Evaluation Toolkit: Preparing

Making Sense of Media

Preparing

This section is divided into three stages:

A. **Planning the process**
B. **Writing your theory of change**
C. **Creating your evaluation framework**

Planning the process

We recommend that you start thinking about your evaluation while your intervention or project is being designed. At this point there are a series of decisions you can make which will shape the kind of evaluation you end up doing. This thinking should be done in consultation with as many people involved in the project (**stakeholders**) as possible.

At whichever point you start planning your evaluation, there are six things we recommend you consider:

1. **What are the objectives of my project?** These will vary from project to project, as each will have specific goals related to the work of your organisation. It is useful to be clear from the outset about what you want to achieve, as that thinking will map into your evaluation plans.

2. **What kind of evaluation do I need to do?** Many evaluations are focused on how well the project was delivered (for example, what went well, what didn't, and how participants felt about it). These are often called **process evaluations,** as they assess the process behind the workshops or materials themselves, and their effectiveness.

> **Definition: Stakeholder**
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> Project stakeholders can include anyone involved in the project, including project funders or sponsors, other members of the team, or for larger projects, other teams.
>
> Stakeholders can also include anyone who might be affected by the intervention, such as target audiences.
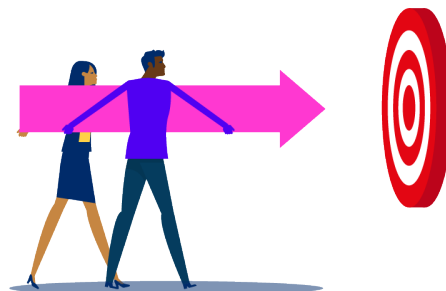
> **Definition: Process evaluation**
>
> Process evaluations will focus on asking you to consider how you delivered your project, and how far the way in which the project was delivered affected the final outcomes.

Impact evaluations focus on asking you to consider what the project achieved in terms of change for the target audience and/or wider society, and how well you met your objectives. They are often requested by funders, particularly governments, trusts or foundations.

> **_Definition: Impact evaluation_**
>
> Impact evaluation will focus on asking you to consider what the project achieved in terms of change for the target audience and/or wider society, and how well you met your objectives.

Evaluations that work out whether a project was value for money are called **economic evaluations.** Evaluations can include all the elements above and will be different for every initiative, depending on your theory of change and the evaluation framework, as explained in the next section.

> **_Definition: Economic evaluation_**
>
> These evaluations will focus on asking you to consider the costs of your project relative to the benefits, asking questions such as "was the outcome worth the cost?" Or "could something else have delivered the same outcomes for less?"

3. **What resources are available to carry out an evaluation, and who will be responsible for it?** Some evaluations will require fewer resources than others (ranging from something the project manager can do alongside the project delivery, all the way up to a dedicated evaluation team) and this will depend on the type of evaluation you want to carry out. The skills that an evaluation might require range from project design to data management to report writing, but in all cases it is important to consider this before you start. There are pros and cons for doing the evaluation yourself or using an external evaluator.

   o **Internal.** Doing it yourself might mean building skills and experience of evaluation inside your organisation. It also means you will have the expertise in place to ensure that evaluation can be built into the initiative's design and will enable you to learn and adapt more quickly to any findings. And it is usually more cost-effective than commissioning external evaluation.
   o **External.** Commissioning an external evaluation is useful if you don't have the internal expertise or available staff to do it yourself. You can work with a commercial social research company or employ an independent evaluator to work alongside you. By employing someone with no previous ties to the project you can ensure impartiality. One option is to work with academics who research and specialise in the topic of your initiative. This won't necessarily be costly, as researchers sometimes have funding in place already.

4. **What existing evidence is there on the issue my intervention is trying to address?**

Baseline evidence is the starting point against which to measure change. For a media literacy project, this could be the participants' existing level of knowledge about a topic, or their existing level of skills. This is typically gathered from participants before the intervention begins. There are also external sources of evidence you can use. Having this understanding in place at the beginning, and knowing about any evidence that you can measure against, will be useful as you progress through the evaluation.

> *Definition: Baseline*
>
> A baseline is the starting point against which to measure change. For a media literacy project, this could be the participants' existing level of knowledge about a topic, or their existing level of skills. This could be established using a quiz, survey, interview or focus group carried out with the target audience before the intervention takes place, and/or could be informed by previous research on similar audiences.

This evidence can also help you think about where you could target your intervention, for example by highlighting particular demographics in need of support. To help get this evidence together there are bodies of research you can consult such as reports from Ofcom, the Lloyds Consumer Digital Index, ParentZone and Internet Matters, and summaries or directories of research such as CO:RE and UKCIS (UK Council for Internet Safety). For links to these, and other research reports, you can search our library.

5. **Are there any other evaluations of similar interventions that I can learn from?**
It can be helpful to look for other evaluations before you start your own – these might well provide learning that can help you make your intervention even better. Also, proving impact is always difficult and if another organisation has spent money on an evaluation which demonstrates that projects like yours can have an impact, this is useful information to deploy.

6. **Who is going to read my evaluation report?** If the report is for your funders, check with them to see whether they have requirements around reporting and what kind of evaluation they are expecting to see. If it is for a wider audience, consider the types of findings that others in the sector might find useful to read, such as whether a certain delivery method worked for a specific target audience. If it is for internal use, you might want to include reflections about the evaluation process itself.

Writing your theory of change

A **theory of change** is a way of setting down the thinking (theory) behind the change that your initiative (or organisation) wants to achieve. This is popular among governments, third-sector organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Having a theory of change helps enormously when putting together a plan to evaluate your project. This is because the process of setting down a theory of change requires you to describe your initiative in a logical way.

A theory of change will allow you to understand the journey from the start of the initiative to its completion and will identify the assumptions underpinning your work, which the evaluation will need to test. You can embed your theory of change statement on to an evaluation framework – we have drawn up a template which you can use and how to do this is set out in the next section. Developing a theory of change for your initiative can range from an hour-long brainstorm with your colleagues to a week-long exercise – but thinking through these elements is an important element of understanding the impact of the project.

The phrase '**theory of change**' is sometimes used interchangeably with terms such as '**logic model**', '**outcomes framework**', 'chain of events' and 'results chain' when describing visual representations (often tables or flow charts) of the evaluation process of a project. There are some subtle distinctions between the terms, but for the purpose of your evaluation you can assume they achieve similar things. Simply put, there is no one right way to do this.

For example, the framework we suggest goes further than some theories of change and logic models we have seen, as it also includes space to include your data collection methods. As with the rest of the guidance, we suggest you choose the elements outlined below that work best for you and your evaluation project.

Definition: Logic model

A logic model explains the relationship between the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes of your intervention.

Much of this information could also be contained in an evaluation framework.

Definition: Outcomes framework

An outcomes framework involves clearly defining the outcomes you want to achieve, and prioritising them. You might separate them into benefits for individuals vs the community, for example. It helps to focus your work on the outcomes that matter to you, to link your activities to the outcomes you want to see, and to communicate these more clearly.

Much of this information could also be contained in an evaluation framework.

For those with less time, we recommend that you write a theory of change narrative in the form of linked sentences (explained below). Below we illustrate each step with an example from a fictional project.

Fictional Example – Digital Sleuth Club

Digital Sleuth Club is a small charity dedicated to increasing media/news literacy skills in young people (age 10-18) in areas with higher levels of financial disadvantage across England, to increase the young people's resilience to mis- and disinformation, and their trust in high quality information. The charity carries out several activities which it hopes will contribute to its goal. These include running in-person workshops at youth groups and at colleges, and in public libraries, providing downloadable resources on its website for youth groups to use on their own, and producing social media campaigns to try to reach audiences wherever they are, using short videos. The charity has a small staff of nine full-time employees but can call on freelancers when it has sufficient funding for specific projects.

The four elements of your theory of change narrative

1 Define the PROBLEM:

Begin with a brief overview of the challenge your initiative is trying to address. For instance, this could be educational or skills-based, such as low levels of specific digital literacy skills. There are a range of ways you can build your evidence base including using research reports (see our research library) or learnings from a previous delivery of your own initiative.

At this point you could involve your service users by asking them what they want, or are expecting, from your initiative rather than deciding what the challenge is yourself. More information about the benefits of this approach can be found in Ofcom's *Making Sense of Media - Initiate* report. [3]

> **Fictional Example – Digital Sleuth Club**
>
> The target audience is vulnerable to mis- and disinformation, which has been demonstrated to adversely affect wellbeing and social cohesion. They have complex and evolving online habits: they are often the first to embrace new platforms, and are very competent in terms of digital skills, but research has shown that they often lack critical thinking skills in relation to their media use, and many actively avoid the news, with much higher levels of trust in their peers. They tend to believe that their media literacy skills are higher than they actually are. (Ofcom's *Children's Media Use and Attitudes report 2022* showed that 74% of 12-17s had confidence in their ability to spot fake information, but less than one in ten demonstrated both confidence and ability in this type of critical understanding).

2 What are you DOING about the problem and with whom?

Briefly summarise the project activities you will deliver to address the problem(s) you've outlined and the people you will be working with. Your approach could be in-person workshops using a curriculum that covers specific topics for a specific audience, or engagement with stakeholders such as social media companies to improve their moderation methods.

> **Fictional Example – Digital Sleuth Club**
>
> Participants on the intervention will: encounter examples of different types of information; hear about the tools to distinguish misleading online content, and paid-for content, from verified information; learn about how the digital media ecosystem works; be encouraged to reflect on their own habits and attitudes.

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[3] Ofcom MSOM Research Report- What works in delivering community programmes

3 What DIFFERENCES will your intervention make?

IMMEDIATE: Participants have had their first interaction with your project; for example, by attending a workshop, receiving training or reading materials. Ideally, this interaction will have made a difference to the participants. You will be looking at specific measurable learnings or confidence levels that your participants come away with, or other changes you can measure.

Fictional Example – Digital Sleuth Club

Participants will be better able to identify reliable online content and identify advertising. They will be able to better discern which information they encounter online is reliable and which may be misleading. They will understand how the different players in the online media ecosystem operate, and the motivations for creating and spreading false and misleading content.

MEDIUM-TERM: This is where consideration is given to the impact of the intervention on participants once they are no longer engaging with your activities – what behaviour change has your intervention accomplished? This might include following up with participants after a certain period of time to explore whether the behaviour change has been sustained.

Fictional Example – Digital Sleuth Club

Participants will change their online habits and will approach information, wherever on the internet they encounter it, with a more critical eye. They will be more likely to consume information from sources they trust.

4 How could these differences CONTRIBUTE to wider societal change?

Your initiative, alongside many others, plays a part in improving the overall media literacy skills, behaviours and experiences of the population. Being clear about how your work fits into the wider societal context can form the foundation for a more comprehensive evaluation. It is worth noting that your intervention is only one thing that is happening in your participants' lives and there may be other things happening that have influenced whether things changed for them or stayed the same.

Fictional Example – Digital Sleuth Club

Participants will comprise part of a generation which is more resilient to the potential harms posed by mis- and disinformation, and by a lack of trust in reliable sources of information. This will have positive effects both on their wellbeing and on wider societal cohesion.

Creating your evaluation framework

Your theory of change can be used as a basis for the evaluation framework template we have created as a tool to help you through the evaluation process.

The template has spaces within it to include the four stages of the theory of change, which will provide an overarching structure. They will shape the evaluation approach by linking impact to project actions. The template offers a way to create a logical and realistic outline of **inputs**, **outputs**, outcomes and impacts.

There are spaces in the evaluation framework template for you to insert the four stages you came up with for your theory of change narrative. These sentences provide an overarching structure to your template and will guide your thinking as you fill in the other boxes.

Each part of the process is illustrated with an example from our fictional initiative, mapped on to our Evaluation Framework, which you can see in the Evaluation Framework example on the next page.

Definition: Input

An input is something necessary to carry out an activity: it could be staff members, information/existing research evidence, or other resources.

For example, the inputs of a media literacy project could be:

- Two full-time staff members.
- Research findings about the audience's key challenges in accessing information.

Definition: Output

An output refers to the deliverables of an intervention or activity. These could be products (resources produced, for example), or services (workshops or training sessions carried out).

For example, an output of a media literacy project could be:

- Ten workshops delivered, each attended by 14 participants.
- Ten lesson plans published, downloaded an average of 16 times.

Further reading

For those who want to read more about how to develop a theory of change or logic model, we find these sites useful:

Identify the difference you want to make | NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations)

Develop programme theory / theory of change | Better Evaluation

Digital Inclusion Evaluation Toolkit - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Resources - Evaluation Support Scotland

About | Reading Outcomes Framework Toolkit (readingagency.org.uk)

Theory of change in ten steps - NPC (thinknpc.org)

Evaluation Framework example

Name of project: Digital Sleuth Club

> Fill in the sentences from your Theory of Change under the headings numbered 1, 2, 3 and 4.

1 Define the 'problem'	2 What are you doing about the problem and with whom?	3 What differences will your intervention make?	4 How could these differences contribute to wider societal change?
The target audience is vulnerable to mis- and disinformation, which has been demonstrated to adversely affect wellbeing and social cohesion. They have complex and evolving online habits: they are often the first to embrace new platforms, and are very competent in terms of digital skills, but research has shown that they often lack critical thinking skills in relation to their media use, and many actively avoid the news, with much higher levels of trust in their peers. They tend to believe that their media literacy skills are higher than they actually are.	Participants in the intervention will: encounter examples of different types of information; hear about the tools to distinguish misleading online content, and paid-for content, from verified information; learn about how the digital media ecosystem works; and be encouraged to reflect on their own habits and attitudes.	Participants will be better able to identify reliable online content and identify advertising. They will be able to better discern which information they encounter online is reliable and which may be misleading. They will understand how the different players in the online media ecosystem operate, and the motivations for creating and spreading false and misleading content. Participants will change their online habits and will approach information, wherever on the internet they encounter it, with a more critical eye. They will be more likely to consume information from sources they trust.	Participants will comprise part of a generation that is more resilient to the potential harms posed by mis- and disinformation, and by a lack of trust in reliable sources of information. The intervention will have positive effects both on their wellbeing and on wider societal cohesion

> **Activities**: What do you do with your inputs to produce project outputs? For example, plan a workshop.

> **Inputs**: What do you need to (or can you) put into the project? This can include project staff, funding, data and expertise

> **Outputs**: Outputs are the elements of your project that can be evaluated to see how well the delivery process went. Outputs are easily measurable as they are direct results of the inputs and activities, such as workshops delivered.

> **Short-medium term impact**: What are the overall intended results of your project for participants; for example, changes in their behaviour, such as increased use of sources of reliable information because of their change in attitude, confidence or skills.

	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Short/medium- term impact	Long-term impact
A Details of inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes etc.	Project staff. Research conducted under a previous grant about the information consumption habits of this target group and their social media use. Partnership with youth club association. Funding from ABC Foundation.	Digital Sleuth Club will deliver a series of standalone two-hour workshops in youth clubs/centres and public libraries, in areas identified using indices of multiple deprivation. The project staff will: • Deliver workshops to young people. • Develop workshop resources. • Hire and train specialists to produce supporting campaign materials for social media. • Ensure programme sustainability by sharing resources or training youth leaders. • Use their partnership with the youth club association to secure workshop venues and to find participants for the workshops	The number of workshops delivered. How many people attended each workshop. The number of downloads of each piece of material. The number of times the social campaign was viewed.	Improvement in ability to detect mis- and disinformation (assessed through a quiz at the beginning and end of the workshop). Increased comprehension of how the digital media ecosystem works. Better understanding of how verified online content is produced and how to identify it, and how to spot advertising content online.	Improved critical thinking skills that enable participants to assess the reliability of online information. Increased use of reliable sources of information. Taking a more considered approach to sharing stories and information online.	Increased resilience to mis- and disinformation. More attention given to reliable and authentic online content and less to false/misleading content. A better-informed public.

> **Who are the relevant target groups?** This will depend on the format of your project, and how it will be delivered. It will usually be the people to whom you deliver your initiative. But, for example when considering writing your workshop content, the target group would be different (for example, educators). Capturing which target groups are involved helps you know whom to approach in order to evaluate which factors influenced whether the intervention was successful.

> **Outcomes:** What are the immediate changes that occur for beneficiaries as a result of the outputs i.e. perceived changes in attitudes, or confidence and skills when assessing content to judge whether information is genuine or not.

> **Long-term impact:** What are the changes in overall societal habits that could be linked to the changes in attitudes and behaviour of your participants? i.e. a better-informed public more resilient to mis- and disinformation. For smaller projects, demonstrating long-term impact won't be desirable, given the numbers of participants involved. But it is important to think about how your project's goals could contribute, alongside projects by other organisations, to a wider societal issue.

	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Short/medium- term impact	Long-term impact
B Who are the relevant target groups?	Project staff Workshop facilitators		Youth group attendees. Students attending workshops at colleges. Young people visiting libraries where workshops are being held. Young people interacting with campaign content on social media. Youth workers/ librarians trained.			

> **Row D: What methods will you use to collect the data?** Here, fill in the data methods you plan to use for each stage. For more information and tips on the range of methods you could think about, please see our Doing section.

> **Row C What relevant data do you need?** Evaluations are only as good as the quality of the information that informs them, so data gathering throughout the project is vital. The type of data may differ across the process; we've made some suggestions below.

> **Row E: What factors beyond your control might influence this stage?** Here it is good practice to note external factors that might disrupt your planning, and your evaluation process, but that were beyond your control. This will help for future iterations of your initiative.

	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Short/medium- term impact	Long-term impact
C What relevant data do you need?	Understanding of the issues that face young people. List of colleges, libraries and youth groups where interventions could be held.		Project monitoring figures	'Before and after' survey data from workshops. Data from case studies. Feedback from teachers and facilitators.	Follow-up surveys of participants. Evidence from other evaluations.	Data on levels of resilience to mis- and disinformation across the population. Evidence from other evaluations.
D What methods will you use to collect the data?	Desk research. Project management tracking.	Project management tracking.	Project management tracking.	Surveys. Case studies. Interviews.	Surveys. Desk research.	Desk research.
E What factors beyond your control might influence this stage?	Emerging harms that need to be addressed.	Lack of take-up.	Lack of take-up.	Incomplete surveys.	Emerging harms that need to be addressed.	Lack of take-up.