

# Ofcom's approach to online media literacy



Making  
sense  
of media

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## Executive Summary

Being able to participate effectively online has never been more important. The last two years have taught us of the power of online connection to keep scattered families and friends together, to educate and entertain our children when schools were closed and to enable many adults to work remotely as the nation locked down. From family workouts to heart-felt video calls with elderly family members in care homes, access to technology and the ability to use it was fundamental to our wellbeing in lockdown. For many the absence of being able to engage in this way was also clearly felt.

Ofcom has a mission to make communications work for everyone, both in traditional and online technologies. That means we must consider how everyone can benefit from all that being online has to offer, safely. It means addressing the imbalance of skills and knowledge among different parts of the population and encouraging platforms to make it as easy as possible for people to understand and use their services safely and effectively. The lockdowns accelerated a trend of ubiquitous internet use, which is here to stay. Alongside all the benefits that brings, there are three primary policy challenges which we will address.

- **Media Literacy is fundamental to inclusion:**  
Being online is hugely powerful – we need to support those not currently online and those only online in a limited way (for example, only using a small number of services, or only online on a smartphone) so that we can all enjoy those benefits. Were we not to do so, there is a risk that a digitally excluded underclass would emerge, which helps no-one. Apps and platforms are created for our communication, information and entertainment, not to dominate who we are and determine who gets to participate in society.
- **Media Literacy is fundamental for people being able to live safe and savvy lives online:**  
We all need to have the ability to and get into the habit of critically assessing what we see online, so that we can recognise the sources of information and content we are receiving, and judge whether we trust it. We will all encounter potentially risky or harmful content or contact at some point while online. Media literacy allows us to build resilience online when we stumble across harms and to take appropriate action to identify and protect ourselves and others.
- **Media Literacy is as much about what platforms and services do as it is what users do:**  
People's ability to understand and control what they see and do online is determined both by their own skills and the design of the services that they use. Safe and effective participation is more likely when platforms design their environments as places where media literacy is intentionally supported.

Promoting media literacy is a key tool in our primary duty to further the interests of citizens and consumers and will be critical to our future functions as the online safety regulator. We are re-launching our online media literacy programme, using our existing powers, with the goal of promoting people's ability to participate effectively and stay safe online. We are organising our programme of work under the following five pillars:

- **Engage** - There is an online media literacy sector across the UK that is already undertaking a substantial amount of work. We will make a material contribution to this sector, rather than replicating what others are already doing.
- **Initiate** - We will support the sector by commissioning initiatives to serve specific cohorts in communities recognised as having particular media literacy needs. Confidence, competence and critical thinking online are unevenly spread across the population and it's often those that need those skills and behaviours most that are the least well served.
- **Establish** - We will seek to establish best practice design principles for media literacy. Our statutory duty to promote media literacy enables us to encourage platforms to look at how their design affects what their users see. Also, to work around enabling users to control what they see. We are keen to develop this work into best-practice principles, which will inform our thinking about our future online safety duties.
- **Evaluate** - Throughout the UK, media literacy programmes are often delivered by third sector organisations working to tight timescales and budgets. To enhance the effectiveness of that work, Ofcom will produce guidance on how to evaluate it and curate an evidence base on what works.
- **Research** - We will continue to provide a solid and innovative evidence base to inform our work and that of the broader media literacy sector. We will continue to work with other media literacy research experts to develop and share methodologies and metrics.

This document details our priorities across these five pillars and serves as an invitation to participate in this work.

# Introduction

Our Making Sense of Media (MSOM) programme was designed to focus on online media literacy, and this document sets out our approach. We also explain how Ofcom's work on media literacy fits alongside our developing online regulatory role. We recognise that media literacy is not solely relevant to the online environment. There are other media that it encompasses, such as broadcasting and telecoms. However, online issues have been a major focus of attention in recent years, and are likely to remain so, given how integral online activity is to so much of our daily lives.

## What is media literacy?

The pandemic and the associated lockdowns made the ability to participate online more important than ever. Perhaps for the first time, that sudden change to life as we knew it provided a reason for some of us to learn how to video call, arrange a food delivery, order clothes and books, find health information and experience entertainment online. Some people learnt to play a musical instrument, speak a new language, started a job, performed online or participated in virtual pub quizzes. We had to decide what information to trust and share on our social feeds, and work out who and what to believe and who and what to ignore. All these activities require a level of skill to navigate how to do them online. In fact, they necessitate a whole cluster of things – skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and a willingness to learn. To be able to do all of these things – and to enjoy the benefits of being online safely and with confidence - is what it is to be media literate.

There are policy implications to media literacy as well as personal opportunities:

- **Media literacy has an impact on online user inclusion and participation.** It can influence whether and how people participate online with social, economic, and political issues. Improving skills, understanding and attitudes can empower people to participate in today's online society more fully, reducing digital exclusion. It can also help them exercise due trust, which in turn can help sustain democracy and support public health.
- **Media literacy has an effect on users' online choices.** It helps them to have clearer expectations and understanding about the services that they use, the content that they consume and how their data is used. This helps facilitate more informed choices when engaging with online content, products and services, including how to avoid causing or suffering harm. More broadly, it empowers users to engage more positively, using the information and opportunities they find online.

- **Media literacy increases users' resilience online.** It can enable users to take charge of and contextualise their online experiences, through using services effectively, accessing reliable information, and knowing how to deal with helpful or harmful content or conduct. It can also increase users' awareness and understanding of the tools and advice available to them for dealing with harmful content or conduct if they do encounter it. This knowledge lowers the risk that people are exposed to by improving how they mitigate and react to online harms.

All of these concepts – inclusion, participation, choice and resilience – are core components of media literacy. They vary significantly, not only between different sectors of society, but also within them. Indeed, levels of resilience and participation can change in the same person over time. This has implications for how we think about our media literacy work, and our evaluation and success metrics.

## The regulatory context

Ofcom has a statutory duty to promote media literacy, as set out in section 11 of the Communications Act 2003. We also have a duty to make arrangements to carry out research into media literacy matters, as set out in section 14(6)(a) of the Communications Act 2003. Ofcom therefore undertakes a range of activities, from research into UK adults' and children's media habits, to working alongside stakeholders to encourage media literacy interventions to be more

effective and promoting the evaluation of media literacy interventions.

### Video-sharing platforms (VSP) regime

Ofcom is the regulator for video-sharing platforms (VSPs) established in the UK. Since 1 November 2020, UK-established VSPs must comply with new rules around protecting users from harmful videos. We have published our plan and approach<sup>1</sup>.

Under the VSP [Framework](#), UK-established VSPs are required to take appropriate measures to protect users, particularly under-18s, from specific types of harmful material in videos. The measures platforms should consider taking are listed in legislation and include the provision of specific tools and information to improve media literacy, and raising awareness of the availability of such information and tools<sup>2</sup>.

Ofcom has provided [guidance](#) on the application of the measures in the VSP Framework, including detailed guidance on the application of media literacy tools and information. This also includes information on how to raise awareness of and understand the effectiveness of the tools and information provided.

### Online Safety Bill

The Government has published a draft Online Safety Bill<sup>3</sup>, which is intended to grant Ofcom new responsibilities as the online safety regulator to help to keep people safe when they are online, as well as clarifying Ofcom's existing media literacy duties. At the time of writing, the draft Online Safety Bill is undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny. The Government has made clear that media

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/information-for-industry/vsp-regulation/plan-and-approach>

<sup>2</sup> Schedule 15A, paragraph 9, [Communications Act 2003](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/draft-online-safety-bill>

## Ofcom's approach to online media literacy

literacy will be an important component of delivering online safety.

### **Digital Regulation Co-operation Forum (DRCF)**

Media literacy has a role within the work of the DRCF, which brings together Ofcom, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)

and the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA). Collectively, we are working together to provide a joined-up approach in the area of 'by design' - how the look and feel of a service, the way in which it is navigated and how content is served (particularly when via algorithms) has an impact on user behaviour or attitudes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-regulation-cooperation-forum-workplan-202122>

## Ofcom's approach to improving media literacy among online users

Ofcom will focus its online media literacy activity in five areas, listed below. We have described these as discrete areas, although they are closely interconnected and interdependent. Our work is currently most developed in three of these five areas: Research, Engagement, and Evaluation. This workplan builds on our existing research and evaluation expertise and focus, alongside our existing collaborative approach. We have identified two further priority areas - working with platforms (Establish) and supporting underserved users (Initiate).

Our priority activities for the next 12 months are detailed at the end of this document. We anticipate our programme will evolve over time.



## We will:

**Engage with the wide range of media literacy practitioners.** We recognise the wealth of knowledge, expertise and action that already exists within the media literacy sector (including third sector organisations, public and private bodies, online platforms, governments across the UK, and many others). We will expand and deepen our work to convene, facilitate and support the activities of this wide range of organisations. Respecting the commercial realities of the media literacy delivery sector, our long-term aim is to meet the needs of all communities by encouraging collaboration, and sharing and coordinating media literacy activities and evidence, so that we can all learn about what works faster. We expect our MSOM Panel and Network to have a key role in this.

**Initiate pilot trials and campaigns to promote online media literacy.** We will support the sector by trialling initiatives to serve specific cohorts in communities recognised as having particular media literacy needs. We appreciate that this work can be costly, and so we will emphasise an experimental approach, exploring and piloting a limited number of interventions. We are exploring setting up pilot projects through a procurement process, and we will work with relevant stakeholders, including those in or representing particular underserved local areas, communities or groups, and we will evaluate and share our findings publicly about what worked well and what did not.

**Establish best-practice design principles for media literacy.** The companies which provide the most popular and widely used services can help users have meaningful

control over what they see. Our statutory duty to promote media literacy enables us to encourage platforms to consider how the design of their service affects what users see and their ability to control it. We will seek to establish best practice design principles for media literacy and welcome the steps that some platforms have already taken to build media literacy considerations to the design of their service.

**Evaluate the effectiveness of media literacy initiatives.** We recognise that media literacy evolves, is multi-dimensional in character and is subject to many varying influences. Throughout the UK media literacy initiatives are often delivered by third sector organisations who are working to tight timescales and budgets. To enhance the effectiveness of that work, Ofcom will produce accessible and interactive guidance on how to evaluate it and an evidence base on what works.

**Research the state of media literacy and share our evidence base.** Research has long been our particular focus, providing solid evidence across a wide range of aspects of media literacy both for Ofcom and for the media literacy sector. Our research examines the varied perspectives of users across the UK, and we report on differences by audience groups wherever we can. We will continue to deliver on these aspects of our work, as well as expanding our methodological base with innovative ways of understanding how people use and think about their media. We will continue to work with other media literacy research experts to develop and share methodologies and metrics.

### **We will collaborate with key stakeholders across our MSOM programme**

Ofcom will establish (or refresh existing) working groups for each of these areas. The working groups will inform our thinking, help scope our work and, where appropriate, support the delivery of our activities. Each of the working groups will sit under the MSOM Advisory Panel, with individual panel members playing a leading role in each group. In addition to informing our work, these working groups will help improve coordination and drive activity in common areas of interest, including developing best practice and evidence about what works best.

We will engage with a range of other stakeholders, in the UK and internationally, to ensure that our work is complementary. This includes, but is not limited to, working closely with the relevant [UKCIS](#) working groups such as [Vulnerable Users](#) and [Evidence](#); the Media and Information Literacy Alliance ([MILA](#)) and the [News Literacy Network](#).

We welcome the publication earlier this year of DCMS's [Online Media Literacy Strategy](#), designed to support organisations in England to undertake media literacy activity in a more coordinated, wide-reaching, and high-quality way over the next three years.

Both Ofcom and DCMS play important but distinct roles in promoting media literacy in the UK. Although Ofcom's activities will be conducted independently, they should be complementary to those of the Government and avoid duplication, and we are working closely with DCMS to identify clear areas of distinction in our respective activities. As an example, Ofcom has a clear focus on leading and encouraging evaluation and adoption of evidence among media literacy practitioners and online platforms.

We will continue to work closely with both DCMS and industry stakeholders as part of our long-standing commitment to promote and create tangible change across the media literacy landscape. This collaboration includes working with other relevant bodies as they develop media literacy to be a core part of children's education.

### **We will measure and evaluate the impact of our activities**

We will measure and evaluate our approach, so we can see what difference our activities are making. We know that long-lasting, substantial change takes years to evolve. Media literacy is not something that shifts easily. It is a 'moving target'; new services emerge that require different responses. Media literacy is also something that does not take place in a vacuum; it intersects with a wide range of societal and psychological factors, both for adults and children, and with commercial interests and service providers.

Nonetheless, there are a range of measures we can use to monitor and evaluate the work that we do. The approach we will take to evaluating our work is based on the concept of theory of change (which is discussed in more detail in the Evaluate section, later in this document). In particular, we need to define the areas where direct change can happen.

We will be mindful that 'what good looks like' may at times be counter-intuitive. For example, people may say they encounter less potentially harmful content, but this may be because they have reduced the breadth of their activity. Conversely, 'no change' on some measures may in fact indicate progress, as without our activity there might have been a decrease in levels of awareness or a change in types of behaviour.

## Engage

Ofcom recognises and welcomes the wide array of media literacy practitioners operating throughout the UK. We have a mission to make communications work for everyone. One way of advancing this is by encouraging enhanced media literacy through facilitating connections, and driving the development and embedding of best practice. It is also important to ensure that evidence on what works is readily available and accessible.

This is a marketplace with insecure funding, which affects actions and priorities. Perhaps inevitably, the provision of media literacy resources and interventions is uneven across the population, as is the risk of harm and digital exclusion. There are funding implications, with resource duplication in some areas and resource scarcity in others, especially in an under-resourced sector.

We recognise the value of the range of perspectives and the diversity of materials that this marketplace generates. This creates challenges for people in identifying which resources work best for them, and for practitioners in understanding what works best when empowering different communities and demographics.

### **Our vision in relation to engaging with other media literacy practitioners**

Better outcomes can be achieved and sustained through collaboration. We will therefore adopt a collaboration-first approach. This approach will infuse every part of our work across all five of our priority areas. The Making Sense of Media [panel](#) and [network](#) are one way in which we do this. Our intention is to resource the sector with insight, peer learning and evaluation tools. We will create opportunities to showcase best practice and our learnings. We will engage in a targeted MSOM network expansion programme, focusing on frontline

professionals for a holistic approach to improving media literacy.

Ofcom has UK-wide responsibilities for media literacy. We will invite further representation within our network from all UK nations and the English regions and will be looking for community experts to bring experiences from the front line of media literacy provision to a wider audience.

### **Current engagement activities**

Ofcom is currently involved in a number of engagement activities with other media literacy practitioners.

In June 2019, we launched our MSOM panel, bringing together ten expert representatives from across industry, the third sector and academia to debate and provide additional input to the development of Ofcom's media literacy research and policy work. The panel has helped inform Ofcom priority areas for future activity and research.

Alongside the launch of our MSOM panel, we set up our MSOM network. We currently have over 300 network members, across a range of organisations in the UK and internationally. Together we seek to foster collaboration and debate, share information on our respective media literacy activities, and disseminate research, evidence, and insights from across a range of relevant sectors.

We have hosted a range of network events, including conferences, seminars and webinars, to share knowledge, expertise and awareness on issues related to media literacy. For example, in May this year we hosted a virtual event to present the findings of our latest adults' and children's media literacy

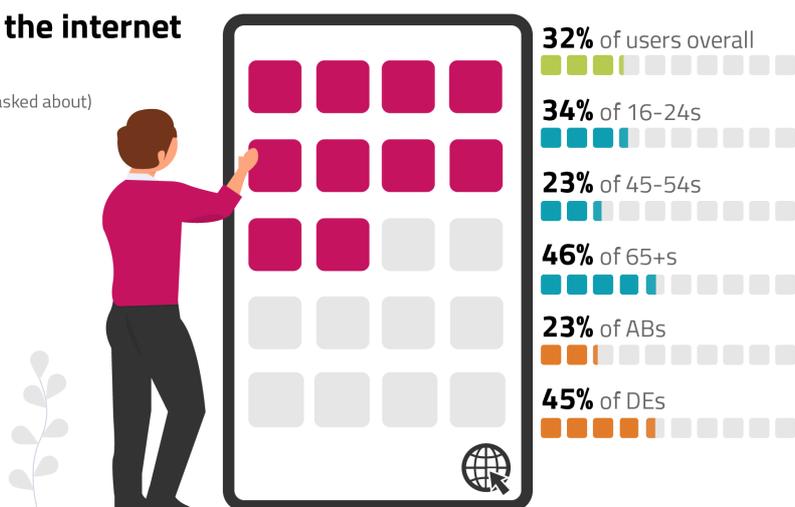
reports, focusing on the topics of [adults'](#) and [children's](#) media use, online knowledge and understanding, and digital exclusion. In June 2020, we hosted our Teens Talk tech event, attended by senior individuals representing government and industry as well as representatives from our MSOM panel.

How we use the internet varies considerably across different groups within society, and is a reminder of the diversity of experiences that the media literacy sector engages with in its activity

## Breadth of use of the internet

### Narrow users

(ever do 1-10 of the 20 activities asked about)



Source: Ofcom adults' [media use and attitudes report 2021](#)

We also regularly publish [MSOM bulletins](#) that provide details about the media literacy activities undertaken by a range of organisations in the UK and overseas.

We welcome the range of different forums in the media literacy landscape and are confident that our respective activities can continue to co-exist to help promote and drive best practice in media literacy. We continue to engage with relevant stakeholders through these initiatives. We seek to ensure that we do not duplicate efforts, and that we continue to make best use of media literacy practitioners' time and expertise.

Ofcom is also involved in a range of media literacy activities with international partners, exchanging and learning from global best practice. The European Union, as well as

countries across the globe, places an increasing emphasis on media literacy, particularly as a means of combating disinformation and improving citizens' online experiences.

We continue to engage through the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities (EPRA) Taskforce on Media and Information Literacy (EMIL), in which we play a leading role. The Taskforce focuses on multi-stakeholder MIL networks, with membership extending beyond media regulators to a wide group of MIL organisations. Through this engagement we seek opportunities to share and learn from best practices and advance our media literacy priorities.

## Our next steps

We are creating working groups based on each of our five activity areas. Working Group Chairs will report to Ofcom and will operate transparently.

We will continue to work closely with other actors in the media literacy landscape through the MSOM network, the panel, other various media literacy forums, and more widely, including with international partners, in order to collectively identify gaps in the provision of media literacy activities, to inform our thinking about emerging issues, and to encourage the development of new activities.

We will further develop our MSOM network, providing opportunities for current members to play a role through our working groups, initiatives, and events. We also aim to expand its membership to encompass frontline, and local and regional practitioners from across each of the UK's nations. We are interested to hear from qualified organisations and individuals who would be interested in participating in the MSOM network or joining

working groups. Please email [makingsenseofmedia@ofcom.org.uk](mailto:makingsenseofmedia@ofcom.org.uk).

We will host virtual and, where possible, in-person events to foster knowledge and activity sharing, and we plan to do this in a geographically inclusive way. We will continue to contribute to and participate in events across the nations and internationally.

Our engagement with other media literacy practitioners will continue to be strongly shaped by our media literacy activities elsewhere in the programme. For example, our ongoing research into people's understanding and use of the internet will continue to be important in informing where we, and in enabling other media literacy stakeholders to take further action. This will also inform our knowledge of emerging issues. Engagement will be critical in our work on evaluation and evidence building where we aim to support the sharing of best practice and lessons learnt through the creation of an evidence base of 'what works' in media literacy interventions.

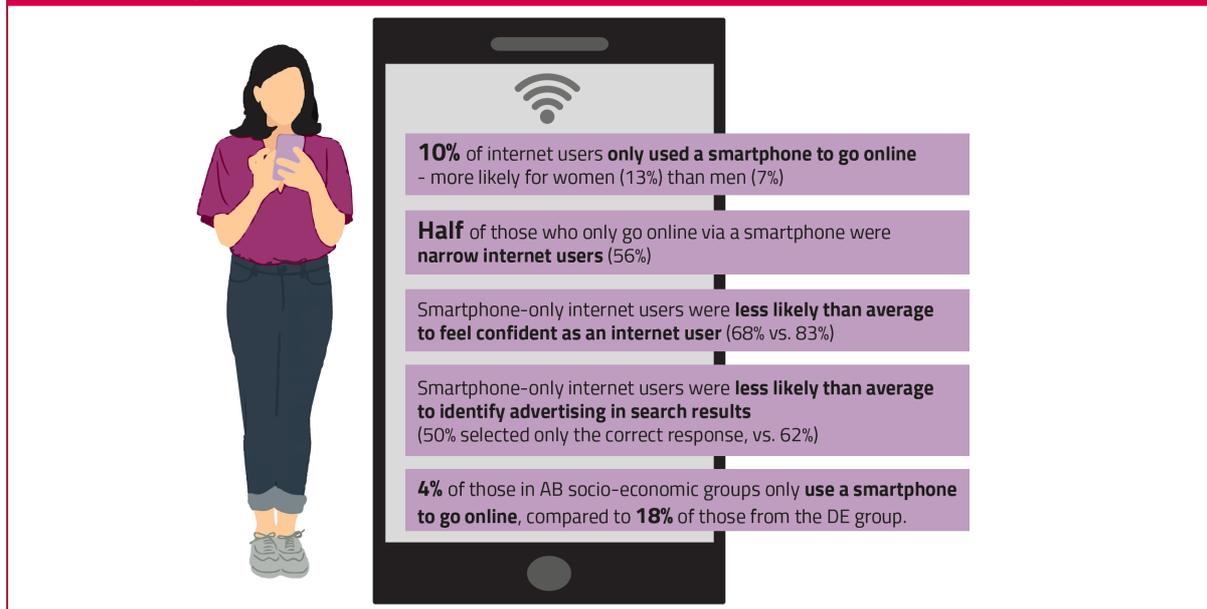
# Initiate

Media literacy levels vary for a wide range of reasons. As DCMS's research into [media literacy interventions](#) demonstrates, some sectors of the community are well served by existing media literacy interventions, resources and activities, but too many are not. As the [DCMS Media Literacy Strategy](#) document notes, of the 170 UK initiatives identified, only 3% were targeted at people with disabilities, 3% at those from a disadvantaged socio-economic background and 1% at those from the LGBT community. It is clear that the needs of people from minority communities or disadvantaged backgrounds or those with protected characteristics are not being effectively met by media literacy provision and resources compared to other sectors of the community.

In keeping with our mission to make communications work for everyone, and in recognition of the challenges of supporting media literacy among specific communities,

Ofcom intends to support a small number of focused initiatives to further our objectives by exploring how some of these issues can be addressed.

**Smartphone-only online access is linked to more limited media literacy and online activity. People from DE socio-economic groups are four times more likely than those from AB households to be smartphone-only**



Source: Ofcom adults' [media use and attitudes report](#) 2021

## Our vision to facilitate campaigns and training initiatives

Our ambition is to facilitate the delivery of effective interventions to improve media literacy among online users who are currently either not served or under-served by existing initiatives. These will range from broad media

literacy awareness-raising programmes to targeted, locally-based interventions. Some of these interventions will improve media literacy among the targeted community. Others will allow us to better understand what does not work, and why. All of these initiatives will conclude with a report detailing

the insights and lessons learnt, using Ofcom's evaluation tools. We will make those reports available, as they will contribute to the body of knowledge about effective media literacy interventions for specific communities.

Our vision is to develop a targeted programme of activities in collaboration with other media literacy practitioners. We will seek to work with others to jointly explore where media literacy activities can most make a difference, and where possible to encourage, facilitate, and drive action in these areas.

We are also keen to learn from successful interventions in other countries, and we will actively explore how lessons learnt around the world can enhance our understanding.

### **Next steps**

We will bring together a small number of experts into a working group to support us in

identifying the most appropriate focus for our initiatives and to scope the proposed pilot projects. We will explore and potentially commission different modes of delivery, bringing in a range of appropriate people. Our evaluation and learnings will be made available to the network, and beyond. We will provide further details about our approach to these pilot programmes at the appropriate time.

Our approach, methodology and delivery will be innovative, collaborative and evaluated by default. The group's role will be to provide the sector with an understanding of what is possible through collaboration and local initiatives, to share learning from these pilots and to promote innovative and challenging thinking and evaluation.

## Establish

Online platforms can make a critical contribution to enable users to participate effectively, fully and safely on their services. The look and feel of content and services has an impact on how users perceive and interact with them.

We welcome the steps some platforms have taken to build in the promotion of media literacy into the design of their services, for example by flagging content which may potentially be inaccurate or by nudging users to consider the impact before they post or forward content. For example:

- In December 2020, Google launched knowledge panels in search results to tackle misinformation about Covid-19 vaccines by showing accurate information. This feature was initially launched on YouTube in March 2020, and in December Google stated that the information panels had been viewed 400 billion times.<sup>5</sup>
- Facebook's fact-checking programme works with International Fact Checking Network (IFCN) certified fact-checkers and organisations to rate and review the accuracy of content on its platform. Content that might be misinformation on either Facebook or Instagram may be identified by users through the flagging process, or by user patterns, such as people commenting that they don't believe a certain post.<sup>6</sup>
- TikTok's #FactCheckYourFeed campaign<sup>7</sup> is an on-platform intervention to encourage critical thinking about news,

vaccine information, and consuming a balanced diet. By using popular creators TikTok was able to position vital information in a way that resonated with their audience. To drive awareness, TikTok created an on-platform guide, intervened in the search functionality and messaged all UK account holders.

- In October 2020, Twitter introduced a 'Read before you Retweet' prompt.<sup>8</sup> This followed testing that showed it had a positive impact on the number of people who opened an article before retweeting, or who did not retweet articles they had not read.

Our statutory duty to promote media literacy enables us to encourage platforms to consider how their design affects what content their users encounter and also empowers users to control what they see.

Our media literacy activities and platforms' activities in this area also have an important role to play in the new video-sharing platforms (VSPs) regime and will inform our thinking around our new responsibilities for online safety as anticipated in the draft Online Safety Bill.

Under the video-sharing platforms (VSPs) regime, UK-established VSPs are required to take appropriate measures to protect users,

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<sup>5</sup> Google the keyword, [How you'll find accurate and timely information on COVID-19 vaccines](#), 10 Dec 2020

<sup>6</sup> [How Facebook's third-party fact-checking program works](#), 1 June 2021

<sup>7</sup> [TikTok launches #FactCheckYourFeed to support media literacy](#), 12 May 2021

<sup>8</sup> Twitter, [Reading an article before Retweeting it? That's growth](#), 21 October 2020

particularly under-18s, from specific types of harmful material in videos. The relevant legislation outlines a list of measures which providers must consider taking, including providing tools and information for users with the aim of improving their media literacy and raising awareness of the availability of such tools and information. We have published guidance which explains what we think VSP providers should consider when designing and implementing such protection measures.<sup>3</sup>

The draft Online Safety Bill will give user-to-user services and search services new duties to identify and take steps to mitigate risks of harm posed to people by their services. We anticipate that media literacy activities which promote people's ability to understand and control what they see online and thereby protect themselves from online harms will have an important role to play in helping to achieve this. Therefore, as part of this new regime, we envisage that platforms will need to consider how they can design their services in ways that help users understand and manage the risks of being exposed to illegal and harmful content.

### **Our vision for establishing media literacy by design**

We want to establish what works well and what does not, in order to identify good media literacy design principles and inform our thinking about our future online safety duties. Building a consensus around best-practice principles will require input from experts with varying perspectives. We will create a space for conversation, challenge and action, bringing together firms, academics, and advocacy groups.

### **Current activities**

As part of our preparation for taking on our new online safety responsibilities, we are working with online platforms in order to understand how service design affects user media literacy online and to explore the effectiveness of specific types of intervention. Our work in relation to VSPs is also helping us develop our understanding.

We are expanding our Behavioural Insights team and are designing a research programme to identify issues around decision-making when using online services. It is possible that behavioural barriers may limit the effectiveness of the protection measures that online services offer, so we are scoping and trialling the use of controlled experiments in order to build an evidence base of what effective service design and delivery might look like.

We are also working closely with other regulators, in particular through the Digital Regulation Co-operation Forum (DRCF), in order to ensure a coherent and coordinated approach to the impact of online services' design and delivery on users' ability to engage effectively and safely with these services.

### **Next steps in this area**

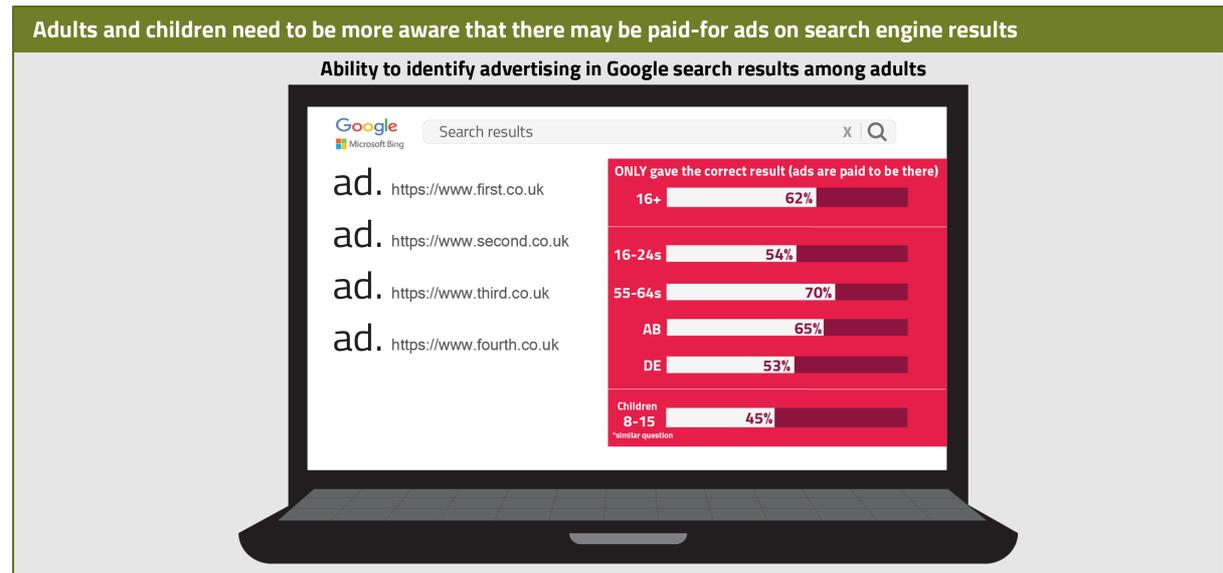
We will establish a working group tasked to bring together platforms, user-experience and behavioural insight experts, advocacy groups and Ofcom, to constructively explore these opportunities and issues, and to seek to build consensus around good practice principles in the design of online services to promote media literacy. We will respect commercial sensitivities, which may mean that the group will sometimes operate as a series of one-to-one interactions, from which wider learning can be disseminated. However, it is important that all group members are

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able to challenge the thinking throughout the process. We expect that our learnings here will influence our thinking as the online safety regime develops.

As part of our first annual VSP report, scheduled for autumn 2022, we will set out

our assessment of the measures in-scope VSPs have used to develop the media literacy of users, including through the design of the user experience and user journey.



Source: Ofcom adults' [media use and attitudes report 2021](#)

# Evaluate

Evaluation can provide organisations involved in the funding, design or delivery of an initiative with an understanding of whether their objectives have been met, helping to guide future improvements and to enable the best allocation of resources. Collectively, the evidence from evaluations can, if widely and accessibly shared, help other online media literacy practitioners and online platforms to improve their own initiatives and interventions, contributing to an improvement in the overall effectiveness of the media literacy sector.

The extent of evaluation across the online media literacy sector is uneven.<sup>9</sup> This is a function both of the challenges of evaluating impact in a complex environment, and of funding constraints. Commercial sensitivities may make sharing evaluation and evidence challenging. However, we think that evaluation is key to ensuring that online media literacy initiatives and interventions are as effective as they can be.

## Our vision for evaluation

Evaluation should be an integral part of online media literacy initiatives and interventions, with the evidence and lessons learned from evaluations shared with others in an accessible way, and for that evidence to be used to inform the design of other initiatives and interventions. This will take time to achieve and will be challenging, as it will involve practitioners and platforms sharing what did not work for them, as well as celebrating successes.

## Current activities in this area

### Developing guidance on the evaluation of online media literacy initiatives and interventions

As we have previously mentioned, there are a range of organisations which design and

deliver online media literacy initiatives and interventions in the UK. These range from one-person organisations with limited funding to global companies with extensive financial and human resources, and we recognise the value of the work to improve online media literacy across this spectrum. To ensure that our guidance on evaluation is inclusive of this whole range of organisations, we have developed three guiding principles:

- It must be practical for the range of organisations that design and deliver online media literacy initiatives and interventions, including those that lack the resources to carry out the most robust types of evaluation.
- It must facilitate improvement of existing activity by encouraging a 'test and improve' approach, so that evidence generated by, and lessons learned from, the evaluation are used to inform future iterations of the initiative or intervention.
- It must facilitate the creation of a collective body of evidence, with lessons learned from one initiative or intervention able to be applied to others with similar focus.

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<sup>9</sup> [Rapid Evidence Assessment on Online Misinformation and Media Literacy \(ofcom.org.uk\)](#) (page 4); [Media Literacy Strategy - Mapping](#)

[Exercise and Literature Review - Phase 2 Report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) (page 49)

In line with these three principles, we are now developing guidance on the evaluation of online media literacy initiatives and interventions, to help build knowledge and understanding of what evaluation is (and is not), the range of activities that evaluation can include, and the benefits of carrying out an evaluation.

Central to our guidance will be asking online media literacy practitioners and online platforms to develop a theory of change, setting out how an activity is expected to work in practice. It identifies the main issues that are being targeted, and how they will be achieved, in a step by step way. By breaking each of these aspects down into their component parts, a theory of change enables each part of the initiative to be evaluated.

Given the range of variables that can impact the success of online media literacy initiatives and interventions, a key benefit of developing a theory of change is to identify the specific parts of an initiative that can be evaluated.

Additionally, developing a theory of change will help practitioners and platforms to identify evidence, including from other sectors, that can inform the design of their initiatives and interventions.

### **Building evidence on what works to improve media literacy online**

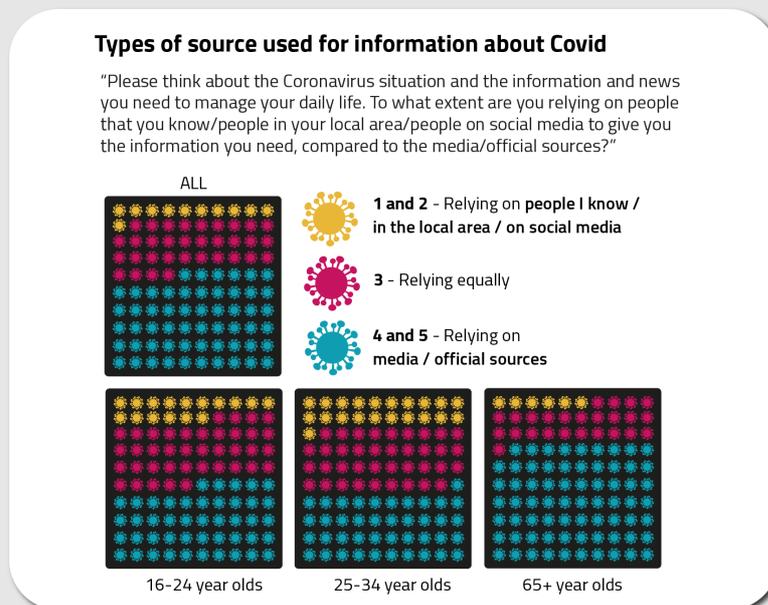
We are building an evidence base that will illustrate what is effective at improving online media literacy (i.e. 'what works'). The purpose of this evidence base will be to support the design and improvement of online media literacy initiatives and interventions. Our activities will focus on topics that are relevant to a broad range of practitioners and platforms.

Earlier this year we commissioned and published a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) from the London School of Economics on media literacy and online misinformation.<sup>10</sup> The REA report summarises recent academic research and evidence on media literacy and misinformation.

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<sup>10</sup> [Rapid Evidence Assessment on Online Misinformation and Media Literacy \(ofcom.org.uk\)](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/online-media-literacy/online-media-literacy-reports/rapid-evidence-assessment-on-online-misinformation-and-media-literacy/)

People vary in their reliance on different types of news source about Covid-19, with younger people more likely to rely on people they know compared to older people who rely more on official sources of information



Source: Ofcom Covid-19 [news and information tracker 2021](#)

### Developing a digital toolkit to share evaluation guidance and the evidence base on 'what works'

We are building an accessible and interactive digital toolkit to bring together guidance on evaluation and a collective evidence base. We want this toolkit to meet the needs of media literacy practitioners and online platforms and have therefore built and tested a prototype with a group of volunteers from our MSOM network. We are using the feedback they have provided to inform and improve the next iteration of the digital toolkit.

Our vision for this toolkit has been inspired by the UK's What Works Centres.<sup>11</sup> Each of the What Works Centres focuses on a specific policy area and aims to improve how high-quality evidence is created, shared, and used in decision-making. They do this by providing guidance on evaluation, collating existing evidence on the effectiveness of programmes and practices, filling gaps in the evidence base

by commissioning trials and evaluations, and sharing the evidence in an accessible way.

### Collaborating with stakeholders to inform the development of our work

In December 2019 we established a Working Group on Evaluation. The members of the Working Group have expertise in online media literacy, the online media literacy sector, evaluation, and evidence generation. It has provided valuable input that has helped to shape the development of our principles for evaluation guidance, the evidence building activities that we are undertaking, and the development of our prototype digital toolkit.

We have also engaged directly with online media literacy practitioners and online platforms to understand how they currently approach evaluation, the challenges that they have regarding evaluation, and the barriers that they face in sharing or adopting evidence on what works. As previously mentioned, we have also engaged with a group of

<sup>11</sup> [About What Works - What Works \(blog.gov.uk\)](#)

stakeholders from our MSOM network to test our prototype digital toolkit and ensure that we meet their needs.

### **Our next steps in this area**

We will continue to develop guidance on the evaluation of online media literacy initiatives and interventions in line with the three principles set out earlier in this section. We intend to publish draft guidance for stakeholder comment in spring 2022.

We will also explore with governments across the UK the extent to which evaluation and the adoption of our guidance could be built into the award of public funding for media literacy initiatives and interventions. We expect that any online media literacy pilots and trials we commission will have evaluation requirements built in.

We will continue to undertake activities that help to build a collective evidence base on what works. These may include:

- commissioning further Rapid Evidence Assessments to generate robust summaries of what the existing evidence says about what is most effective, or promising, on a given topic;
- collecting evidence from stakeholders who have evaluated their initiatives or interventions;
- exploring commissioned opportunities for stakeholders who are refining their

interventions to test the impact of such changes, where useful for a collective evidence base; and

- behavioural insight trials, to help us and others understand how initiatives and interventions could be improved to increase their effectiveness by trialling new approaches such as the use of 'serious games' to improve media literacy.

We will build, and make publicly available, a digital toolkit to bring together guidance on evaluation and the collective evidence base. The toolkit will be published in summer 2022, and before then we will test it with stakeholders from our MSOM panel and network to help us produce a resource that meets their needs.

Collaboration with stakeholders will remain a central part of our work across this area. Our Evaluation Working Group will continue to be a key source of input as we progress our work, and we will consider whether refreshing it is appropriate, as our work develops. We will also seek to coordinate with other organisations and forums that aim to encourage more evaluation of media literacy initiatives and interventions, or to build evidence on what works in media literacy, including the recently established [Media and Information Literacy Alliance](#) (MILA) and relevant [UKCIS](#) Working Groups.

# Research

Our research provides a wide-ranging evidence base of adults' and children's understanding and use of media. It is an important input in the formulation of Ofcom's own policy, as well as providing the media literacy sector with a depth and range of objective evidence useful for developing strategic priorities.

## Our vision

Our ambitions in this area are threefold:

- 1) **To deepen our role as a centre for excellence in media literacy research.** We will continue to provide breadth and depth in our monitoring of media literacy, ensuring that we highlight the extent of difference between audiences, positioning online safety issues firmly within the wider context of daily online life and activity.
- 2) **To innovate in our methodologies.** We will continue to evolve the research tools we use to understand people's habits and attitudes and will increasingly combine these methods to get a deeper understanding, for example by conducting passive monitoring together with follow-up qualitative interviews.
- 3) **To learn from others and to share our own knowledge,** working closely with other researchers and stakeholders. We want to encourage a fruitful dialogue with those researching in this space (and more widely), and to find ways of avoiding duplication while maintaining independence.

## Our current activities

### Media Use and Attitudes research programme

Core to our work is the tracking of trends in media literacy through annual surveys.

Our Adults' Media Use and Attitudes reports<sup>12</sup> capture the trends in adults' (aged 16 and over) media literacy. This includes a particular focus on critical thinking, including among those groups who tend not to participate digitally.

We also explore children's and parents' media use and attitudes<sup>13</sup>, again, capturing trends over time. This research provides detailed evidence on the media use, attitudes and understanding among children and young people aged 5-15, as well as about media access and use by 3-4-year-olds. It also explores parents' views about their children's media use and the extent to which parents monitor their child's use of different types of media.

### Media Lives programme

These insights are further bolstered by our annual Media Lives research, which involves small-scale qualitative tracking of participants' media habits, and complements the findings of our Media Use and Attitudes surveys. The

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/adults-media-use-and-attitudes>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2021>

Adults' Media Lives research<sup>14</sup> interviews the same 20 individuals each year. It provides insights into their motivations and the context of their media use, and how media services and devices are part of their daily life and domestic circumstances. The project provides rich detail of how media habits and attitudes change over time, in particular linked to life-stage.

The Children's Media Lives survey<sup>15</sup> follows the same approach, tracking 18 children aged 8-18 over consecutive years. Like the adults' research, it provides rich detail on how media habits have changed over time, particularly in relation to children's emotional and cognitive development.

### Specific research

In addition to our ongoing research into media literacy trends over time, we conduct research on particular topic areas. For example, earlier this year we published a qualitative exploration on the theme of misinformation<sup>16</sup>. This qualitative research provided an in-depth understanding of people who self-identified as either 'questioning' or 'rejecting' the mainstream media. Our goals were to develop a richer understanding of how this group interacts with news and information online, and to discover their opinions about, and categorisation of various types of misinformation.

### New tools and methodologies

We are developing our research tools and capabilities as we prepare for our forthcoming online safety responsibilities. Earlier this year we published a summary report<sup>17</sup> that

assessed the existing range of online automated tools, set within a framework for measuring online experiences. It outlined the current providers and legal, ethical, and other considerations to be addressed when using such tools.

This need for a range of methods and techniques to measure the array of online experiences is an important aspect of Ofcom's wider online research activity. We seek to bring together experts from different research disciplines to ensure a holistic approach. In early 2021 we convened a roundtable of research experts with very different backgrounds and approaches, to identify common ground about the tools required for researching the online environment.

### Events and engagement

Finally, we have a range of ways in which we currently interact with media literacy stakeholders, including hosting research events that include third-party presentations as well as our own findings, and discussing our findings with relevant stakeholder groups. We present our research as often as we can and have updated our website as a media literacy resource.

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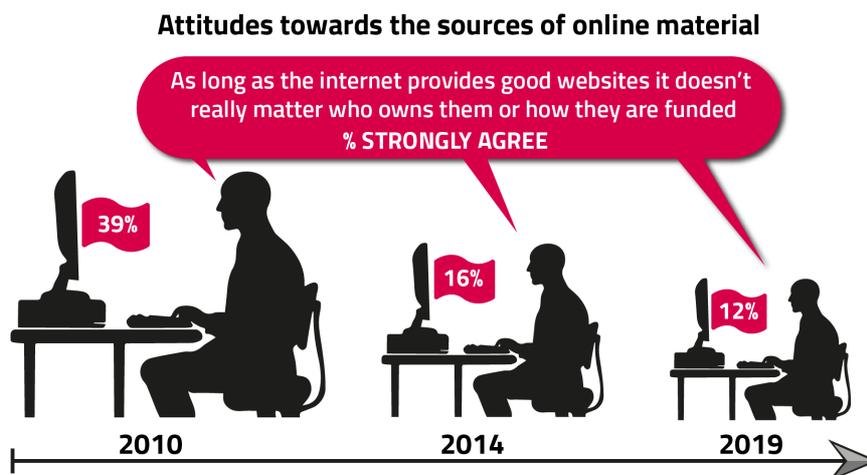
<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/adults/media-lives>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/childrens-media-lives>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/220402/misinformation-qual-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/220402/misinformation-qual-report.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0015/220425/automated-tooling-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/220425/automated-tooling-report.pdf)

Monitoring changes in attitude over time is a core component of our media literacy research



Source: Ofcom adults' [media use and attitudes reports](#)

## Our next steps

As Ofcom prepares to take on new online safety duties, and to further media literacy in respect of online communications more broadly, research will continue to be an integral element of how we discharge our media literacy duties.

We are refreshing our Media Use and Attitudes surveys to provide more focus on the knowledge that both adults and children have in relation to areas of critical understanding. These sections of the survey will provide a range of online scenarios related to people's levels of knowledge and understanding. Our 2021 findings will be published in spring 2022.

We have set up an online research panel of 6,000 respondents aged 13+, to help improve the flexibility of Ofcom's online research capabilities. In addition to providing core metrics on the reported prevalence and impact of online harms, we will use the panel to investigate four separate topics over the coming year. The available methods for such investigations currently include passive tracking, survey, 'pop-up' communities, and

qualitative in-depth interviews. We also plan to use this panel to conduct a series of 'quick polls' across the next year, to gain real-time insights on a range of issues.

We will explore and test ways to integrate behavioural insights into our research. We are already progressing a trial of a 'serious game' to help guide targeted behavioural change among participants in a fun and interactive way. More generally, we will be using behavioural insights to examine the types of safeguards that some online services already have in place to protect users. In doing so, we will explore how behavioural insights could potentially help improve the effectiveness of these interventions. We hope this work will grow to bolster our understanding of how design interventions might support and improve media literacy in the future.

We will also continue to undertake research in a range of areas. For example, we will carry out a 'Day in the Life' qualitative study, looking at the daily experiences of online users and how they intersect with aspects of media literacy.

## Ofcom's approach to online media literacy

We will work closely with other research practitioners in the media literacy sector and with stakeholders – including online platforms – to identify new areas where research can add most value, and to drive activity in these areas. We will also continue to draw on stakeholders' knowledge and expertise to inform our own research activities, including survey design and topics of interest.

As such, we intend to convene a new research working group. This will complement other alliances that already exist, such as the UKCIS evidence group, of which Ofcom is a member. Our working group will take a broad definition of media literacy and identify gaps in research provision and how these can be filled, working with a range of practitioners. At the same time, it will work to avoid unnecessary duplication in research activity across the sector.

## Next Steps: Summary of Ofcom’s activities in the next 12 months

### Media literacy activity start dates:

	Q4 2021/22	Q1 2022/23	Q2 2022/23	Q3 2022/23
<b>Engage with the wide range of media literacy actors</b>	Collaborate with media literacy practitioners to identify gaps in the existing media literacy activities.	Create working groups based on the five activity areas.	Develop new media literacy activities, events, and initiatives.	Further develop and expand the MSOM network.
<b>Initiate pilot trials and campaigns to promote media literacy</b>	Understand components of successful skills/lifestyle interventions	Explore options to work with a wider range of locally based community experts.	Explore different models of delivery of our evaluation and learnings.	Provide the sector with learnings from pilot trials.
<b>Establish media literacy by design best practice</b>	Identify issues related to online user engagement and online decision making.	Establish working group to help identify current and good practice across platforms.  Understand what it will take to move from current to good practice.	Build consensus around current, good, and best-practice principles.	Publish Ofcom’s own assessments, research, and authoritative commentary.  Continuously build consensus around best practice.
<b>Evaluate the effectiveness of media literacy initiatives</b>	Develop digital toolkit.  Carry out further information-gathering/evidence reviews on effectiveness of initiatives.  Evaluation Working Group meeting.	Publish guidance on evaluation for media literacy practitioners for comment.  Gather feedback on digital toolkit.	Publish digital toolkit.  Further stakeholder outreach activity.	Iterate digital toolkit design.  Add further aspects of “what works” to toolkit and guidance.  Continued outreach.

	Q4 2021/22	Q1 2022/23	Q2 2022/23	Q3 2022/23
<b>Research the state of media literacy and share our evidence base</b>	Commence ‘Day in the life’ qualitative research. Develop online research panel. Set up Research Working Group.	Publish suite of media literacy research. Liaise via RWG with range of relevant stakeholders to share best practice.	Further develop our critical understanding module within our annual media use and attitudes surveys.	Continued suite of publications and dialogue. Conduct further ad-hoc research with Online Panel.

We are interested in views and opinions on our plans set out in this document: please send any comments to [makingsenseofmedia@ofcom.org.uk](mailto:makingsenseofmedia@ofcom.org.uk). Please use the same email address to contact us if you are interested in participating in a working group.