

# Evaluating Media Literacy with a Theory of Change



CEMP, Bournemouth University, for UK Government Media Literacy Programme, 2023

**Report Authors: Julian McDougall and Julia Weiss**

### **Project Team**

[Professor Julian McDougall](#), Professor of Media and Education (Project lead)

[Dr Karen Fowler-Watt](#), Associate Professor of Journalism & Global Narratives

[Dr Isabella Rega](#), Associate Professor in Digital Media for Social Change

[Professor Scott Wright](#), Deputy Dean for Research and Professional Practice

Julia Weiss, Research Assistant

Noémi Zajzon, Graphic Designer

### **Critical Partners**

[Media and Information Literacy Alliance](#)

### **Funded by**

UK Government Media Literacy Programme

### **Supported by**

Media Education Association

### **Evaluation methodology tested by**

Louise Davies, Head of Media Studies, The Maelor School, Wrexham & Doctoral Researcher in CEMP

Emma Smyth, Head of Media and Film Studies; Sir John Lawes School & Doctoral Researcher in CEMP

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## Objectives and Methods

The [UK Government's Media Literacy Strategy](#) aims to *"bring coordination to the media literacy landscape and outlines a Media Literacy Framework of best practice principles to inform the content and delivery of media literacy education."* (UK Government ,2021). This project was funded by the DCMS (now DSIT) Media Literacy Programme, with the following aims:

- Provide the UK Government with a robust evaluation framework, aligned with a holistic theory of change for measuring the impact of media literacy projects;
- Provide a review of recent, existing and current UK media literacy projects (supported by DCMS and other), using the evaluation framework and theory of change.
- Deliver to the UK Government a fit-for-purpose, sustainable and transferable evaluation framework and guide for use beyond this project to evaluate all work funded in the programme.

We understand media literacy to be the holistic ability to engage fully with media in our connected daily lives. This means engaging with media safely and healthily, critically and actively, with positive social consequences. The theory of change developed by CEMP is aligned with Ofcom's [Making Sense of Media](#) work and with the [Media and Information Literacy Alliance's](#) framework's five lifelong aspirations, for media literate people to be *informed; empowered; healthy; socially conscious and connected*.

The media literacy evaluation framework we have developed is framed by this theory of change for the agentive and consequential uses of media literacy, measuring the impact of projects and activities in relation to four change elements:

- Full and safe ACCESS to digital technology and media,
- Critical AWARENESS of media representations and what content and information can be trusted,
- The CAPABILITY to use media 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.

The methods used for this project were (1) the refinement of the theory of change and evaluation methodology, with critical feedback from key partners (Ofcom, DCMS, MILA and the Media Education Association); (2) a pilot study of 5 media literacy projects, with further critical review from MILA; (3) a full review of a further 25 projects, and (4) a workshop with key partners, integrating feedback into this final report.

This report summarises the project and the findings of our evaluation of UK media literacy projects using the theory of change. For guidance on how to use this theory of change to evaluate media literacy projects, visit the [project website](#) to access a [user guide](#) and [video walkthrough](#).

The Theory of Change that follows consists of 4 inter-related elements.

These categories of change can be used to evaluate more specifically how media literacy changes things in people's lives and also to help to design projects, alongside the Ofcom toolkit, with more specific change objectives in mind.

When we use this theory of change to evaluate a media literacy project, we use the 4 inter-related element descriptions to identify the kind of change a project has made or has the potential to make.

Some projects might create change across all four elements, others might only impact on one. This will depend on scale, intentions, funding and scope.

In some cases, change will be more evident in projects that focus more on one element with deliverable outcome than others which are more ambitious but may lack realisable impacts. Think of this as a sliding scale or continuum.

When the relevant elements are identified, we use the criteria for each change element to identify evidence of change or the potential for change for each of the four elements.



# The Theory of Change



<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ACCESS</b></p> 	<p>Functioning civic societies require a diverse and pluralist media ecosystem and citizens being literate enough to make informed choices about what to access within the ecosystem, through digital connectivity, technological access and the skills to use the media and digital technology available to us.</p> <p>Access involves when, where and how we have access to media content, information and digital technology, and having the knowledge and awareness needed to use it in everyday life and for citizenship, education, work and health.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>AWARENESS</b></p> 	<p>Media literacy enables people to have a critical awareness of how media and information represent people, events, issues, and places.</p> <p>On a larger scale, media literacy helps us to understand how the media environment we are engaging with is constructed, for example in terms of how diverse it is, who owns or controls different media sources and how digital and social media is governed, designed and manipulated.</p> <p>Media literacy also involves critical awareness about the role of data and algorithms in everyday life and with regard to citizenship, education, work and health.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>CAPABILITY</b></p> 	<p>This is where we use our media literacy more actively for particular purposes in our lives, rather than as passive consumers of information and content.</p> <p>Media literacy capabilities range from access changes, the application of more critical or mindful decision making when receiving information, the use of fact-checking of information or sources, more informed attitudes to sharing content and information, or getting directly involved in the media ecosystem as creators of media content.</p> <p>Increases in media literacy can also lead to new capabilities for civic engagement through digital media and technology and increased employability through the gaining of creative and/or digital skills.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>CONSEQUENCES</b></p> 	<p>Media literacy can contribute to significant change if we take media literacy actions that can make a constructive and positive impact on the media ecosystem in our lives and on the lives of others in a functioning civic society.</p> <p>Consequences may include challenging misinformation, producing media content and / or online information, sharing trustworthy content on social media, trying to increase the representation of people who are marginalised in the media, data activism or more critical and mindful non-action (e.g., not sharing misinformation, changing data settings).</p> <p>Media literacy interventions should focus on how people (including the general population, children and 'at risk' groups, but also media practitioners) can not only develop, increase and use their media literacy to improve their lives but also to use their media literacy for positive change for everyone in the ecosystem.</p>

The theory of change can be used to **evaluate** any media literacy project, activity or educational programme. It can also be used to aid the **design** of media literacy activities. Wherever media literacy is being developed, applied, used to solve a problem, help people, to improve a situation or to make things better in society, this framework can help to more precisely identify the specific kinds of change a project intends to deliver.

To use this theory of change, first use the 4 element descriptors above to identify which aspect of media literacy the intended change will relate to.

*Is it to do with people's access to media? Is it about their media awareness?*

*Is it intending for help people to use media literacy to extend their capabilities in their lives?*

*Does it want to make a positive difference to society through the consequences of people's media literacy?*

Often a media literacy project will create change in more than one of these areas, so it is not about only identifying which one element is relevant, but looking across the elements to see where change can happen.

This framework is also flexible so we can identify change, see the potential for change and also include both manifest and latent change.

When you have identified the **change elements** which the media literacy project or activity can achieve, then move to the **change objectives** table and identify which of the specific **change impacts** can be evidenced or where the potential for change is apparent – for example, **new kinds of knowledge** developed by people taking part in the activities, or **people doing things differently** in their lives, and how these changes are related to their access, awareness, capability or the consequences of their media literacy.

If you are using this resource at the project design stage, then we recommend that you also use the [Ofcom toolkit](#) alongside these elements and change objectives. The two resources together will help you design a successful media literacy project and be more precise about what change you want it to lead to.

You can use this resource to evaluate a project, at any stage. This could be a new project, identifying the change it is likely to achieve once you get started. It could be a mid point review of a project. Or it can be a final evaluation of the change a media literacy project created.

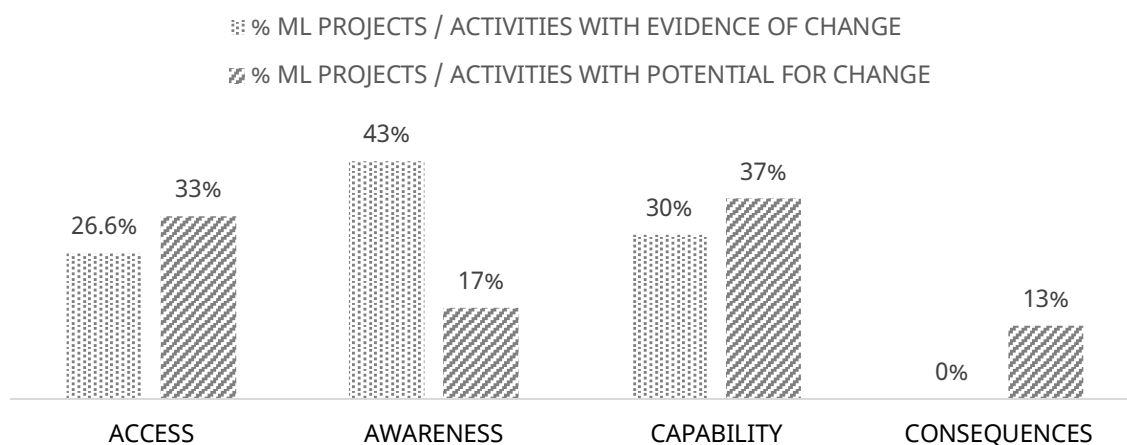
To evaluate a project using this theory of change, use the template provided in the [user guide](#). Examples are provided at the end of this resource, to show how the template can be used for different kinds of projects.





# Headline Findings

### Change Enabled by UK Media Literacy:



From the 30 UK projects we evaluated, the graphic and tables here provide an ‘at a glance’ summary of where media literacy leading to change in people’s lives is most directly evident (manifest) and also where there is the most (latent) potential for change.

Evidence Type (Manifest)		Basis for Potential (Latent Evidence)
1	Interviews	Recommendations for policy and practice
2	Focus Groups	Use of toolkits and resources
3	Surveys	Stated intentions by participants

Media Literacy Change Evidence (Manifest)		Media Literacy Change Potential (Latent)
1	People use <b>critical thinking</b> skills to assess how media texts and / or artefacts and information sources are constructed and to evaluate their intentionality.	More <b>active and resilient attitudes</b> circulate among people towards media, data and information, enabled by media literate people.
2	People <b>see the connection</b> between their media literacy, their health, civic society, educational and economic opportunities.	<b>People feel motivated</b> to make better and safer access choices.
3	People <b>understand</b> the tools needed to access the full digital media, information and data environment and the extent to which they have access to them.	<b>People are more mindful</b> in their engagement with and / or their sharing of media and information and data.

## Projects Evaluated

Firstly, a pilot study of 5 projects was undertaken. The sample projects were chosen to cover prospective theory of change elements; range of methods and participants / audiences and a combination of completed projects, ongoing initiatives and newly funded projects (by DMCS).

### Pilot Study Sample

National Literacy Trust Empower Programme

Ofcom Adults' Media Lives + Day in the Life

Good Things Foundation Digital Lifeline

Age UK Think Digital

ESRC study: Hammond, Polizzi et al: 8-12 year-olds building digital resilience

The process involved using the two tables together to measure impact and change. The evaluation reports were collated and shared at our first review workshop with MILA. Researchers included a reflexive description of how they applied the methodology. We then standardised to adopt a best practice approach for the full review based on this collective experience in the pilot phase.

Following additional feedback from MILA on the methodology and pilot review findings, and also from DCMS, Ofcom and MEA on the revised theory of change, our approach was refined further and finalised for the full review of a further 25 projects. The team first evaluated 3 of the 25 together, to further moderate and standardise, and then reviewed the remaining 22 separately.

The 30 projects were selected from a return of 42 through a systematic filtering process, including projects and activities from within a ten year period, key search terms related to our theory of change elements and key inclusion criteria to ensure a representative cross-sample of participant groups, duration, funding and scope (see the second table) and also making use of the Ofcom Media Literacy [Research Library](#) and [Initiatives Library](#) which were both launched during our selection phase.

In the following table, 'Primary' and 'Secondary' indicate the most prominent element of our theory of change evidenced in each project or activity and the second most prominent element.

Project	Led By	Primary	Secondary	Evidence
<a href="#">Active Online Choices</a>	Behavioural Insights Team	Access	Capability	Tech expert interviews, workshops, randomised control trials.
<a href="#">BBC Young Reporter</a>	BBC	Awareness	Capability	Media artefacts Interactions with participants
<a href="#">Being alone together: developing fake News immunity</a>	University of Liverpool	Awareness	Access	Surveys. pilot qualitative experiment.
<a href="#">Be Internet Citizens</a>	YouTube, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Parentzone	Capability	Consequences	Focus groups, interviews, testimonies, impact report, confidence & knowledge tests.
<a href="#">Changing conversations: Empowering vulnerable children in a digital world</a>	Internet Matters	Awareness	Capability	Manifest: Interviews, focus groups. Latent: methodological approach, for future research
<a href="#">Children's data and privacy online</a>	LSE	Awareness	Access	Manifest: workshops, focus groups, interviews. Latent: use of toolkit.
<a href="#">Digital Citizen Project</a>	Northern Ireland Library Authority	Capability	Consequences	Access stats, user survey, testimonials.
<a href="#">Children's Understanding of the Wider World Through News Items</a>	Jacqueline Harding (Middlesex University)	Capability	Awareness	Manifest – semi-structured interviews with children, parent and teachers and questionnaires
<a href="#">Digital Exclusion &amp; People with SMI</a>	Middle & Welch	Awareness	Capability	Manifest: Focus groups, interviews, survey. Latent: captures need for digital skills support within the health sector
<a href="#">Digital Families</a>	Samsung / CEMP	Capability	Access	Focus groups, observations, self-reporting, research reflections and interviews
<a href="#">Digital Leaders</a>	Childnet	Capability	Consequences	Impact report, survey data.
<a href="#">Digital Lifeline</a>	Good Things Foundation	Access	Capability	Manifest: Data (Quantitative & Qualitative)

<a href="#">Empower</a>	National Literacy Trust	Awareness	Access	Latent (Predictive, from previous projects)
<a href="#">Extremism &amp; ML</a>	Shout Out UK	Access	Awareness	Self-reporting, distance travelled, evaluations.
<a href="#">GCSE Media Studies</a>	Eduqas, WJEC	Awareness	Capability	Manifest: GCSE assessment, practical coursework, student surveys. Latent: Learning Outcomes into Consequences
<a href="#">How 8–12-year-olds build and show digital resilience</a>	Hammond, Polizzi & Bartholomew	Capability	Awareness	Academic analysis from qualitative data. Potential conceptual change in practitioner field.
<a href="#">Me &amp; My Big Data</a>	University of Liverpool	Awareness	Capability	Manifest: survey, focus groups. Latent: policy recommendations
<a href="#">Media Lives / Day in the Life</a>	Ofcom	Awareness	Access	Manifest Data: Surveys, Case Studies. Observational, change is potential from the data.
<a href="#">NewsWise</a>	Guardian Foundation	Awareness	Consequences	Manifest: surveys Latent: participants' stated intentions
<a href="#">Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project</a>	Oxford University: Oxford Internet Institute	Awareness	Access	Manifest: interviews, surveys, observations. Latent: recommendations for policy.
<a href="#">Parenting for a Digital Future</a>	London School of Economics	Awareness	Access	Manifest: large survey & ethnography. Latent: 'imagining the future' policy recommendations
<a href="#">PZ SEND</a>	Parent Zone	Capability	Access	Latent: resources – capacity for change.
<a href="#">Reaching Out Online</a>	University of Sussex / Terrence Higgins Trust	Access	Awareness	Manifest: statistical evidence, interviews, focus groups, ethnography. Latent: impact statements.
<a href="#">Reboot UK</a>	Good Things Foundation	Access	Capability	Evidence-based model, quantitative and qualitative data. Survey, focus groups, interviews. Test & Learn methodology, wellbeing measures.
<a href="#">Refugee Journalism Project</a>	London College of Communication	Awareness	Capability	Creative portfolios, engagement stats.

<a href="#">Social Switch Project</a>	Catch 22 / Redhead	Capability	Access	Manifest: pilot study outputs. Latent: behaviour change in access choices from training
<a href="#">Think Digital</a>	Age UK	Capability	Access	Engagement Stats
<a href="#">Third Space School Library, Digital Literacy Mental Health</a>	School Library Association / CEMP	Awareness	Capability	Focus group, interviews, work produced by participants.
<a href="#">Topical Talk</a>	Economist Educational Foundation	Access	Awareness	Manifest: reach and dialogue evidence Latent: take up of resources
<a href="#">Widening Digital Participation</a>	Good Things Foundation	Access	Capability	Manifest: surveys. Latent: recommendations.

## Evidence: Funding and Scope

Project	Funding (where stated)	Duration
Active Online Choices		2018 – 2021 (3y)
BBC Young Reporter		2018 – current (5y) - ongoing
Being alone together: developing fake News immunity	£210,989	2020 – 2021 (1y)
Be Internet Citizens	Part of £25 mil fund	2018 – present? (~5y)
Changing conversations: Empowering vulnerable children in a digital world	£30,000	2021 – 2022 (1y)
Children’s Understanding of the Wider World Through News Items		2017 (February and April data collection, 3mth)
Digital Exclusion & People with SMI		2022 (1y or a few months?)
Digital Families	£15,000	2014 – 2016 (~2,5y)
Digital Leaders		2014 – present (9y)
Digital Lifeline	£2.5 million	2021 (~1y)
Empower		2022 – 2024 (~2,5y)
GCSE Media Studies		2 years of study
How 8-12-year-olds build and show digital resilience	£24,853.25 (	2020 (interviews) – 2023? (~3y)
Me & My Big Data	£339,156	2019 – 2021 (2y)
Media Lives/Day in the Life		2005 – present (~18y)
NewsWise	£270,189	2018 – 2022 2022 – 2024 (6y)
Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project		2020 (~1y)
Parenting for a Digital Future		2014 – 2017 (~3y)
PZ SEND		2022 – 2023? (run for 2 months)
Reaching Out Online	£11,500	2013 (6mth)
Reboot UK	£329,956	2016 (8mth)
Refugee Journalism Project		2016 – present (~8y)
Social Switch Project	£200,000	2019 (~10mth)  2021- 2022 (~1y)
Think Digital		2020 – 2021 ( 1y)
Third Space School Library, Digital Literacy Mental Health	£10,000	2022 – 2023 (~7mth)
Topic Talk	£144,388	2022 2023 (~1y)
Widening Digital Participation	£2.7 mil	2013 – 2016 (~3y)  2017 – 2020 (~3y)

The image features a light blue background. A large, semi-transparent yellow circle is positioned in the lower right quadrant. Overlapping the left side of this circle is a series of approximately 20 wavy, orange lines that curve from the top left towards the bottom right. A horizontal white rectangular box is centered over the wavy lines, containing the text "Underpinning Research" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font.

# **Underpinning Research**



# Underpinning Research

CEMP (the research team) co-produced the [DCMS Media Literacy Mapping Exercise and Literature Review](#); recently delivered four media literacy project evaluations for the British Council and a media literacy theory of change, training guide and practitioner toolkit for BBC Media Action. We researched the lived experiences and media literacies of reality TV participants for ITV. CEMP delivered media literacy research for the US Embassy in London, working with journalists, teachers, information professionals and young people, a project for the Global Challenges Research Fund into media literacy for refugee youth engagement and several ARHC international network grants exploring media literacy for marginalised voices. CEMP collaborated with the London School of Economics on two UK media literacy reviews; produced a cross-EU review of best practices in media literacy education and are represented on the Ofcom media literacy research working group. We are currently working with the e-nurture programme to pilot an approach using the same theory of change to improve vulnerable young people's mental health through increased resilience in the digital environment.

During our work with BBC Media Action, for which the theory of change was first developed for application with local journalists and audiences in diverse, fragile and precarious international contexts, we observed that

*“the distinction between usage and positive change can be subtle and nuanced, but it is about supporting positive uses of (digital) media literacy, informed not just by access and understanding of the role of media and society but also the recognition that one's own individual actions and decisions in how (digital) media literacy is used impact society no matter how minutely. Positive change encourages individuals to take (digital) media literacy actions that can make a constructive and positive impact to their lives and society.”* (McDougall / BBC MA, 2021).

This body of previous, recent research, along with other current work in the field, has identified the following needs:

- For media literacy work to reach more elusive, excluded and vulnerable groups;
- For the independent, consistent and robust evaluation of media literacy projects,
- To move beyond self-reporting and measuring small-scale impacts to provide a stronger understanding of 'what works' in the longer term (McDougall, Fowler-Watt and Edwards, 2022).

Evidence from a series of projects which generated the background research that informed this project is available on [the CEMP website](#) and open access in these publications:

McDougall, J. and Rega, I. (2022). [Beyond Solutionism: 'Differently Motivating Media Literacy.'](#) Media and Communication. Vol. 10, Issue 4.

Amr Aljouni, Ozden Bademci, Susan Hogan, Sara Marino, Julian McDougall, Isabella Rega, Sarah Skyrme & Nasir Uddin (2023) [Digital arts – refugee engagement](#), *Media Practice & Education*.

Our response to these needs in this project has been to develop a theory of change which goes beyond assessing levels of media literacy to measure sustainable, positive consequences of media literacy in different contexts, moving beyond solutionism:

*The more agentive uses of media literacy for positive change require more longitudinal evidence of media literacy in society beyond education, and also with a commitment to good consequences, as opposed to the gaining of competences which can be, and often are, used to create the problem. In other words, they bear witness to the paradox that unhealthy media ecosystems are not caused by a lack of media literacies so much as the toxic uses of them. Our research seeks to address the problem by moving beyond skills and competences alone to focus on these uses (McDougall & Rega, 2022: 2).*



# Methodology

# Methodology

Our Theory of Change (ToC) for this project was refined from and underpinned by previous work (see McDougall 2021, McDougall and Rega 2022). Deductive and collaborative efforts guided the development of the ToC from the initial stages (Laing and Todd 2015; Belcher et al. 2020). The first stage involved a pilot evaluation of five projects which gathered individual approaches. Refinements to the ToC considered feedback from critical friends that highlighted the need for more non-academic language, inclusion of projects from different sectors (e.g., health, educational, social, and political contexts), more coherent alignment with Ofcom's resources and more guidance for 'bottom up' project developers entering the media literacy research field for the first time. Following adaptations from this feedback, our approach was pre-tested in the form of a standardisation exercise. The knowledge and experience from the pilot stage was then synthesised to establish the consistent approach which guided the final review of a further 25 projects.

30 UK projects were selected for evaluation. Projects, initiatives, and interventions included in the evaluation displayed clear intentions for media literacy to lead to positive change. Criteria for inclusion included geography, sampling frame (last 10 years), positive change objectives, and evidence-based findings. Although the sample was restricted to the UK for this work, the ToC and evaluation methodology can be applied to any country and context.

In addition to the [DCMS \(2021\) mapping review](#), the [Online media literacy resource](#) by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT, previously DCMS, 2021), Ofcom's [Media literacy initiatives library](#) and [Media literacy research library](#) (2023a; b), independent (keyword) searches and snowballing for further projects were conducted for the sample selection. Projects were then randomly allocated to each of the five team members, adding to the reduction of bias. A manifest and latent evaluation approach was used for data collection of projects' impact and potential impact, respectively. In this context, analysing the explicit and implicit nature of the evidence generated by projects was essential.

Evaluated projects focused on different contexts and ranged from initial stages to completed projects with full impact reports. To analyse those evaluations and establish themes and distinguish types of evidence, the projects were mapped against the four key elements. Evaluations were then shared with project leads in three cases, to sense check the approach taken and gather their responses to our findings.

The **Media and Information Literacy Alliance** acted as critical friends for this project. In this capacity, MILA board members reviewed the pilot phase outcomes in a workshop at the **Wikimedia Foundation** in March 2023, responded to work in progress during the full review stage at a MILA board meeting (virtual) in May 2023, and Stéphane Goldstein represented MILA as plenary discussant at the end of project / resources launch event at the English and Media Centre, London, on 25.5.23. During the pilot phase we also received feedback on the first draft of our evaluation methodology from **DCMS** (Josh Phillips), the **Media Education Association** (Steve Connolly) and Ofcom (Kate Morris). We also worked closely with **Ofcom** throughout the project to ensure productive alignment with the Media Literacy toolkit. In addition, we asked two Media Studies teachers to trial our methodology by applying our theory of change and evaluation methodology to the qualifications they teach, in order to assess Media Studies for its capacity to develop media literacy in students and also to gather more critical responses to our approach. The evaluation of Media Studies this generated is included in our sample. These were conducted by **Emma Smyth**, Head of Media and Film Studies at Sir John Lawes School and **Louise Davies**, Head of Media Studies, The Maelor School, Wrexham. Both are doctoral researchers in CEMP.

## Critical friend inputs from MILA

The following inputs were all addressed in the revised ToC, following the pilot phase.

*We think the public would benefit by a greater reference to health uses and contexts.*

*Given the holistic approach of this ToC (which I completely agree with), I'm a little surprised about the relatively few references to how ML contributes to democracy, citizenship, participation, etc. I note a brief reference to civic engagement under capability impact, but could we make more of this? Another missing element is around how people use media, particularly social media, to create information. One of the outcomes cited by the ToC is participants making change to the media ecosystem. Could there be more specific references to developing good practices in anything that people choose to create?*

During the in-progress full review engagement with MILA, we received the following responses:

*I like the scope and am really pleased to see mental health projects in the list,*

*From a citizenship (education) perspective, our work really does sit very well with the concept of 'agentive'. It would be good to emphasise rights, democracy, power and action-based approaches - the right to know and critically engage in information, issues and matters that affect people, responsibilities (roles of media, parliament and citizens) in holding those in power to account, countering misinformation, linked to making informed decisions and taking action on matters of concern.*

NB we chose to refer to 'functioning civic societies' instead of using the term 'democracy' so that the ToC would remain as agile as possible for more diverse international contexts.

## Project Lead Responses

Before sharing the findings at our end of project workshop and finalising this report, we consulted three project leads to share our evaluations of their projects and gather their feedback on how they felt about our evaluations of their work.

**BBC Young Reporter:** feedback from the project lead included agreement that an impact report/longitudinal study would be very valuable to evidence the impact and reach. It was also highlighted that there is a tension/difference between online resources and "live" workshops: this is a fast-moving area and the needs and content have moved on as have the ways in which young people consume news. The challenge for BBC is to ensure that the online resources evolve, whereas the workshops are much more dynamic, with currency and delivered by BBC journalists.

**Shout Out UK:** feedback from the project team validated our evaluation, after clarification of the latent / manifest threshold and what is indicated by empty cells in the template. It was agreed that limits of funding and time mean that consequences can often only be projected. The team felt that the evaluation was an accurate reflection of outcomes and was useful for considering future improvements to designing projects with change objectives and measurable impacts.



**Parenting for a Digital Future:** feedback from the project lead included the view that the ongoing project blog had not been prominent enough, as we had focussed on the book and project reports. The blog was felt by the project lead to be the most likely source of outreach and engagement, evidenced by Google Analytics, but it was agreed that this was more about access and potential capability – a parental and caregiving discourse about digital media – than evidence of action or positive

consequences. Our assessment of the precise recommendations and 'imagined futures' being a strong example of projected consequences was endorsed.


## Example Evaluations

Two example evaluations are presented here to demonstrate how the theory of change can be applied to contrasting projects. The first is a large, academic ethnography, conducted by London School of Economics, to understand - *How do parents seek to bring up their children in the digital age? And What risks and opportunities shape children's digital lives now and in the future?* The second is a formal school subject – GCSE Media Studies.


For each of the 4 inter-related elements, the evaluations identify the evidence of change generated directly by the project and the potential for further change arising from the project. Both manifest change (that for which evidence can already be identified) and latent change (evidence of potential) are described. Including both manifest and latent evaluation enables the inclusion of evidence in numbers or words, expected/predicted outcomes (visible) and non-explicit or underlying outcomes.



Title of Project: <a href="#">Parenting for a Digital Future</a>			
	Evidence of ML leading to change	Potential for ML leading to change	Nature of evidence of change or potential for change (latent or manifest)
<p><b>ACCESS</b></p> 	<p>No access impact within the project but provides deep and broad data on domestic digital media access (key element of ToC – full, safe and informed access..) Generates data on digital inequalities impacting on digital skills, online support for opportunities and, online risks and parental mediation.</p>	<p>Findings about parental views on access for age groups and govt policy.</p>	<p>Survey – 2032 parents.</p>
<p><b>AWARENESS</b></p> 	<p>Captures ethnographic picture of parental awareness, generates knowledge about digital parenting, pressures on parents in digital contexts and views on regulation and privacy debates for academic fields and policy / tech sectors. New knowledge about how parents and caregivers support learning online.</p>	<p>The open access materials produced have potential for parents and caregivers to feel less isolated and anxious through awareness of shared experiences and concerns.</p>	<p>Ethnography with 73 families. Interviews, focus groups,</p>




		<p>Recommendations (see potential consequences) raise awareness about digital parenting experiences and needs across sectors and agencies – “it is now for society – policymakers, educators, journalists, designers, industry and more - to hear parents’ voices, value their efforts, address the inequalities that divide them, all to better support them..”</p>	
<p><b>CAPABILITY</b></p> 	<p>No impact on capability in project but generates knowledge about digital parenting as a complex set of capabilities, bound up with other anxieties, concerns and relational aspects. Also measures parents’ digital skills (from self-reporting). Findings relate to support for online learning capability.</p> <p>People see the connection between their media literacy, their health, civic society, educational and economic opportunities.</p>	<p>Ethical listening generates recommendation for parental voice in discourse that may enable capability for parents to articulate negotiations of affordance and challenge in digital family life.:</p> <p>People participate in dialogue about media access, online safety, data and media literacy skills with media practitioners, policy makers and institutions.</p>	<p>Latent – ‘imagining the future’:</p>

<p><b>CONSEQUENCES</b></p> 		<p>Future Consequences projected from the research related to education, mobility and employment.</p> <p>Advocacy and recommendations from research evidence for positive consequences in future – support, parental discourse, education, design and governance of digital environment, policymaking.</p>	<p>(Latent) recommendations from (manifest) evidence:</p> <p>Practitioners and institutions are motivated to respond to more resilient and media literate audiences and users in their professional practice.</p>
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<p><b>Title of Project:</b> <a href="#">Media Studies GCSE WJEC – Wales</a></p>			
	<p><b>Evidence of ML leading to change</b></p>	<p><b>Potential for ML leading to change</b></p>	<p><b>Nature of evidence of change or potential for change (latent or manifest)</b></p>
<p><b>ACCESS</b></p> 	<p>Students gain access to a range of media they would otherwise not have encountered. For example, in addition to accessing news themselves on short form video platforms like TikTok, they study different news platforms on the Media Studies course e.g. radio / print media and recognise that narratives are mediated in different ways depending on the ideology of the media producers.</p>	<p>This can potentially mean that students are less satisfied with accepting narratives that are mediated to them on social media / short-form video content and more proactive in looking elsewhere in media ecosystems, being more reflective on the access choices they make</p>	<p>Manifest – evidence in GCSE outcomes and response to media encountered in the classroom</p> <p>Latent - Students more aware of the range of media they can access and begin to access a variety of media</p>

<p><b>AWARENESS</b></p> 	<p>Students can see how media texts use codes and conventions and how meaning is communicated. They are aware of producers' intentions in communicating meaning and can deconstruct how producers position audiences, and that audiences can have oppositional readings to media products. By studying representation, they are aware of the stereotypes that are often reinforced in the media and can better understand the normative practices of the media</p>	<p>They can potentially then recognise how media producers both online and otherwise construct realities and be more empowered to challenge media products in unhealthy media ecosystems. In their own media products (both on the course and in their personal lives e.g. short form video content) they can create more diverse representations</p>	<p>Manifest – evident in students' own media products produced on classroom e.g. representation of gender in the adverts they create for coursework</p> <p>Latent - Also evident in the information they create and share online outside the Media Studies course</p>
<p><b>CAPABILITY</b></p> 	<p>Students think of themselves as media producers and better understand that they can be prosumers rather than passive media consumers. They can see the connection between their media literacy and their academic study and apply it beyond media studies in other educational contexts.</p>	<p>This can potentially lead to an application of the media literacy acquired within Media Studies to other areas of the curriculum e.g., evaluating media sources for assignments on other subjects including Social Sciences. They can also use this capability to help recognise the impact of social media on their own / others' mental health.</p>	<p>Manifest – Year 11 Media Studies students delivering assemblies to younger students on media literacy (TikTok / news)</p> <p>Latent – Ability to make more informed choices on sharing content without fully understanding it e.g., fake news / hate speech e.g. Andrew Tate</p>

<p><b>CONSEQUENCES</b></p> 	<p>Students recognise that they have a role to play in healthy media ecosystems. This tends to occur most when courses have a production component, as it is only when students need to make decisions about their own products that they can realise that they have agency to impact the media ecosystem e.g. decisions about representation and stereotypes in audio visual products</p>	<p>This can lead to students critically evaluating each other's work, and recognising misinformation / untrustworthy content in online contexts</p>	<p>Manifest – Evidence in students' own media products which create positive representations of those who can be excluded and marginalised, and evaluation of their peers' work</p> <p>Latent – Students become more confident to 'call out' misleading content or make conscious decisions not to share material</p>
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# Findings

# Detailed Findings

Data added to support findings.

Examples added to support findings.

## What we evaluated

We evaluate media literacy projects and activities in the UK over the last decade, with our focus mainly on the most recent work, including newly funded work in the UK Government Media Literacy Programme.

Our sample represented the most common focus areas for media literacy projects in the UK:

- **Educational activities** to develop critical thinking about media and information, which include both small scale pilot or exploratory interventions and larger initiatives delivered across a larger quantity of settings and also including Media Studies as a school subject;
- Projects focussing on **journalism and news literacy**, either fostering news engagement and resilience to misinformation or capacity building for inclusion in journalism practice at various levels;
- **Health literacy** linked to media and information literacy, including projects aiming to reduce health inequalities through digital inclusion; interventions aiming to develop new capabilities in health professionals, activities focussing on media literacy and mental health and work seeing to improve the media ecosystem with the promotion of health information.
- **Online safety** interventions, ranging from building confidence in the online world through media literacy and active choices to more immediate risk reduction and awareness raising about privacy and data.
- Projects either measuring or seeking to increase **access and digital inclusion**.

The projects which stated the amount of funding in our sample ranged from around £10,000 to the highest with around several million pounds. Projects durations ranged from a few months for more exploratory ML projects to the longest ML programme being conducted over 18 years (although this was a long-term observation study, and as such is an outlier in our sample).

## **What we found**

Across these areas, our review has 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.

Examples: *BBC Young Reporter; Being Alone Together; Changing Conversations; Children's Data & Privacy Online: Digital Exclusion and People with SMI; Empower; GCSE Media Studies; Me & My Big Data; Ofcom's Media Literacy research; NewsWise: Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project; Parenting for a Digital Future; Refugee Journalism Project and The Third Space School Library.*

Projects and activities have also demonstrated the most potential (37% of projects / activities) to develop people's media literacies into **capabilities**. There is the most potential, if projects have the longer term impacts they predict, but are not able to evidence within their time-spans, these kinds of capabilities – people developing more active and resilient attitudes towards media, data and information, people feeling more motivated to make better and safer media access choices in the future and to be more mindful in their engagements with media and when sharing media and information with others.

Examples: *The Digital Citizen Project; Active Online Choices; Being Alone Together; Changing Conversations; Children's Data & Privacy Online; Experiences of Digital Exclusion; The Third Space School Library; Empower; Me & My Big Data; Parentzone SEND; The Social Switch Project and ShoutOut UK Extremism and Media Literacy;*

## **What is the evidence?**

**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. Often change evidence is generated from evaluations of projects. Surveys are both quantitative and qualitative, but the data presented as evidence is more typically qualitative (presented by 43% of projects / activities), with quantitative data often being used for baseline context or recruitment of participants based on selection criteria from survey responses (presented by 36% of projects / activities).

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 by 17% 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). These are latent change indicators, subject to the conversion of intentions into action, but projects generally lack capacity for longitudinal follow up to measure this.

Across the projects we evaluated, there was no tangible evidence of media literacy activities leading to positive consequences. Where projects were 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. However, over a tenth (13%) of the sample presented significant **potential for positive consequences**, based on latent evidence.

In some cases, evidence of change is not manifest due more to the ways in which findings are presented than there being a lack of change. Some projects have more tangible change evidence because they include quantitative measurement indicators or particular kinds of testimony from participants which are more robust. Examples include *Being Alone Together*; *Be Internet Citizens*; *Digital Leaders*; *Digital Lifeline*; *Reaching Out Online*; *Reboot UK* and *Think Digital*.

In other cases, there are assumptions made, sometimes problematic, about positive change resulting from exposure to an activity, resources or training. Our theory of change is agile in this regard, identifying change potential at the latent / manifest threshold – for example, training has taken place, a measured quantity of people engaged with it and therefore have been given new capabilities (manifest) and so there is potential for the training to lead to behaviour change, such as access changes or consequences in actions (latent potential). Examples include *Digital Citizen Project*; *GCSE Media Studies*, *Shout Out UK*; *NewsWise* and the *Social Switch Project*.

Exploratory projects do not generally offer direct evidence of ML leading to change but can provide insights to inform future project design or practice. Examples include *Third Space School Library*; Hammond et al; *Ofcom Media Lives* and *Digital Families*.

When founded on research (qualitative and quantitative) a project that explores, for example media literacy needs and uses can still make



**strong policy recommendations**, without directly offering an intervention. Examples include *Parenting for a Digital Future*; *Digital Exclusion and People with SMI*; *Me and My Big Data*; *Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project* and *Widening Digital Participation*.

## What are the implications?

One significant issue emerging from our review is **over-claiming positive impacts** from minimal evidence. In this sense a kind of confirmation bias seems 'baked in' to the media literacy field in the UK. This is most likely to be due to short term duration and funding, meaning most work is a pilot study pitching for scale up or continuation, but this places a lot of the change impact in the potential category. Identifying what improvements could be made to achieve a shift from potential to evidence would be a step towards addressing this.

**Co-creation and creative methods** with beneficiaries appear to be, on the evidence of our sample, the most effective way of achieving positive impacts across several elements of the theory of change. Also, impact reports facilitate evaluation of change and, again, the latent / manifest threshold can be directly addressed through these.

However, if the UK media literacy field is to move from potential to manifestly positive change, in the form of the **consequences** of more media literacy improving the health of the media ecosystem, then this requires (a) a shift in mindset for project design, as currently most projects only progress to capability and don't have consequence objectives, and (b) the funding and resources for longitudinal projects with annual impact reports, for progression and development through stages in the lifespan of activities.

These implications are addressed in the recommendations which follow.



# Recommendations

## Recommendations

We have used a theory of change and evaluation methodology to review 30 media literacy projects conducted in recent years or newly funded and in progress.

From our findings, we can make the following five key recommendations for the UK media literacy community of practice:

- 1.** Media literacy project design should be realistic and precise with regard to desired change for participants, society and the media ecosystem.
- 2.** Media literacy project design should extend beyond the development of media literacy capabilities to include objectives for the positive consequences of media literacy.
- 3.** Media literacy projects 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.
- 4.** Media literacy projects 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.
- 5.** For the UK media literacy field to move from potential to manifestly positive change, in the form of the consequences of media 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.

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