

Turning the wheel: Next steps for Ofcom's approach to online media literacy – Friday 21 January 2022

On Friday 21 January we hosted our first Making Sense of Media event of the year, *Turning the wheel: Next steps for Ofcom's approach to media literacy*.

The event was an opportunity for Ofcom to share what we are planning in our online media literacy work, as set out in our December publication, [Ofcom's approach to online media literacy](#), and to hear the thoughts of attendees on these plans. Over 140 people from a wide range of backgrounds and organisations joined the virtual event.

The event was opened by our Chief Executive, Dame Melanie Dawes, and chaired by Yih-Choung Teh, Ofcom's Group Director for Strategy and Research.

Melanie welcomed the attendees and used the opportunity to discuss what it means to be “media literate”, how being able to participate effectively and safely online has never been more important, and the role of platforms in creating a safer online world. She said that taking on more responsibilities for online safety is an important moment for Ofcom and emphasised three things which will underpin our work: collaboration, evidence-based and working across all four nations of the UK.

Ofcom's five priority areas

Yih-Choung set out the five priority areas that constitute Ofcom's new approach to media literacy: Initiate, Engage, Establish, Evaluate and Research. He recognised these do not form the complete answer to media literacy, but are areas where Ofcom can tangibly contribute, in line with our mission to make communications work for everyone.

He highlighted that two of these areas are new: Initiate, where we intend to commission pilot media literacy initiatives to address underserved communities; and Establish, where we will work with the platforms, advocacy groups and other stakeholders to create some best practice design principles for media literacy. Attendees then broke out into eight separate groups, each discussing a particular theme. This was followed by the discussion leads sharing some of the most compelling thoughts from each group.

Initiate

The groups focused on identifying the priority groups where Ofcom should direct its attention. Participants mentioned a variety of groups: children excluded from school; older people, particularly living in rural areas; those with poor technology understanding; people for whom English is not their first language; people out of the workforce for a considerable time; and minority communities who may mistrust traditional media sources. Attendees agreed that we must commission local organisations to deliver bespoke interventions and services, focusing on places where people already gather: family hubs, clubs, religious centres, etc. An important point was made about the misalignment in the socio-cultural background between the people delivering skill-based interventions and the communities they try to support.

Establish

We held two breakout groups – one with representatives from stakeholders including advocacy groups and charities (Group 1) and one with representatives from online services (Group 2). Group 1

considered key areas of focus when designing services to promote media literacy, and examples of services that are designed to do this or in a way that constrains this. This discussion covered a broad range of themes including:

- the recommendation algorithms that affect the content users come across;
- the use of labelling or flags to prompt users to consider content further;
- the prominence and ease of use of sharing buttons;
- the need to consider triggers for media literacy interventions;
- the need to design for children and vulnerable users; and, relatedly
- the need to understand what works well for vulnerable users in addition to the majority.

Group 2 discussed how they currently empower their users to control the content they see and how we should use a future working group. Methods of empowerment included: recommendation algorithms; selecting which content to follow; implementing prompts that encourage specific types of behaviour; and not collecting user data. The specific methods of empowerment varied across services and were dependent on the type of service, the users of the service, and the need or issue of focus. On a future working group, Group 2 suggested having a space to have high level discussions on what works and what doesn't.

Evaluate

These groups focused on the challenges faced by evaluators and possible solutions. One of the main challenges discussed was the long-term nature of fundamental behaviour changes and how to measure this over time, considering there are many variables at work. Funding was discussed as another challenge, as well as convincing others of the value that evaluation brings to interventions and in building credibility. A suggestion was made to provide access to a range of measurement tools in the form of either low-cost or free toolkits.

Research

The research discussion was divided in two groups. The first focused on collaboration and how to avoid duplication in media literacy research. Events and building connections between organisations to promote research were deemed valuable. A central repository was suggested as useful way to avoid duplication, allowing a wide range of researchers and organisations access. The group also discussed the artificial barriers that can be created by the use of different terminology, and that 'media literacy' is not always badged as such.

The second research discussion group focused on innovation in research, methods and approaches. There was divided opinion about whether technology should be the basis for innovation or whether traditional methods, such as ethnography, are better suited to reach certain groups of people. For example, individuals or groups without online presence must not be left behind when we think about research. Technology was mentioned as a possible source of new approaches and angles, ensuring we're not tied to one particular approach or data set. The group agreed that innovation in research could facilitate new ways of thinking about interventions.

Yih-Choung closed the event by outlining Ofcom's next steps. He focused on our ambition to create productive and collaborative working groups in each of the priority areas, and invited attendees to engage and share their thoughts on how these working groups might be most efficient. Anyone interested in participating in a working group should contact makingsenseofmedia@ofcom.org.uk.