

# DEPARTMENT FOR DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

## Online Media Literacy Evidence Review - Executive Summary

27 October 2020

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

RSM UK Consulting LLP was commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to conduct some research into the UK's media literacy landscape. This research supports a commitment set out in the Online Harms White Paper for the Government to develop an online Media Literacy Strategy that empowers users to stay safe online.

The research was split into two phases: phase 1 delivered a mapping exercise to identify and analyse existing media literacy initiatives across the UK; and phase 2 which delivered a literature review of the differing media literacy rates across user groups, and the effectiveness of evaluations of media literacy initiatives. Phase 2 also considered the different barriers and enablers for improving media literacy rates across different user groups.

The research has been based on the Ofcom definition of media literacy which is described as 'the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts'.

## Phase 1: Mapping Exercise

The mapping exercise sought to identify and create a picture of the landscape of media literacy initiatives in the UK. We developed a framework setting out the different topics and skills which make up media literacy, and the different user groups that could be targeted with media literacy initiatives. This framework was used to inform which initiatives were in-scope of the mapping exercise. We then conducted desk-based and primary research to identify initiatives including through stakeholder consultation, and a survey of media literacy providers. From this we were able to analyse where there is existing provision for users, and where there are gaps.

## 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, directly or via their parents; 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 **other third sector** organisations (14%).



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



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.



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%).



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%).



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.

## Phase 2: Literature review

Phase 2 of the research was split into two sections. The first delivered a literature review exploring existing levels of media literacy amongst different user groups in the UK and the barriers/enablers for developing greater media literacy. This included reviewing academic sources, policy material, and self-reported evidence from media literacy providers. In the second section we developed a high-level framework to assess the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation practices in the media literacy initiatives identified during the phase 1 mapping exercise.

### Levels of media literacy in the UK

The UK has above average levels of media literacy in comparison to other European countries. However evidence suggests that the UK population has gaps in its media literacy levels, particularly with regard to skills and behaviour. Furthermore, media literacy rates, and gaps in knowledge and skills differ across demographics. Our research analysed the media literacy rates across children and adults, and then considered how different factors such as socio-economic background, gender, age, and disability impact media literacy rates.

## Key Findings



UK users have good foundations in the basic digital skills needed to **access online information**, especially amongst children.



Adults, parents, and children have foundational knowledge and awareness of media literacy but this is often basic and context specific.



All users groups have limited media literacy skills and struggle to put their knowledge and behaviours into practice online.



Users from vulnerable groups<sup>1</sup> often have lower levels of media literacy and confidence in engaging online.



There has been an **increase in scepticism about the news** among UK adults over recent years. Whilst critical thinking is a key part of media literacy, there is a risk that with a limited understanding of new literacy, users will become overly sceptical, distrustful and disengaged with public discourse

## Barriers to Improving Media Literacy Rates

The literature review highlighted that different demographics and user groups face different barriers to improving media literacy rates. These barriers include:

- A lack of skills, confidence, and experience in using technology, particularly amongst older people
- A lack of economic capital (e.g. the cost of physical hardware to access the internet), social capital (networks and connections) and cultural capital (education and cultural consumption). For example, internet use is fuller and more varied among wealthier citizens, whereas some geographical areas have limited or no broadband coverage making it difficult for citizens to access the internet.
- Parents have the potential to restrict children's access to technology and limit opportunities to engage in more creative activities.
- Some users with disabilities face compounded barriers, including:
  - negative expectations about online inclusion;
  - technological barriers such as limited access to screen readers;
  - structural barriers such as poverty and lack of inclusive education.

## Enablers to Improving Media Literacy Rates

The literature also highlighted some key factors in initiatives that served as enablers to improving media literacy levels:

- Access to formal learning environments for adults.
- Initiatives need to vary to cater for different demographics such as age, socio-economic status, and disability.

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<sup>1</sup> Groups particularly vulnerable to online abuse include new/novice users, device-specific users (eg smartphone only), users from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, looked-after children, and protected groups from the 2010 Equalities Act.

- Initiatives should consider how to better facilitate communications between parents and children about online safety.
- Taking a skills based approach encourages users to apply their awareness and knowledge.
- Classroom initiatives saw success when giving opportunity to students to apply their learnings in a creative way such as through social media or blogging.

## Evaluation

As highlighted in the mapping exercise, media literacy initiatives rarely have any accompanying formal evaluation. As such there is limited robust evidence on the impact and effectiveness of initiatives in improving media literacy rates. Many initiatives measure students' beliefs about skills rather than the actual skills themselves. We developed a framework to assess evaluation measures for media literacy initiatives identified during the phase 1 mapping exercise. We saw the following findings:

- Only 1 out of 20 evaluation measures assessed in the exercise met the standards set out in HM Treasury guidelines.
- Many evaluation measures were not independent.
- Some initiatives acknowledged the constraints of their evaluations citing lack of time, availability of data, and funding as the main limitations.
- Many initiatives measured students' beliefs about skills and knowledge learned through the initiative rather than measuring actual progress.

## Conclusion

Whilst the UK does have a high level of media literacy comparative to other countries, users' grasp of media literacy is basic and there are often gaps particularly in applying knowledge in the online environment. Our research has highlighted several key findings which the Government should seek to consider through its Media Literacy Strategy:

- Media literacy providers should be encouraged to implement robust monitoring and evaluation practices into their initiatives, for example by producing guidelines for evaluation measures.
- The differing experiences of different user groups can determine or impact on the media literacy levels
- Users struggle to apply their knowledge about media literacy when interacting in the online environment.
- Teachers require support in their own knowledge of media literacy and teaching media literacy skills to others.

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