed and safe choices online; and evaluate and develop domestic approaches to keep pace with new technologies and their applications.

We will continue to work to tackle the challenges of media literacy with our international partners.



Chapter 9

**THE ROLE OF  
OFCOM IN  
PROMOTING  
MEDIA LITERACY**



# THE ROLE OF OFCOM IN PROMOTING MEDIA LITERACY



Ofcom and the government have distinct roles in supporting media literacy programmes. However, both work together closely to ensure that our approaches are complementary and not duplicative.

Currently, Ofcom has a legislative duty to promote media literacy which it discharges through a number of activities. This includes undertaking research into UK adults' and children's media habits, attitudes and critical understanding. Ofcom also delivers the expert 'Making Sense of Media Panel and wider Network', in order to increase collaborative activity, information-sharing and debate in relation to media literacy issues. Ofcom is also creating an evidence base of 'what works' in media literacy interventions in order to encourage better evaluation of interventions and in turn help encourage media literacy interventions to be more effective.

In May 2021, the government published the draft Online Safety Bill which included updated provisions on media literacy.

The proposed Bill will build upon and strengthen the existing duty by charging Ofcom with additional responsibilities to promote media literacy, including:

- Promoting greater understanding of the public's media literacy knowledge and skills through research, identifying key gaps and groups with the greatest need and ensuring the public has access to current information;
- Developing a greater understanding of how service design choices strengthen users' media literacy;
- Developing and encouraging others to develop educational initiatives which increase public awareness and online safety;
- Supporting and encouraging the evaluation of media literacy initiatives, including service design choices and educational programmes, through the development and maintenance of a media literacy evaluation guidance; and
- Carrying out, commissioning or encouraging educational initiatives.

Ofcom will be able to undertake a range of initiatives when it identifies an area in which media literacy needs to be improved. This might include communications campaigns, piloting targeted interventions and delivering training to key services in the community (e.g. support workers, community leaders). Ofcom will have independence to discharge its duties in this regard, although the government may have views on the regulator's priorities that the regulator should take into account in determining its work.

Ofcom is also the national regulatory body for UK-established Video Sharing Platforms (VSPs).

The UK's Audiovisual Media Services Regulations 2020 came into force in November 2020 and introduced associated obligations on VSPs. This new regime sets out to protect users of VSP services from specific categories of harmful material in videos. The framework sets out a list of measures which providers must consider taking. The legislation recognises that providing tools and information for users with the aim of improving their media literacy, and raising awareness of the same, is a measure which platforms can take to protect users from harmful material.

Annex A

**FULL LIST OF  
STRATEGIC  
SECTOR  
PRIORITIES**

# FULL LIST OF STRATEGIC SECTOR PRIORITIES

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**1**

Online platforms should invest more in promoting media literacy to their users, both online through design choices and in person. Where possible, platforms should be transparent about the data gathered through media literacy activities.

**2**

Online platforms should be used to reach all users, in particular those who are 'hard-to-reach' or vulnerable users.

**3**

Advocacy for all user groups within the sector, particularly those where there are currently gaps in media literacy resources and provisions.

**4**

Organisations should take action to promote political literacy, including knowledge about elections, as part of media literacy provisions. This should include understanding the role of high-quality journalism in holding power to account, and encouraging users to participate further in democratic debate.

**5**

Cross-sector collaboration between researchers and delivery organisations to ensure research about the effectiveness of media literacy is integrated into real-life provisions.

**6**

**Researchers should:**

- consider the impacts of emerging technologies and the future of tech on media literacy. This should cover both how they may create new areas of need for media literacy, and the opportunities they may create for delivering media literacy; and
- continue to explore what interventions are effective at building long-term media literacy capabilities in users.

**7**

**Upskill community and public service workers about media literacy to:**

- create strong societal media literacy capabilities;
- help the workforce support users manage their online safety.

**8**

**Create greater coordination and collaboration across the sector to reduce duplication and collectively address key challenges.**

**9**

**Create an inclusive media literacy landscape by filling gaps in provisions for certain user groups, and those experiencing disproportionate online abuse.**

**10**

**Increase our understanding of user vulnerabilities to mis- and disinformation, and integrate this into information literacy provisions.**

**11**

**Create an evidence base about the effectiveness of a wide range of literacy by design interventions that go beyond just addressing mis- and disinformation; and promote uptake from online platforms.**



Annex B

**THE ONLINE  
MEDIA  
LITERACY  
ACTION PLAN  
2021/22**

# THE ONLINE MEDIA LITERACY ACTION PLAN 2021/22

## Introduction

The Online Media Literacy Strategy sets out the government's vision for transforming the media literacy sector in the UK. In particular, we have outlined the six key challenges we are committed to tackling over the next three years. This document is the first Online Media Literacy Action Plan 2021/22 which sets out the government's plan of action to enact this vision. In annual Action Plans in future years, it can be expected that the range of activities and their ambition is likely to grow.

The initiatives set out through this Action Plan will contribute to the key objective of the Media Literacy Strategy: to support organisations to undertake media literacy activity in a more coordinated, wide-reaching, high quality and efficient way.

**This Action Plan will announce the following initiatives beginning in 2021-22:**

- A Media Literacy Taskforce
- A Media Literacy Online Portal
- Train the Trainer Programme
- Social Media Influencers
- UK Media Literacy Forum
- Media Literacy Comms Campaign
- Upskilling Librarians
- Upskilling Youth Workers

The contents of this Action Plan will be developed over the Financial Year 2021/22 and will initially be funded with £340k. The government has made a commitment to publish future Action Plans annually over 3 years until the end of Financial Year 2024/2025.

The Action Plans will be dynamic and agile, allowing us to respond to new and emerging research, trends and needs within the media literacy sector. We will also use future Action Plans to report on our progress in tackling the media literacy challenges, and evaluate initiatives we have delivered. In-between the publication of Action Plans, we will seek to publish interim updates about the implementation of our media literacy initiatives.



# MEDIA LITERACY INITIATIVES



1

response to calls for greater collaboration across the media literacy landscape, we are establishing the new Media Literacy Taskforce. The Taskforce will bring together key stakeholders from across the media literacy sector to consider, coordinate and address the challenges set out in the Media Literacy Strategy. Crucially, the Taskforce will focus on taking collective action to remove barriers and solve challenges, rather than just being a platform for information sharing.

2

## The Media Literacy Online Portal

We know that there are many media literacy resources available for users to equip them with key skills and knowledge, and we want to help users access these resources more easily. We are going to launch the Media Literacy Online Portal. This will be a 'one-stop-shop', providing users and organisations with easy-to-access information about media literacy and online safety, and signposting them to existing media literacy resources.

3

## 3. Train the Trainer Programme

The Media Literacy Strategy highlighted several gaps within the media literacy landscape. **Two prominent gaps are:**

- limited media literacy support and resources available for disabled users; and
- teachers having a lack of confidence or capabilities to discuss media literacy with their students.

**We are funding the roll-out of a media literacy training programme for teachers and carers of disabled children. These workers will be supported to:**

- improve their own media literacy capabilities;
- support the development of media literacy capabilities in the children they teach and care for;
- help children with their media literacy at home; and
- feel confident to make early interventions to prevent children coming to harm online.

**4**

### **Social Media Influencers**

Social media influencers can have large audiences who are typically hard to reach through traditional education channels. We believe influencers have untapped potential to promote media literacy. We are going to work with influencers to help them raise awareness about media literacy amongst their audiences.

**5**

### **UK Media Literacy Forum**

As set out in the Media Literacy Strategy, media literacy is a devolved policy. The Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have their own policies and work plans to promote and encourage media literacy within their respective nations.

We are going to establish the UK Media Literacy Forum to facilitate dialogue on media literacy between central government and the Devolved Administrations. Through this, we will aim to increase coordination, share best practice and identify future areas for collaboration.

**6**

### **Media Literacy Communications Campaign**

A key part of taking steps to improve media literacy rates among users at scale is to raise awareness about the importance and benefits of online safety amongst the general public. We are going to work with external partners and launch a communications campaign to raise awareness about media literacy. This campaign will be used to drive the uptake of safer behaviours online and to encourage users to make the most of what the internet has to offer. The campaign may address specific user groups or issues, and will take steps to effectively reach the relevant audiences.

**7**

### **Upskilling Librarians**

Libraries around the country already offer training and support to the public to help them access technologies and navigate the online environment. As a result, libraries are well placed to develop their role as media literacy 'hubs' where users can access help and support with online safety issues.

The organisation 'Libraries Connected' represents the public library sector in England, Wales and N. Ireland and provides training and support for library staff. We are funding Libraries Connected to develop and roll out a training module on information literacy for frontline staff. This will enable libraries to increase the support they already provide to the public with information literacy skills and knowledge.

## DCMS Online Media Literacy Action Plan

# 8

### Upskilling Youth Workers

Youth workers have unique opportunities to build trusting relationships with young people, and often those who may be vulnerable. As such, they have the potential to support young people to manage their online safety, and make early interventions to prevent harm occurring online.

The National Youth Agency provides a National Curriculum for Youth Work, sets occupational standards, and offers accreditation for professional development. We are funding the National Youth Agency to develop a module on media literacy to be included alongside the National Curriculum for Youth Work.

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