Response to the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into media literacy

Julian McDougall, Professor of Media and Education, Bournemouth University, submitting as Chair of Trustees on behalf of the Media and Information Literacy Alliance, 11 April 2025

Q1 - What are the overall aims of delivering media literacy in the UK?

Definition and scope

Media literacy is the ability to engage with media safely and healthily, critically and actively, with positive values. Information literacy is the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use[1]. The Media and Information Literacy Alliance (MILA) recognises that these two literacies are closely aligned and overlapping, so we follow the lead taken originally by UNESCO in treating media and information literacy (MIL) as a hybrid concept. MIL enables, empowers and protects citizens *and* benefit society as media and information literate people are safer, more critical and more positive about the contribution they can make to society, more equipped to work in future employment sectors, more resilient to misinformation and disinformation, more civically engaged and equipped with the critical agency to use AI for social good. As such, MIL is more than just about protecting against online harms, which is how it has tended to be framed in UK public policy; MIL is fundamentally about developing a critical understanding of information and media environments[2]. It helps to develop an understanding of where information comes from and how it is mediated - and more broadly, to understand how the world works. We know from this work that MIL both protects citizens and benefits society[3]. We recognise also that there is a range of other literacies that intersect with MIL, including digital, data[4], statistical, health, critical and political literacies (and more recently, AI literacy). Although these are not the focus of our submission to the inquiry, we feel it is important to bear them in mind, in as much as they form part of an environment of related competencies.

Why it's important

MILA's framework for MIL and the theory of change we use to evaluate impact are aligned with Ofcom's definition of media literacy that underpins its strategy and the Ofcom media literacy outcomes - access and creation, safety and protection, critical thinking, being media savvy, and digital citizenship. It is crucially important that safety and protection is one of five aspects of ML and cannot be delivered in isolation. This is because, globally, the now well-established research and practice fields of media literacy provide evidence that media

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[1] Chartered Institute of Information and Library Professionals (2018), *CILIP Definition of Information Literacy*, https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.cilip.org.uk/resource/resmgr/cilip/information_professional_and_news/press_releases/2018_03_information_lit_definition/cilip_definition_doc_final_f.pdf

[2] Gibson, P., & Connolly, S. (2023). Fit for purpose? Taking a closer look at the UK's Online Media Literacy Strategy. Journal of Media Literacy Education, 15(1), 109-115. https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2023-15-1-9

[3] McDougall, J (2024) 'Important, but complicated: Media and information literacy for digital citizenship.' Teaching Citizenship: 59: 14-17.

[4] Carmi, E., & Yates, S. (2023). Data citizenship: Data literacies to challenge power imbalance between society and "Big Tech". *International Journal of Communication*, *17*, 3619-3637.

literacy (and more broadly, MIL) is an essential element in the health of the communication ecosystem. As such, it should be understood more in terms of media and information literate citizens making active, positive contributions to the communications environment and digital life than being only about protection and resilience to a toxic ecosystem.

The Ofcom approach is also in sync with the EDMO Guidelines for Effective Media Literacy Initiatives - in the articulation of how "*a good media literacy initiative promotes critical understanding of the media ecosystem.*" However, these ambitions for 'raising standards' stop short of positioning media literacy as *contributing* to ecosystem change. What good looks like, then, is active MIL which makes this positive contribution and this is most commonly delivered through interventions which are agile to meet needs, use engaging materials and reassure participants with flexibility regarding technology and resources. Good MIL is also activity-based and age-appropriate, with progression from knowledge to application to dialogue and change outcomes, with accreditation and transferable skills for citizenship or employability adding value and where working in partnership with journalists, and / or in intergenerational contexts, with children, parents and carers or community settings. The role of libraries, including public libraries, is particularly noteworthy and important as 'third spaces' where MIL can be embedded in the community: librarians, as curators of information, have a long-established role in helping people to become more information literate. Moreover, as a profession, librarians are highly trusted by the public (much more so than, say, journalists) and they are present in a rich, albeit sadly shrinking network across the country (we address the role of school librarians in our response to Q6). But if UK MIL practice is to move from potential to manifestly positive change, funders must invest in more longitudinal projects with the scope for incremental progression and development through stages in the lifespan of activities.

Evidence and indicators

Bournemouth University's theory of change breaks down the difference media literacy makes to people's lives into four inter-related elements - changes to media *access* choices, critical media *awareness*, media literacy enabling new *capabilities* and, then, the *consequences* of higher levels of media literacy for communities and society and for the overall health of the communication ecosystem. An evaluation of UK media literacy in the last ten years using this theory of change found that media literacy in the UK has created the most evident change (43% of projects / activities) in people's media awareness. This involves critical thinking, seeing connections between media, health, civic and educational engagements, economic opportunities and understanding the tools they need to access the full media ecosystem. Projects and activities have also demonstrated the most potential (37% of projects / activities) to develop people's media literacies into capabilities. Manifest evidence is most commonly qualitative (presented by 80% of projects / activities). This is in the form of interviews and focus groups and usually relies on self-testimony and attitudinal responses by participants, within or at the end of projects, as opposed to measuring change in action or following up the difference participation makes in everyday life with media. The basis for potential for change, beyond the scope or duration of projects, is most commonly in the form of evidence-based recommendations for media literacy work in policy and practice, which, if actioned, will lead to change (presented by17% of projects / activities). Toolkits and resources produced for and during projects are also presented with change objectives, subject to their future use by target groups (presented by 10% of projects / activities). Many projects present stated change intentions by participants, often in the form of direct

quotations but also sometimes as quantitative survey response percentages (presented by 23% of projects / activities). Where projects are small scale with limited funding, this is to do with scale and timescale for capturing longer term change. However, where projects were conducted over a longer period, they often had not taken the opportunity to gather impact evidence.

Q2 - How well are existing UK media literacy initiatives working, and how could they be enhanced?

Since the Communications Act 2003, media literacy has been recognised in government policy and supported via Ofcom's work, as well as via various funding initiatives in government departments and by inclusion in the Online Safety Act. However, despite the setting out of the government's Online Media Literacy Strategy in 2021, three broad areas of challenge remain:

- broader context - media environment, public awareness and understanding of MIL, funding, sector coordination, government role
- delivery - quality issues, reach of current programmes, education-related challenges, reaching vulnerable and neglected audiences
- evaluation - skills and expertise, evaluating longer-term outcomes and access to data for evaluation.

The Online Media Literacy Strategy correctly pointed out that the UK's media literacy environment was fragmented, characterised by a multiplicity of initiatives, often undertaken at small scale, largely driven by the third sector. Ofcom, of course, is a major and positive player, and its media literacy responsibilities have been enhanced since the Online Safety Act. Nevertheless, nearly four years after the Strategy was published, the fragmented and siloed nature of the environment remains. There is a lot of valuable work undertaken on the ground, but it is largely not scalable, difficult to sustain and prone to all the difficulties associated with short-term financing. In the wake of the Strategy, Ofcom and the government (initially through DCMS, then DSIT) funded a series of projects with a focus on disadvantaged and/or hard-to-reach communities, but these were short-term and again, not scalable. Despite the existence of the Strategy, there is little sense of a strategic approach and the government continues to take what sometimes appears to be a laissez-faire attitude, expecting other players to take the lead. We strongly suspect that DSIT does not have the resources, either financial or human, to play a truly strategic role to ensure that MIL, or even just media literacy, become much more prominent in public policy and more broadly recognised as a major societal issue.

One of the Strategy's conclusions was that, to overcome this fragmentation, there is a need for some form of active, national, cross-sector coordination to help bring disparate players together and to foster collaborative working (although the Strategy did not give any indication about how such work might be funded or supported). To some extent, a coordinatory role was built into the people and partnerships pillar of Ofcom's own Media Literacy Strategy. But Ofcom, for all its good work, its reach and its excellent reputation in behavioural research, is not, as a public agency, ideally set up to play an 'activist' advocacy role, which we feel is a necessary corollary to promoting and encouraging collaboration. For our part, a major

rationale for setting up MILA was to contribute to such an effort, but as a very small charity, there are limits to what we can reasonably achieve.

Q3 - How will media literacy need to evolve over the next five years?

Our response to this is essentially covered by what we suggest under Q6, relating to what needs to be done as part of formal education.

Q4 - How does the UK's approach to media literacy compare with that of other countries?

We are not well-placed to answer this question, but we note that the Committee has received solid and persuasive evidence from a range of non-UK experts in one of its oral evidence sessions.

Q5 - How adequately is the UK's regulatory and legislative framework delivering media literacy?

We address some of the points in this question in our response to Q2, since these two questions are closely related.

Q6 - What is the role of formal education?

Current situation

There is an urgent need to deliver MIL as a mandated area of provision in the school curriculum as a first priority - Decades of research and practice tells us what works in MIL education[5]. Current UK public policy is framed around media literacy rather than information literacy or MIL and public media literacy strategies prioritise online resources, non-formal education, extra-curricular programmes in schools and short-term teacher training. As such, currently, there is minimal MIL education in schools in England, with many schools doing little or no work in this area. MIL may feature in the national curriculum for Citizenship and subjects such as Media Studies and Citizenship, but it is addressed in a fragmented and uneven way, with little or no assessment, no oversight and no clear guidance for teachers and school leaders. Ofsted has pointed out, for instance, that the curriculum offer in citizenship does not typically match the scope and ambition of the national curriculum[6], and we would argue that this shortcoming contributes to the lack of comprehensive and

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[5] McDougall, J., Zezulkova, M., Van Driel, B., & Sternadel, D. (2018). Teaching media literacy in Europe: evidence of effective school practices in primary and secondary education, NESET II report.

[6] Ofsted (2023), The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2022/23. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202223-educationchildrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-servicesand-skills-202223

substantial MIL education. It's worth noting that the International Baccalaureate addresses and assesses MIL, but it is only offered in this country in a tiny number of schools.

Whilst MIL education in schools is only part of what is needed, as a vital first step it will be effective because MIL lessens vulnerability to misinformation, conspiracy, radicalisation and fake content and MIL activities which take place out of school rarely reach the poorest children, who are often the most vulnerable; MIL has a positive impact on young people's mental health and their behaviour in the digital environment and, over time, this makes the media and information ecosystem a healthier place for us, and because when younger people are media literate, they take this home. This creates inter-generational MIL, where they can teach their *networks of literacy*[7] how to apply MIL in their own context in a way that is meaningful to them, which has clear benefits for the communities which schools serve. MILA has explained its stance on the place of MIL in school education in our response[8] to the call for evidence from the school curriculum and assessment review, last autumn.

Implementation and recommendations

MIL should be properly incorporated across and within the curriculum consistently, coherently and in a well-planned manner, with greater clarity about what is expected from teaching it. This would give MIL its due prominence, at all key stages, so that it is better recognised as an indispensable part of all young people's education, not just in secondary schools but primary schools too. This means not only reinforcing the place of MIL education in key subjects where it has traditionally been taught, such as Media Studies, Citizenship and English, but recognising the relevance of MIL (including its relationship to critical thinking) in a wide range of subjects where it either does not properly feature at present, or does so in an ad hoc, uncoordinated way.

MIL should also be incorporated into the formal assessment of knowledge and skills, and included in school inspections as an essential day-to-day competency taught by teachers and learned by students. In due course, Ofsted could be asked to make a thematic review of MIL.

To implement media literacy education in schools, we can utilise the skills and experience of education and information professionals already working in schools teaching Media, ICT, English, Citizenship. They can work with teachers of other subjects to integrate MIL and with journalists and civil society and we can further develop the partnerships with platforms and technology companies and services, such as the Parentzone work with YouTube Hit Pause. Teacher training will be needed to renew and upskill teaching for the digital future and there

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[7] Yates, S., & Carmi, E. (2022). Citizens' networks of digital and data literacy. In The Palgrave handbook of media misinformation, edited by Fowler-Watt,. K., and McDougall, J., (pp. 191-205). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

[8] Media and Information Literacy Alliance (2024), response to Curriculum and Assessment Review, https://mila.org.uk/response-curriculum-review/

are costs associated with this, for curriculum reform and teacher training and for resources in schools. But the cost of *not* equipping young people with MIL will be much greater[9] [10].

Teacher training

Following a mapping exercise, we made five key recommendations to Ofcom for teacher training in media literacy,[11] which we also submit to this inquiry. These are to address gaps in skills by training teachers to support content creation and offer a more differentiated media literacy education to support more diverse and locally specific access and engagement needs (Ofcom Media Literacy Area 1) and focus on the conversion of media literacy awareness and skills to active digital citizenship and positive online actions (Area 5); build on strengths in current provision in critical thinking and awareness (Area 3) by offering a package of training supporting which addresses the online safety outcome (Area 2) as schools' most urgent need, progressing to more holistic resilience-building media literacy practices where viable (all areas); develop a consistent, accredited model so that evaluation across media literacy can compare outcomes, to include hybrid engagement, co-design, peer-to-peer onwards media literacy and a series of 'touchpoints' with providers and trainees; build in change objectives and evaluation to all media literacy design by requiring commissioned providers to work with theories of change and the Ofcom evaluation toolkit, for accreditation and to foster a joined-up approach with shared values, to make media literacy 'everyone's business' in schools. To do this, involve teachers who are currently working in congruent subjects and areas (e.g. Media Studies, Citizenship, English, PSHE + ITE providers) alongside other professional groups (safeguarding leads, teaching assistants and librarians) and crucially, parents and carers, in partnership with external providers, to ensure all existing skills and experience are utilised and, where possible, involve students also, as peer ambassadors, to build in co-design from the outset.

The role of school libraries

The role of school librarians in supporting MIL education needs to be much better recognised. Librarians, as information professionals, can make a key, cross-curricular contribution, but this requires their teaching or teaching support role, and their own training and/or upskilling needs, to be properly acknowledged and supported by their teaching colleagues and their school management.

Q7 - What are the barriers and challenges to teaching media literacy to adults?

Media literacy interventions for adults are increasing, through programmes and schemes funded by DSIT and Ofcom, with a focus often on more vulnerable, harder to reach or older, digitally excluded adults. Key challenges are firstly to promote the need for media literacy for all adults, and in contexts where people work together in family or community settings, and

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[9] Shout Out UK. (2022) The Importance of Media Literacy for Today's Youth, https://www.shoutoutuk.org/2022/08/31/the-importance-of-media-literacy-for-todays-youth/

[10] De Saulles, M. (2007), "Information literacy amongst UK SMEs: an information policy gap", Aslib Proceedings, Vol. 59 No. 1, pp. 68-79. https://doi.org/10.1108/00012530710725214

[11] Ofcom (2025) A teachable moment: opportunities, gaps and next steps from our review of Media literacy training for teachers

secondly to extend media literacy for adults beyond functional skills and supporting online safety of younger people, to the more agentive uses of media literacy for social good. Whereas school aged media literacy can be more easily mandated and standardised, for adults the 'buy in' is more complex. Ofcom's research with adults who exhibit 'high media literacy' indicates that some participants engaged due to previous negative experiences and therefore sought out the expertise to minimise the risk of repetition, while others built high media literacy slowly over time through positive experiences, or felt that high media literacy was an attribute they already had rather than something gained through support.[12]

Another barrier is that media literacy work in the UK in the policy space has recently been almost entirely focussed on the online world, but there are still significant numbers of adults who access media offline, so there is a need to cover both and to support people with the transition to online media literacy.

Ways to address these barriers include training in work, library programmes, and national awareness campaigns linking media literacy to the skills people will need in the future (e.g. around AI) and to contribute to a healthier digital environment, so that adults feel that they can benefit individually with new skills and societally in terms of social cohesion.

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[12] Ofcom (2023) Exploring High Media Literacy Among Children and Adults.