



# Important, but complicated: Media and information literacy for digital citizenship

Julian McDougall explores the rise of media and information literacy and its challenges, arguing that the focus needs to shift from simply acquiring skills to considering their consequences.

*“December 1948. A man sits at a typewriter, in bed, on a remote island, fighting to complete the book that means more to him than any other. He is terribly ill. The book will be finished and, a year or so later, so will the man. January 2017. Another man stands before a crowd, which is not as large as he would like, in Washington, DC, taking the oath of office as the forty-fifth president of the United States of America. His press secretary later says that it was ‘the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration – period – both in person and around the globe.’ Asked to justify such a preposterous lie, the president’s adviser describes the statement as ‘alternative facts.’ Over the next few days, US sales of the dead man’s book will rocket by almost 10,000 per cent, making it a number one best-seller.”*

(Lynskey, 2019, p. xiii)

In the times we are living through, when functioning civic democracies seem so precarious, it is understandable that ‘media literacy’ can be seen to have its moment – as a solution to the problem of misinformation; to boost the resilience of citizens in these times of ‘post-truth’, deepfakes and, of course, the rapid development of generative AI; and as part of the bigger project of restoring trust and safeguarding democracy.

## Media and information literacy

The abundant field of research into media and information literacy (MIL) tells us that:

- MIL has been shown to lessen the vulnerability of young citizens to online harms and mis/disinformation.
- ‘Quick fix’ responses such as fact-checking tools and online resources are less effective and sustainable for social cohesion than longer-term educational programmes.
- MIL activities that take place out of school rarely reach the poorest young people and they are the most vulnerable to misinformation (Fowler-Watt and McDougall, 2022) and online harms.
- MIL has a positive impact on young people’s mental health (McDavitt and McDougall, 2023), their behaviour in the digital environment and their civic intentionality. Over time, this makes the information ecosystem a healthier place for all of us.
- When young people are supported to become more media- and information-literate in school, they take this home. This creates inter-generational media literacy, which has clear benefits for social cohesion, civic life and democracy.

To better understand ‘where we are now’, it is useful to go back to 1957, when Richard Hoggart wrote *The Uses of Literacy*. In this book, Hoggart observed how people were using the new ‘mass literacy’ for self-improvement, education, social mobility and civic engagement, but also how various powerful actors were exploiting new possibilities to use this same expansion in literacy, through the new mass media, for commercial and political motivations.

Back to these times, and current anxieties, NATO published a defence strategy for building resiliency with media literacy (Jolls, 2022), foregrounding media and information literacy as an aspect of citizen self-safeguarding. This is convincing, but it is far more complicated. The idea that media and information literacy is part of resilience cannot only be only a matter of citizens’ own defences, as people need to not only be able to defend themselves, but also play an active role in making the ecosystem healthier in the future so that there is simply less danger to be resilient to.

The crucial point here is that Richard Hoggart wrote about the *uses* of literacy, not literacy as a solution to anything in and of itself. He considered literacy to be something we need to actively use to be ‘full citizens’. As the Citizenship curriculum seeks to provide young people with ‘the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens’, in my view it is crucial to be mindful of Hoggart’s approach to this when we consider the value of media and information literacy to the subject. It is not about media and information literacy for citizenship, but rather the pedagogic nurturing of the uses of MIL for civic intentionality (Bennett, *et al.*, 2020). This becomes a question of values and consequences, very much more than the knowledge and skills.

So, the situation we are addressing here is far too complex for any kind of quick solutionism to resolve or binary discourses about danger and resilience to account for. Toxic information ecosystems are unhealthy because the rapid development of media literacy is two-sided.

On the one hand, citizens (on the privileged side of digital inequalities) are connected, engaged and curating their textualised lived experiences through digital platforms. They are often very creative in the digital environment and have new educational opportunities aside from the formal education system.

But on the other hand, citizens have become a market, an audience and a target for commercial, persuasive, manipulative and predatory, abusive and exploitative digital interaction. Actors with bad intentions have either polluted their digital ecosystems, failed to protect them in their digital environments, or undermined trust in experts through public discourse and amplifying the idea that ‘mainstream media’

should not be trusted. Research shows that ‘conspiracy theory’ beliefs often develop from benign peer dialogue, rather than an overt intention to inhabit alternative information ecosystems with less regard for ‘truth’.

Media and information literacy, combined with critical thinking and civic intentionality, is essential for all of us, but for young people living with even greater precarity, it is double-edged. As Hoggart was seeing in 1957, we can see today – we use our media literacies to develop our capabilities and to participate in the social, economic and civic world, but our media and information literacies are also used by others, sometimes for good, but often to do harm. Literacies are complex, dynamic and profoundly ‘unsettled’ (Lee *et al.*, 2022).

## It’s complicated

It is never a blank slate. We all have media and information literacies, of various kinds, always dynamic and in play. This presents another challenge – nobody thinks they need more media and information literacy; people tend to think it is something that other people lack. Added to this, many people do have media literacy but use it to do harm. The inconvenient truth is that media literacy is used more often for harm than good.

Again, note that word – used. This is not about saying media literacy itself does more harm than good. It is a question of application, since literacies are never neutral, never merely instrumental, but also dynamic, in play and ideological. And, if we need yet another complication, there needs to be more of a healthy scepticism towards all media, information and communications. The solution cannot only be ‘trust in journalism’, but reflexive thinking about our inevitable biases and selective alignment with particular views of events and issues.

Finally, in terms of diagnosing the problem – enter GenAI! the ultimate game-changer, in terms of thinking about source and credibility. And yet, the more hopeful affordance we can see here is that the machine is learning from people. Therefore, rather than accept that all knowledge has already been generated, and our future literacies will be about utilising information mined from the internet up the moment in which we ask the question, could we think instead about a media and information literacy education that enables young people to teach the machine to understand the world in different ways, towards more equality, towards more diverse knowledge, towards more civic responsibilities? Could AI be the threshold moment for a healthier information environment, contrary to the pervading anxieties about the opposite?

## The challenges

To summarise the challenges for a media literacy education linked to citizenship:

- Literacy is essential for us to be full citizens but literacy is always double-edged. Our focus should be on the uses of media literacy with regard to civic engagement.
- A lack of trust in ‘mainstream media’ is often justified, and conspiracy thinking is usually the unintended outcome of justified concerns shared by citizens in precarious times.
- Trust in media and information is never objective, formed without bias. What we need – for people to be subjective, complex humans, at the same time as intentional citizens with a concern for social cohesion – is for them to have access to information that aligns with their views, but is informed by credible expertise, relatable and trustworthy, rather than true or false or falling on the ‘right’ side of ideology.
- GenAI is here, it cannot be slowed down, but it provides us with potentially the richest pedagogic ‘third space’ we could ever have imagined.

Drawing these strands together is the project ahead of us. We need to think differently about media and information literacy as the ‘first line of defence’ for citizens in precarious times. Instead, we need to facilitate a more sustainable, peer-to-peer approach to foster positive, healthy uses of media literacy, by and between citizens. For this we need a theory of change.

## Theory of change for media literacy

The more agentive uses of media and information literacy for positive change require more longitudinal evidence of such literacy in society, with a commitment to good consequences. This approach bears witness to the paradox that unhealthy media ecosystems are not caused by a lack of media and information literacies so much as the toxic uses of them, and seeks to address the problem by moving beyond skills and competences to focus on uses (McDougall and Rega, 2022; Rega and McDougall, 2023).

Change occurs as media and information literacy develops in people, from access to awareness to capability to consequences.

**Access** is enabled as people first gain the means to be included as an individual in the full digital media ecosystem and then increase and/or change their access through changing media behaviours.

**Awareness** develops as people come to understand, at the micro level, how media and digital information represent the world from particular points of view with particular intentions, and at the macro level, the relative health of their digital media environment.

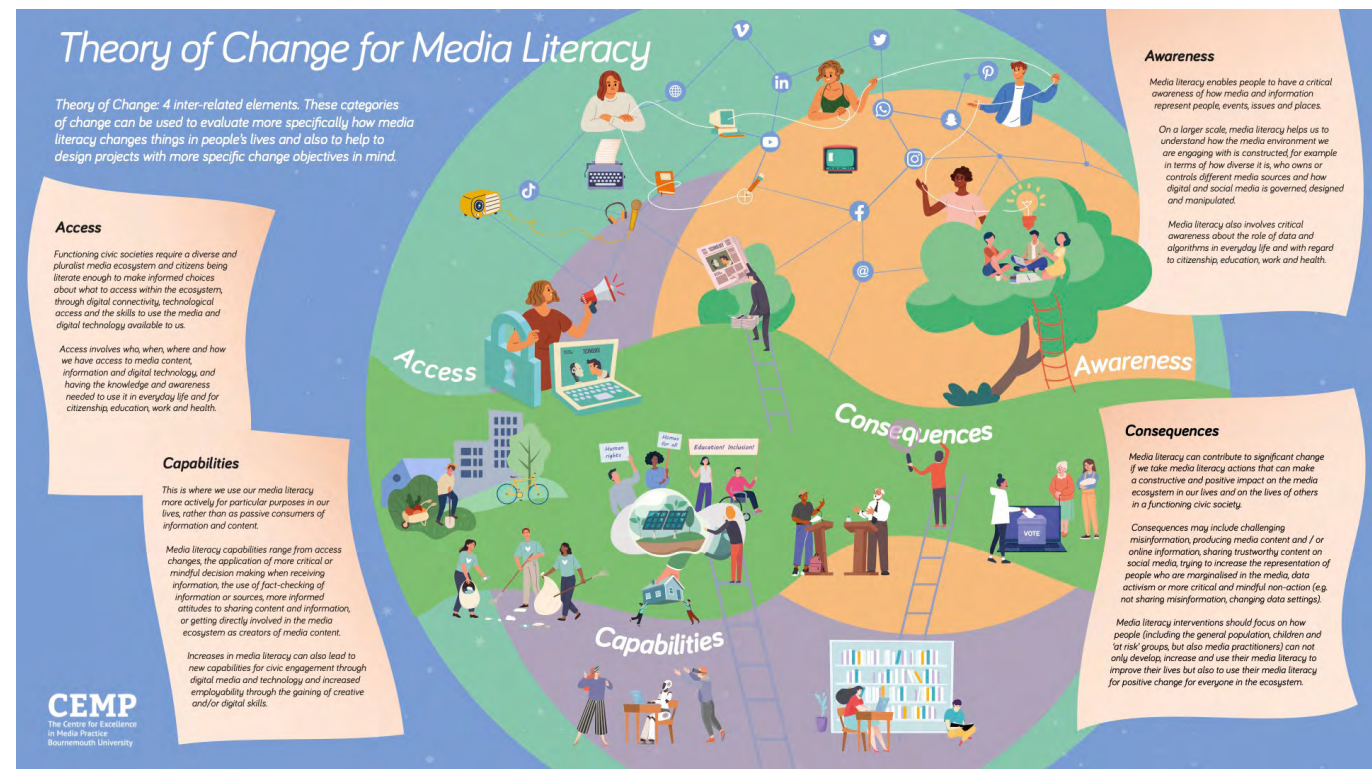
**Capability** involves people *using* their media and information literacy for particular purposes in their lives. This can include civic engagement, employability or community actions. However, there is no reason why this capability will lead to the *positive* uses of media and information literacy unless this is combined with consequences.

**“Citizens have become a market, an audience and a target for commercial, persuasive, manipulative and predatory, abusive and exploitative digital interaction.”**

Consequences involve the conversion of media and information literacy into capability and then into positive change, requiring an active desire for media and information to promote equality and social justice. Far from being the inevitable outcome of media and information literacy, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests the opposite. Polarising discourse, ‘othering’ media representations, online harms, biased algorithms, data harvesting for malintent, misinformation, propaganda and conspiracy narratives are produced by the media literate.

This theory of change starts out from the following assumptions – media- and information-literate people demonstrate:

- full and safe **access** to digital technology, media and information, and the ability to make good choices about access
- critical **awareness** of how media and information represent people, places, ideas and issues and what content and information can be trusted
- the **capability** to use media and information literacy actively, rather than as passive consumers
- the critical understanding of the **consequences** of actions in the media ecosystem and how to use capabilities for positive consequences – by acting with values as a positive influencer, a media and information literacy change agent



For citizens to be resilient, value democracy and strive for social justice, we need to convert media and information literacy capability into positive consequences. The difference between capability and consequences can be subtle. It is about a collective, accumulative impact on the media ecosystem and society in the long term, rather than only for an individual.

Impactful media and information literacy actions by individuals, for positive change on the wider level and for others, contribute to a functioning civic society, for example:

- citizens challenging misinformation and consequently reducing negative health consequences
- people being more critical with information and media content they share – harms reduce through changes in mindset in more resilient users
- media practices changing as citizens have higher expectations and, over time, media ecosystems become healthier

## “Media and information literacy activities should be realistic and precise with regard to desired change for participants, society and the media ecosystem.”

### What does this mean for Citizenship education?

At Bournemouth University, we have conducted over a decade of research into media and information literacy. This has taken place in diverse and complex settings (McDougall and Rega, 2022; McDougall et al., 2022; Rega and McDougall, 2023), with a range of funders, most recently BBC Media Action, the British Council and DCMS/DSIT in the UK. Our theory of change has developed as a response to our findings

and observations of best practice. In offering the theory of change as a toolkit for educators, researchers and activists, and to inform policy, we make the following key recommendations.

- Media and information literacy activities should be realistic and precise with regard to desired change for participants, society and the media ecosystem.
- Media and information literacy activity design should extend beyond the development of media literacy capabilities to include objectives for the positive consequences of media literacy.
- Media and information literacy activities should focus on the threshold between latent and manifest change, identifying what is needed for the shift from potential to evidence, using impact reports to facilitate evaluation.
- Media and information literacy activities should use co-creation and creative methods where possible, as the evidence shows this is the most effective way of achieving positive impacts across several elements of the theory of change.
- For the UK media and information literacy field to move from potential to manifestly positive change, in the form of the consequences of media and information literacy, this requires funders to invest in more longitudinal projects with the scope for incremental progression and development through stages in the lifespan of activities.

Teachers of Citizenship wishing to integrate media and information literacy into their work to foreground urgent imperatives for digital citizenship, aligned with the curriculum objectives to enable students to be positive contributors to democracy and society, using the essential knowledge needed about citizenship to take informed action for positive change, will hopefully see the connections between this work and this theory of change.

A brief outline of how Citizenship projects could link to the theory of change model is provided opposite.

Project title	Programme of study link	AACC focus	Description	Change objectives (evidence)
Demystifying Social Media Algorithms	Understanding power and decision-making How decisions are made in the UK, and the role of different institutions (e.g. media organisations)	Access Awareness	Students investigate how social media algorithms work and their impact on the information they see. They explore concepts like ‘filter bubbles’ and echo chambers.	Students demonstrate a deeper understanding of how social media algorithms influence access to information (Access). Students can critically analyse how algorithms create bias in media content (Awareness).
News Detectives	Rights and responsibilities The rights and responsibilities of citizens, including freedom of expression	Awareness Capability	Students analyse real and false news articles, learning techniques used to manipulate information. They create a guide for classmates on identifying trustworthy sources.	Students develop skills to critically evaluate the credibility of online information (Awareness). Students practise responsible online behaviour by creating resources to promote media literacy (Capability).
Citizen Journalism for Change	Active citizenship Taking part in civic life, and making a positive contribution	Capability Consequences	Students choose a local issue they care about. They research the issue using various media sources, fact-checking their information. Finally, they create a short video or blog post raising awareness in the community.	Students actively use media to advocate for a positive change (Capability). Students’ projects contribute to a more informed local community (Consequences)
Digital Divide Defenders	Power and decision-making How decisions are made in the UK, and the role of different institutions (e.g. media organisations)	Access Capability	Students research the digital divide and its impact on access to information and participation in civic life. They design a campaign raising awareness of the issue and advocating for solutions.	Students demonstrate awareness of the unequal access to media and technology (Access). Students advocate for policies that promote digital inclusion (Capability).

### Using the theory of change

If readers of *Teaching Citizenship* wish to use the theory of change methodology and toolkit to map their work in the classroom to the four change elements, we would be very interested to see the outcomes. 📍

Access the theory of change, guidance materials and a toolkit for application here:

[www.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/projects/evaluating-media-literacy-theory-change](http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/projects/evaluating-media-literacy-theory-change)

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