



Ofcom

Future Technology and Media Literacy: Anchor document

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Making Sense
of Media



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Overview

Media literacy – the ability to use, understand and create media online – plays an increasingly vital role for people across the UK in accessing opportunities, community and support. As future technology trends emerge, the skills and understanding users need to access these opportunities and mitigate potential risks and harms may change.

As stated in our [Making Sense of Media annual plan¹](#), we are producing a series of discussion papers on future technology trends which examines their potential media literacy implications in order to support those working on media literacy to better understand future opportunities and challenges.

This document is the “contextual anchor” for this series and outlines Ofcom’s role in this area, the nature of its remit, and how Ofcom defines media literacy. It also describes how we will select the future technology trends that will be considered in this project and the lenses through which we will assess the media literacy implications of these technology trends.

¹ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/approach>

Ofcom's remit and definitions

What is media literacy?

Ofcom defines media literacy as "the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts".

Media literacy has a positive impact on online users' inclusion, participation and outcomes. It can influence whether and how people participate online in social, economic and political issues. Further, it can improve skills, understanding and attitudes empowering people to better and more fully participate in today's online society. It can also help users exercise due trust, which combined with other benefits can contribute to the promotion of democracy and public health.

Media literacy influences 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.

Media literacy is one key enabler that can help people flourish online and offline.

Legislative context

Since its inception, Ofcom has held a statutory duty to promote media literacy as set out in section 11 of the Communications Act 2003. We also have a duty to carry out research into media literacy matters as set out in section 14(6)(a) of the Communications Act 2003. This is a broad remit and we have therefore focussed our work on areas where Ofcom can best support media literacy in the UK. Our role is to use our unique influence, our evidence base and our resources to: equip the media literacy sector to be more effective, expand and enhance the funding streams, and encourage the platforms to deliver more on platform and fund more off platform. Achieving this will significantly contribute to meeting Ofcom's objective of empowering users to keep themselves safer online.

Why is this work important?

Media literacy can shape how users interact with the world online. It encompasses user safety and wellbeing and can enable people to take advantage of those opportunities being online can provide.

This discussion series contributes towards Ofcom promoting media literacy. It will look at how future technology trends will affect media literacy from a range of perspectives, enabling those working on media literacy to prepare for future opportunities and risks that may arise. This preparation will help create opportunities for users to benefit from the possibilities that emerging technologies offer – whether that be the convenience of voice-activated technologies or the ability to feel physically present in different worlds from your own home.

Future technology trends

For those who work on media literacy and adjacent areas, a significant amount of time and resource is spent mitigating risk including users' safety, how mis- and disinformation is shared, and how users engage with platforms and other users.

Looking at future technology trends has its own risks. The trends we are looking at may evolve over time as they may change in both form and function, and/or they may not reach the level of prominence in users' lives as is currently expected. Even accounting for these risks, examining technology trends before they reach prominence is an opportunity for those working in media literacy to think about media literacy implications before users are experiencing them at scale.

This work will highlight the key media literacy implications for users through a range of technology trends, drawing together key themes, risks, as well as the potential opportunities these technology trends offer for users and how they may be captured.

It is desirable for those working on media literacy to have the time and space to take advantage of these opportunities. In developing our work on the potential media literacy implications before a technology trend is fully realised, we hope to create a space for those working on media literacy to take advantage of the opportunities of these technologies, e.g., supporting users to create content, build communities and learn online, rather than solely working to reduce the risks. It is also important that users are not only safe and secure online, but that they can realise the full potential of these technologies to flourish online.

Details of the work

This project will consist of a series of discreet discussion papers on single technology trends. Each paper will outline how the technology trend is being defined and how these technology trends are expected to develop and be used. The papers will then examine the media literacy opportunities and the risks that these technology trends, and their potential uses, may present. Each discussion paper will examine the media literacy implications using the structure outlined below.

Future technology trends

By technology trends, we mean trends that are currently emerging which appear likely to play a role in our online lives in the near future. While technology trends we consider may already have a level of market breakthrough with projections to grow over the next 3 to 5 years or more, they are not guaranteed to become prominent or indeed even relevant in future. Furthermore, the timeframes for reaching prominence may vary depending on several factors such as: technological capabilities, cost and global supply chains. These technology trends have been selected through a mixture of desk research and criteria as laid out in this document.

The technology trends examined in this work will tend to focus on the broad direction of types of technologies, rather than looking at specific products that may never reach prominence. Instead, identifying broad technology trends allows Ofcom to take a better view of the current direction of travel, considering possible media literacy implications and reducing the risk of bias to individual technologies.

The definitions and background information on these technology trends will reflect Ofcom's ongoing work in these areas. These discussion pieces are not intended to provide in-depth considerations of

a technology's potential development, uses or relative positions within markets, rather they will provide an overview of the technology trend and analyse potential implications for media literacy.

Technology trend selection

As this discussion series is made up of discrete discussion papers, it can be further developed as and when new and compelling technology trends emerge or indeed refreshed as technologies evolve.

To select the technology trends that will be included in this project, a period of scoping work has taken place. This work has included reviewing academic papers, trade reporting and consultation with Ofcom's [Making Sense of Media \(MSOM\) Advisory Panel on future](#) technology trends most likely to affect media literacy ². Monitoring of technology trends will continue to ensure trends selected are relevant and timely.

The technology trends selected will all have met two key criteria. First, they will each already have some technology in development with reasonable evidence that it will reach material adoption in the consumer market in the near future. Second, these technology trends are not yet considered to have reached their full potential both in terms of the technology itself as well as its public adoption.

² <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/network>

How will we examine the technology trends?

There are several ways to look at technology trends to understand their impact on media literacy and, while there is no single lens for analysis, there are some approaches that can help ensure the key opportunities and challenges are captured.

The first is Ofcom’s own definition of media literacy: "the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts". This definition can assist in looking at how users might engage with different technology trends. In each of the analysis pieces, the media literacy areas for consideration will be broken down into ‘use’, ‘understand’ and create’.

Throughout the series we will use the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens³ (the “Framework”) as a guide to consistently assess technology trends and understand online media literacy implications for users. The Framework is a useful lens through which to consider technological changes and how they impact media literacy as it provides a common understanding of what digital competence is, offering a useful basis for framing media literacy policy.

The Framework consists of five key areas for media literacy, which break down into sub-sections.

1. Information and data literacy	1.1 Browsing, searching and filtering data, information, and digital content
	1.2 Evaluating data, information and digital content
	1.3 Managing data, information and digital content
2. Communication and collaboration	2.1 Interacting through digital technologies
	2.2 Sharing through digital technologies
	2.3 Engaging citizens through digital technology
	2.4 Collaborating through digital technologies
	2.5 Netiquette
	2.6 Managing digital identity
3. Digital content creation	3.1 Developing digital competence
	3.2 Integrating and re-elaborating digital content
	3.3 Copyright and licences
	3.4 Programming
4. Safety	4.1 Protecting devices
	4.2 Protecting personal data and privacy
	4.3 Protecting health and wellbeing
	4.4 Protecting the environment

³ European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Vuorikari, R., Kluzer, S., Punie, Y., DigComp 2.2, The Digital Competence framework for citizens : with new examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/115376>

5. Problem solving	5.1 Solving technical problems
	5.2 Identifying needs and technological responses
	5.3 Creatively using digital technology
	5.4 Identifying digital competence gaps

We will examine future technology by first understanding the implications for media literacy – looking at each of the areas of consideration laid out in the Framework above and then highlighting the key areas that are likely to have significant impacts on media literacy.

While both the Ofcom definition of media literacy and the Framework provide useful perspectives, examining technology trends from a median user perspective can fail to consider the viewpoints of users with particular experiences, characteristics or needs. To fully understand the key media literacy implications of technology trends it will also be important to look at implications for all users through an equality lens. For this piece we will consider the protected characteristics as laid out in the Equality Act 2010.

The protected characteristics laid out under the Equality Act are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. Looking at media literacy implications for users with protected characteristics ensures we are considering perspectives that may have traditionally been missed or marginalised.

Some consideration will also be given to how socioeconomic status may intersect these future technology trends and what this means for media literacy. Ofcom’s research indicates that a lower socioeconomic status correlates with narrower online experiences, making this an important factor to consider, particularly in instances where socioeconomic status will continue to have a significant impact on related areas such as device inequality, among others.

The process of analysing future trends is necessarily uncertain. We may understand the broad strokes of a trend, but it may not be until a technology trend is prevalent in users’ lives that the full media literacy implications become apparent. While this work is uncertain, it remains important to consider and understand how these technologies may impact users, and what this means for media literacy, as early as practically possible. This will allow us to take account of the potential risks and support the sector to educate platforms and users about how these risks can be mitigated, as well as how users can take advantage of the myriad of opportunities for flourishing online that new technology trends could create.