

Online Media Literacy Strategy

Response from CILIP and the Information Literacy Group

This is a response to the Online Media Literacy Strategy from CILIP and the Information Literacy Group. CILIP is the Chartered Institute for Librarians and Information Professionals, the professional body and advocacy organisation for information, library and knowledge practitioners in the UK. The CILIP Information Literacy Group is one of CILIP's special interest groups and encourages debate and the exchange of knowledge in all aspects of information literacy. The Group has over 1,700 direct members who operate as a community of practice.

In response to the publication of the Online Media Literacy Strategy, CILIP and the Information Literacy Group will shortly be convening a new *Media and Information Literacy Alliance (MILA)* – a cross-sector group representing media and 3rd sector organisations, regulators and the information profession. We look forward to developing MILA as a platform through which we can support the ambitions set out in the Strategy (<http://www.mila.org.uk>).

We welcome the publication of the Strategy. Developing media, digital and information literacy is a core part of the role of many librarians and information professionals working in sectors such as education, healthcare, the workplace and in public libraries. It is an area where the profession has a tremendous body of experience and knowledge about how to teach these critical abilities to different audiences in many formal and informal settings. As a profession, we have a lot to offer in terms of the programmes and frameworks that we have developed and the evidence we have collected about what works when teaching critical evaluation. However, in our view information literacy also extends to how people use information in their daily lives, what they do with it, how they communicate and share it with others, and we expand on this point below.

Within the library and information services (LIS) sector in the UK there is also a large body of research about how to teach information and media literacy effectively, and we are beginning to develop our ability to evaluate the impact of these interventions. Those who work in education, do this through collaborating with teachers and lecturers to help embed these skills into the curriculum.

General comments on the Strategy

At an overarching level, we greatly welcome the formulation of the Strategy and the commitment to put this into practice through annual action plans. We feel that a strategic, national approach to media literacy is overdue, and we are pleased that DCMS has set out a cohesive, holistic vision which recognises media literacy as an issue of fundamental importance to society. We are particularly grateful that information literacy has specifically been highlighted as a factor that addresses important questions around critical thinking and discerning approaches to information. Indeed, we believe it is the first time that any major UK public policy statement has recognised the importance of information literacy and the role that our professional community plays in its promotion.

We are impressed by the research and evidence-gathering which underpins the strategy, and we look forward to seeing the phase 1 and 2 literature review and mapping exercise, once this is made public. Your research has rightly pointed to worryingly low levels of media literacy among many sections of the population, both young people and adults, and it is good that the Strategy has not only identified areas of concern, but also flagged up the barriers and challenges faced by different user groups.

However, while on balance, the Strategy marks real progress, we wish to point to two broad concerns:

- The Strategy's stance is largely founded on countering risks and dangers, i.e. perceiving media literacy and information literacy as forms of defence. We do not minimise the importance of countering genuine threats, and we recognise that the Strategy grew out of the Online Harms White Paper. However, we would like to have seen greater emphasis on how media literacy and information literacy are fundamental in their own right, not just as part of countermeasures but as inherent to the workings of a healthy, democratic, inclusive society. This would reflect the basis of CILIP's 2018 Definition of Information Literacy¹, with its focus on empowering people to reach and express informed views and to engage fully with society, throughout life and in different lifecourse contexts. In a few places, the Strategy alludes to this positive imperative, for instance under principle 5 of the framework, with its recognition of how media literacy can foster an ability to engage in democratic debate. It would be good to see this sort of view better represented as a premise of the Strategy.
- We feel that there is a risk that the Strategy misses the opportunity to address how the school education system can be improved to further develop media literacy and information literacy capabilities among school students. This is a curious omission, since the Strategy recognises the extent to which children do not possess the relevant skills or abilities. It uncritically recalls how the National Curriculum addresses media literacy, but without pausing to consider whether this teaching provision is adequate. We believe that the curriculum displays significant shortcomings in this area, and we are not alone in holding this view. As suggested for instance by the House of Lords 2020 report on Digital Technology and the Resurrection of Trust, "The Government's focus on computing education is insufficient; basic digital skills are not enough to create savvy citizens for the digital era [...] DfE should review the school curriculum to ensure that pupils are equipped with all the skills needed in a modern digital world. Critical digital media literacy should be embedded across the wider curriculum based on the lessons learned from the review of initiatives recommended [in the report]". We hope therefore that the implementation of the Strategy will consider what more needs to be done in schools to prepare young people to be lifelong media literate individuals. At the same time, we wish to see a reflection on the place and role of school librarians who, unlike public librarians, appear to be overlooked in the Strategy.

¹ See <https://infolit.org.uk/ILdefinitionCILIP2018.pdf>

We have a few further reflections on specific elements of the Strategy, covering some of its chapters.

Media literacy introduction

The Strategy does a good job at introducing the concept of media literacy, its rationale, the problems that it addresses and how the UK has come to the issue. To our mind, media literacy and information literacy are largely overlapping concepts, but the latter is the term that, historically, librarians have tended to use. There are other stakeholder perspectives too; for instance, as the Strategy points out, UNESCO refers to media and information literacy (MIL); others talk about critical digital literacy. In implementing the Strategy, it is important to understand that different players are liable to use different terminology to describe essentially the same thing, with the confusion that this could potentially occasion.

Media literacy framework

The five principles seem sound to us, and we like the way in which user skills, business expectations and user knowledge illustrate what each of the principles means in practice. Principle 2 raises some very important points about understanding the workings and mechanisms of the online environment and could come under the heading of critical digital literacy, as we mentioned above. Principle 3 is the one most closely aligned with information literacy and we applaud the crucial emphasis on critical thinking – but we feel that the scope of this principle could easily be extended beyond the realms of journalism and news. Critical engagement with information occurs in many different contexts which are not just driven by news cycles and content. Finally, we are also pleased at principle 5's recognition that media literacy is not just about the consumption of information but also its creation.

Media literacy landscape

It is useful that the Strategy provides an overview of what different sectors are doing in this area and we note the rich pattern of activities and initiatives undertaken by different players. We strongly agree with the Strategy's assertion that major knowledge gaps remain, particularly around evaluation of the effectiveness of media literacy. We too believe that the research effort needs to be stepped up to develop the evidence base. Such an effort requires funding (funding for media literacy initiatives in general is highlighted later as one of the six challenges), but there is little in the Strategy to suggest sources of financial support other than a vague reference to making funding available.

We note also the five areas in which government can help move forward the agenda, all of which make sense. However, we're concerned that, in spite of the stress placed on implementing concrete proposals, DCMS takes the view that government's role is limited essentially to that of coordinator and enabler, i.e. it leaves it to others, across different sectors, to take the lead on practical developments. We have already pointed to the Strategy's silence on the school curriculum as an instance of where government could have a more direct and proactive role in furthering media literacy.

Disinformation and misinformation

The Strategy quite rightly stresses the dangers that misinformation and disinformation represent to society, not least in the context of major contemporary issues such as Covid-19 and climate change. This chapter of the Strategy is the one that refers most extensively to information literacy and we are very pleased at this recognition. Nevertheless, we would have liked to see a reference to CILIP's 2018 comprehensive Definition of Information Literacy, to expand on what is set out in the text of the Strategy. Our definition makes it clear that information literacy represents an approach and a way of thinking that applies to many lifelong experiences. The definition situates education literacy in the context of education at all levels, citizenship, health, the workplace, everyday life; it is a way of undertaking a large range of information-related tasks, to allow people to make the best possible use of information. As we suggested earlier, this is far more than just about combatting misinformation and disinformation.

Media literacy challenges

We strongly support the drive to develop the evidence base on evaluation of media literacy provisions and would like to ensure that this also encompasses information literacy;. The Strategy rightly identifies the factors which make evaluation exercises difficult, and this bears a close relationship to the next challenge, on funding: useful research must necessarily include in-depth studies, including longitudinal work, which goes beyond the sort of limited, short-term evaluation that the Strategy talks about. It follows that this has cost implications. But as we stated earlier, the Strategy is evasive about where such funding might come from, and if the first two challenges are to be adequately addressed, more clarity is required about funding sources and commitments.

We believe that public libraries could play a key role in supporting hard to reach audiences and vulnerable groups, providing access to technology and digital skills training; and providing individuals and communities with media literacy support in safe and accessible environments. However we acknowledge that much of the expertise in teaching media and information literacy currently lies in higher education and to a lesser extent in school libraries.

We are very happy to play our part in helping with sector coordination – which, as the Strategy point out, has tended to be somewhat ad hoc and under-resourced to date, notwithstanding the existence of excellent initiatives such as the News Literacy Network and the Ofcom-facilitated Making Sense of Media (MSOM) Network. We have established relationships with many players in the area of information literacy and media literacy, and we are represented on Ofcom's MSOM Advisory Panel. CILIP and as mentioned above, CILIP and the Information Literacy Group are currently setting up a Media and Information Literacy Alliance (MILA), with the aim of championing media and information literacy and to provide an open platform for collaboration and knowledge exchange. This initiative, addressed at as wide an audience as possible, is still in its very early stages, but we hope that it can make a useful contribution to addressing the Strategy's challenge 6.

Activity across government

We have already expressed our concern at the extent to which the Strategy overlooks changes to the school education system, and particularly the National Curriculum, as one important means of addressing the Strategy's objectives. The main problem, for us, is that the curriculum lacks a joined-up framework through which to address media literacy and information literacy – and indeed critical thinking.. Information literacy in particular is highly context-specific and should be embedded in the full range of school subjects, rather than be treated as an add-on to computing, PSHE/RSHE and citizenship. There is a need for a strategic approach which recognises the centrality of media literacy and information literacy to young people's educational development. These questions absolutely need to be addressed in the implementation of the Strategy, perhaps as part of a future annual action plan, and this will require thorough engagement with the Department for Education. In our experience, DfE have shown themselves to be somewhat glib in their view that they have already addressed the issue.

This chapter of the Strategy also addresses the role of libraries, which we are delighted to see. Libraries play a key role in helping to tackle misinformation and disinformation through the teaching of critical evaluation skills; and more broadly, they provide environments where users can learn about finding their way online. As trusted sources of knowledge librarians in the healthcare sector are particularly well equipped to support users in finding accurate and high quality information in relation to the pandemic and healthcare choices. The Strategy's focus appears to be specifically on public libraries. These are hugely important resources, but the role of librarians and information professionals in other sectors (schools, colleges, higher education, the Health Service, workplaces, prisons) should not be overlooked, and we would like to see the Strategy recognise this too.

Action Plan 2021/22

We greatly welcome the setting out of annual action plans. These will be important to help ensure that the ambitions of the Strategy are translated into real action. The first of these plans contains ambitious objectives and we are gratified that DCMS has allocated budgetary resources for the implementation of these objectives. Through the Media and Information Literacy Alliance, we will be developing a programme of activity, advocacy and sector development and we look forward to playing an active part in the implementation of the activities under the Action Plan 2021/22.

We very much hope that the library sector will be represented on the proposed Media Literacy Taskforce, which will clearly have a major role in helping to take forward the Strategy. The communications campaign, alongside the Online Portal, should be valuable in raising awareness of why media literacy is important, and its significance to individuals and communities. We are pleased too that one of the objectives concerns the upskilling of librarians and we look forward to seeing what emerges from this. We are already in touch with Libraries Connected about the proposed training module, and we look forward to working with them on its development.

Conclusion

We hope that this response has been helpful in providing a perspective on the Strategy from CILIP and the Information Literacy Group. We would be happy to answer any questions and, of course, we look forward to contributing to future discussions and to the implementation of the Strategy through the new Media and Information Literacy Alliance (<http://www.mila.org.uk>).