



A Vision for Media Literacy:

Charting the path for
media literacy in schools

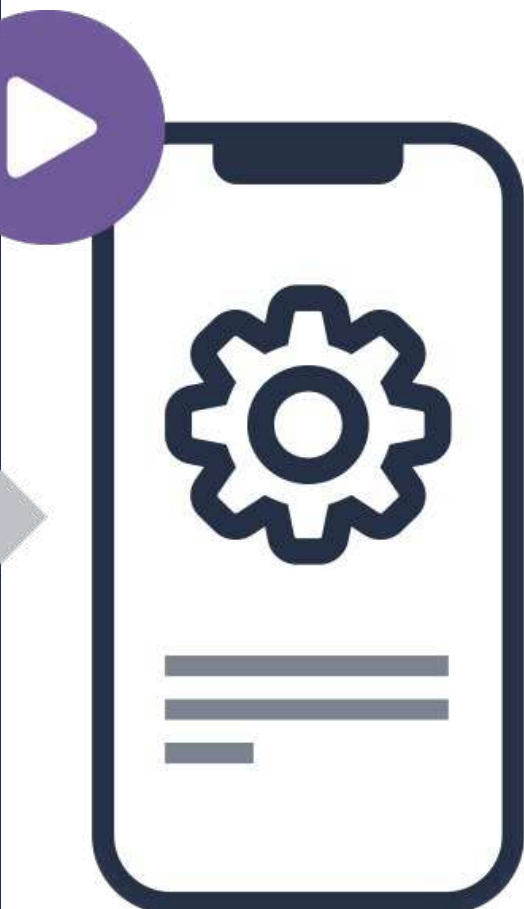
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Introduction

Internet Matters turns 10 this year – a milestone for any organisation. It is a chance to reflect on the state of the sector, how far we have come and what the priorities for the next decade must be.



Introduction

Internet Matters was created to empower parents. We were born out of a moment of crisis, when public concern was building about the volume of harmful content that children were being exposed to online.ⁱ A decade later, we are facing a similar watershed moment as concerns about online safety are translating into parental movements against smartphone and social media use by children.

Why media literacy?

Since our founding, the core policy focus in the UK has shifted away from empowering children and parents with the skills they need to stay safe online, and towards regulation of online platforms. While online safety regulation is absolutely essential, and an important area of progress in terms of creating a level playing field for children online, it will not eliminate all risks and harm. As things stand, too many children and parents lack the skills and knowledge they need to be resilient in the face of a fast-evolving online world.

With political attention having centred on the long passage of the Online Safety Act in recent years, the media literacy agenda has been somewhat neglected in comparison, lacking the same scale of ambition. The stated aim of the Online Safety Act is to make the UK the safest place to be online, but this goal will not be achieved without a much more expansive media literacy offer.ⁱⁱ That is not to say there has been no work in this space – far from it. There has been much excellent work across the sector, guided in recent years by media literacy strategies from both the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and Ofcom in 2021. Yet much of this work is piecemeal, time-bound and under-resourced. The result is that media literacy among families remains stubbornly poor.

As a new government and parliament forms, we are setting out a bold, ambitious set of proposals to turn the tide on poor media literacy among children and parents. Articulating a clear vision for media literacy is particularly critical in this election year, given the significant level of interest across the political divide. The Labour Party has identified digital literacy in the fifth of its five missions to break down the barriers to

opportunity,ⁱⁱⁱ while the Conservative-led government are considering how to bolster media literacy through greater action on features such as parental controls, which go hand-in-hand with online safety regulation.

We are basing our vision on our own decades-long experience of supporting the media literacy of families, as well as specific research for this project, including desk research and in-depth interviews with experts.

Why schools?

We have decided to focus this vision primarily on the role of schools in supporting children's media literacy. We have focussed on the school system as a means to achieve scale, and as schools are the main institution in the lives of children and families.

There have been significant steps in the right direction in recent years. Important reforms to the Personal, Social, Health and Economic curriculum (PSHE) mean that all children must now learn about aspects of online safety, including healthy relationships, harmful content and digital citizenship.

But there is still much further to go. Media literacy teaching remains inconsistent and fragmented. Teachers tell us they feel under-prepared and under-resourced to teach about online safety topics, struggling to keep up with developments in the digital world.

Why now?

All children deserve to thrive in a digital world. With all the incredible opportunities that technology *does* offer – the answer has to be a strong media literacy curriculum that supports children now and in the future. This is our call to action.



Five big ideas for change: the future of media literacy in schools



5

big ideas for change: the future of media literacy in schools

Every child should leave school with the skills they need to stay safe, be a critical thinker and behave responsibly online.

Here are our five big ideas to transform media literacy through the classroom.

1 Raise the status of media literacy

We are advocating for a cross-curriculum approach to media literacy. Just like numeracy and literacy, we think that media literacy competencies should be embedded across the curriculum to ensure that every child leaves school with the skills they need to thrive online.

This approach must be underpinned by a central strategy and framework. We are calling on the Department for Education to develop a national framework for media literacy, which sets out delivery and outcomes at each Key Stage of school.

2 Embrace a whole-family approach

Parents are the key protective force in children's digital lives. Schools can play an important role in supporting parents' media literacy. This will help to bridge the generational divide between children and parents, and help to create communities of families who are united behind safe and responsible use of devices.

The Department for Education should support schools with parental outreach, by providing additional funding and guidance on best practice for supporting parents.



3 Train teachers for the digital age

While most teachers understand the importance of online safety, many feel unequipped to teach media literacy topics, including through statutory relationship, sex and health education (RSHE). Our research with children shows that poor-quality media literacy teaching is widespread, and can do more harm than good.^{iv}

Every new teacher should receive training on media literacy through a compulsory module in their Initial Teacher Training (ITT). Existing teachers should be trained through compulsory continuing professional development (CPD) on media literacy and this training should be accredited by the Department for Education (DfE).

4 Set standards and generate insights

A revised media literacy curriculum should be overseen by Ofsted inspectors who have received specific training on media literacy. Training for Ofsted inspectors must be a result of collaboration between Ofcom and Ofsted. Expectations for media literacy

should be set within Ofsted's education and personal development assessments, alongside existing safeguarding requirements.

Ofcom and DSIT must upscale their understanding of what works in this space, beyond smaller and more targeted projects. Key findings should be shared with the media literacy sector to inform wider work.

5 Build a cross-sector coalition

Schools must be supported by a thriving media literacy sector, with sustained funding and direction from Government.

A Secretary of State should be accountable for the nation's media literacy. The Secretary of State should coordinate media literacy initiatives across Government, industry, schools and the sector – building a cohesive, public health approach to media literacy. A public campaign for media literacy, centred around a specific day or week, would help to solidify public awareness.



Methodology

This briefing, written by Internet Matters, is informed by new and existing research including a rapid literature review, interviews with sector experts, survey data from Internet Matters' bi-annual tracker and previous research by the organisation.

In the UK, education is a devolved matter and we have chosen to focus this research and briefing on media literacy education in England, however, many of the barriers and recommendations apply in other contexts.

INTERVIEWS

Fourteen interviews with sector experts were carried out between January - April 2024. Interviews covered a range of topics relating to media literacy in schools including: defining media literacy; delivery of media literacy education; teacher training and resources; assessment and evaluation; and the role of parents, industry and the third sector in media literacy education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A rapid literature review was conducted to provide an overview of the media literacy landscape for children and young people in England, referencing media literacy studies and reports published since 2019. The review targeted literature that focused on media literacy education in schools, including how media literacy is being taught, the progress made, and challenges faced in recent years, as well as case studies of good practice.

SURVEYS

Internet Matters conducts a bi-annual survey with a representative sample of 1,000 UK children aged 9-17 and 2,000 parents of children aged 3-17. The most recent survey was conducted in November 2023, and included questions relating to families' experiences and views of media literacy education in schools.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our gratitude to all the sector experts who generously gave up their time to be interviewed for this briefing. Without their valuable insights and perspectives this briefing would not have been possible. We also extend our thanks to the Centre for Educational and Youth (CfEY) who carried out research on our behalf.

Lord Jim Knight,
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PSHE Association

Allen Tsui,
Willow Brook School

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Stéphane Goldstein,
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BBC Bitesize

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Alex Harris,
BBC Teach

Elli Narewska,
The Guardian Foundation

Helen Blachford,
Priory School



The Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY) creates connections, insights and actions that improve young people's childhoods, transitions to adulthood, and life chances. We partner with a diverse range of organisations and people, bridging gaps between sectors, practitioners, policymakers and researchers, to help drive wise, bold decisions about how best to support young people. CfEY carries out timely, accessible and rigorous research projects that get under the skin of key issues, working to identify and challenge the underlying barriers standing in the way of positive educational experiences and fulfilling prospects for all young people, particularly those who are marginalised.

What is media literacy?



What is media literacy?

Interactions with digital technologies have a huge impact on our lives. But there is no universally accepted definition of 'media literacy' in a digital context, and interpreting the term has been a longstanding challenge.

Various organisations, regulators and government departments – including Ofcom,^v DSIT,^{vi} the UK Council for Internet Safety^{vii} and UNESCO^{viii} – have developed frameworks for defining media literacy. Each definition encompasses a broad range of topics and skills associated with critical thinking, responsibility and personal safety within online environments.

What makes media literacy particularly challenging to define is the overlapping and interdependent nature of the skills and knowledge needed to safely navigate a digital world.

Our expert interviews reflect the lack of consensus across the sector:

“I think there's a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about what media literacy actually is ... Media literacy seems to be this chameleon that shifts and changes its focus” EXPERT INTERVIEW

While some sector experts use the term to refer exclusively to identifying mis- and disinformation, we extend our meaning – in line with Ofcom^{ix} – to cover online safety skills, due to the inevitable linkages between these issues.

For Internet Matters, media literacy is essentially about the following important areas which – taken together – will enable children and families to flourish in digital environments:

A NOTE ON DIGITAL INCLUSION

The issue of digital inclusion is distinct from media literacy. But we do recognise that media literacy and digital inclusion are closely connected: for example, the extent of digital inclusion within a population will have an impact on levels of media literacy.

While digital inclusion is not the focus of this paper, there is a need for greater action to ensure that all children and families have access to technologies to stay connected, to fully participate in society, and to engage with education and work. We continue to support the Digital Poverty Alliance's efforts in this area.^{xi} We further advocate for digital access initiatives to include an offer of media literacy training for individuals at point-of-access.^{xii} Our research into the online experiences of children receiving free school meals (FSM) shows they are significantly more likely than their peers to experience online harms which underscores how vital this is.^{xiii}



1 Being able to evaluate information and distinguish between truth and false online.

In a digital context, this encompasses analysing and critically evaluating online information, as well as considering how platforms are designed to present, prioritise and disseminate media.

This includes understanding how information may be manipulated by digital means – including identifying misinformation and disinformation. (See glossary for full definitions).

2 Being able to create and share digital content responsibly and safely.

Media literacy also means being able to contribute safely and respectfully to online environments, by making informed choices when creating and sharing information.

“[Media literacy] is not purely [about] protecting oneself against threats which do exist, but it's also about enriching our lives and empowering us.”

EXPERT INTERVIEW

Media literacy education should help children to understand their own role in creating positive online spaces and how to be a responsible ‘digital citizen’. This includes considering the consequences of their own outputs and interactions on the safety and wellbeing of other users.

3 Protection from the risks of being online

Strong media literacy is also grounded in an awareness of the wider risks of being online, and the steps that individuals can take to avoid or mitigate them.

The framework that we generally use to think about online risks is the ‘4 Cs’ – of content, contact, conduct and commercial risks.^x There are some cross-cutting risks too, such as privacy and data security.

Media literacy skills in this area would include:

- Steps children and parents can take on platforms – including technical tools and controls – to have safer online experiences. For example, blocking potentially offensive or upsetting search terms or hashtags, confidently reporting harmful content and behaviour, and managing data preferences.
- Being mindful and cautious about the amount of personal information shared with other users.

The scale of the problem



The scale of the problem

Children spend a significant amount of time online. For many children, the online world fosters joy and community, and facilitates learning and new skills. However, time online can also expose children to harm.¹



WHOLE DAY A WEEK SPENT ONLINE

Children report spending 3.4 hours online during the week and 4.4 hours on the weekend, on average.

Online harm takes many forms, from bullying and exposure to hate speech, to receiving illegal content such as unwanted sexual imagery.

28%
OF CHILDREN

are unsure if what they see online is true

ONE
IN FIVE

children aged 13-17 have been contacted by a stranger

15%
OF CHILDREN

have been exposed to content which promotes hate speech

Certain groups are more likely to experience harm and have more negative experiences online, which is often driven by broader socio-economic factors such as poverty and social isolation.

- 75% of parents whose child has a special educational need (SEN), disability, or a physical or mental health condition report their child has experienced harm online, compared to 56% of parents of children without these additional needs.
- Children entitled to free school meal (FSM) are significantly more likely to say being online makes them feel sad, with 14% of children reporting they feel sad compared to 4% of children not receiving FSM.^{xiv}
- 48% of girls aged 15-16 report a stranger has tried to contact them online, up from 29% just a year ago.^{xv}



3/4
OF CHILDREN REPORT EXPERIENCING HARM WHILE SPENDING TIME ONLINE

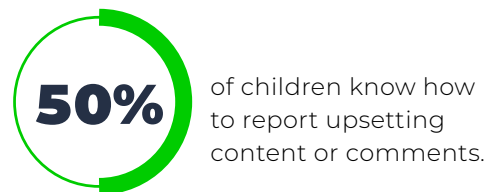
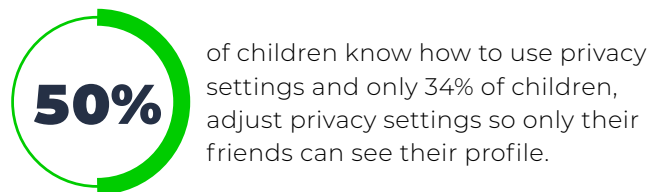
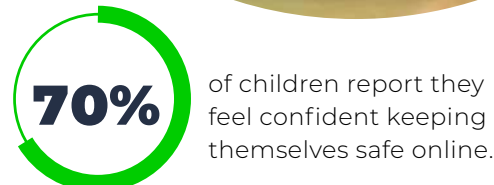
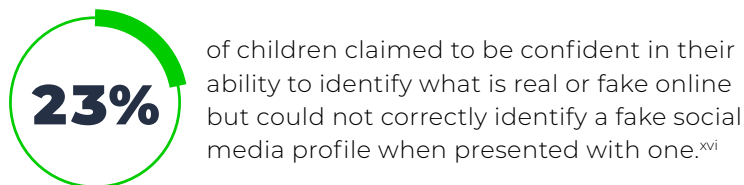


1/2
OF PARENTS REPORT THEIR CHILD HAS EXPERIENCED HARM WHILE SPENDING TIME ONLINE

These figures are worryingly high and show that some parents are unaware of what their child is experiencing online, with children reporting higher rates of harm than parents.



The majority of children (70%) are confident they know how to stay safe online. However, many aren't aware of the steps they can take to keep themselves safe, such as adjusting privacy settings and reporting harmful content. Even if they are aware of actions they should take in response to online harms, many don't apply this knowledge.

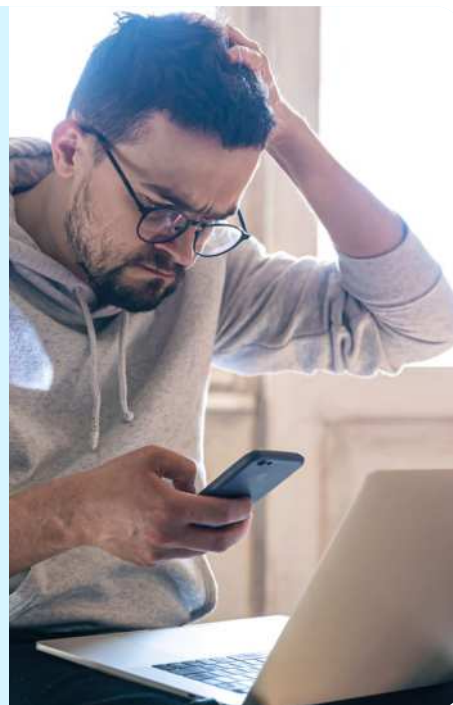


ON AVERAGE, CHILDREN REGULARLY USE 7 DIFFERENT PLATFORMS APPS OR SITES

The role of parents

Although parents are children's main source of information, many parents are concerned about their child's online safety.^{xvii} They feel overwhelmed by the ever-growing array of platforms, apps and sites their children are on and our statistics show that some parents do not have the knowledge or skills to keep their child safe online.^{xviii}

Where parents are aware of tools to keep their child safe online, we find that these aren't always used, with 60% of parents who don't use tools, such as broadband controls, saying they don't need them. We also know from our wider research that some parents are normalising the harms their children are experiencing online, seeing them as an inherent part of their child's online engagement.^{xix}



"I don't have a clue what my boys watch on their phones because they're in their bedrooms, they're constantly on their phones."

DAD

82%

of children say parents are their main source of information about how to stay safe online

44%

of parents aren't aware they can set up a block for adult content on their child's phone^{xx}

36%

of parents are using broadband parental controls

Why does media literacy matter?



Why does media literacy matter?

Strong media literacy in the digital age is critical – both to the safety and wellbeing of individuals, but also to our national health, security and prospects.



Personal safety

Children are exposed to a spectrum of harms online. Some of the most serious harms, such as cyberbullying, unsolicited messages from strangers (including grooming and the sharing of sexual images) and extortion, can have significant negative consequences for children's personal safety, and often their physical and emotional wellbeing.^{xxii} Furthermore, frequent exposure to harmful content such as videos of violence and self-harm has been shown to result in normalisation and desensitisation to the gravity of these issues.^{xxiii xxiv}

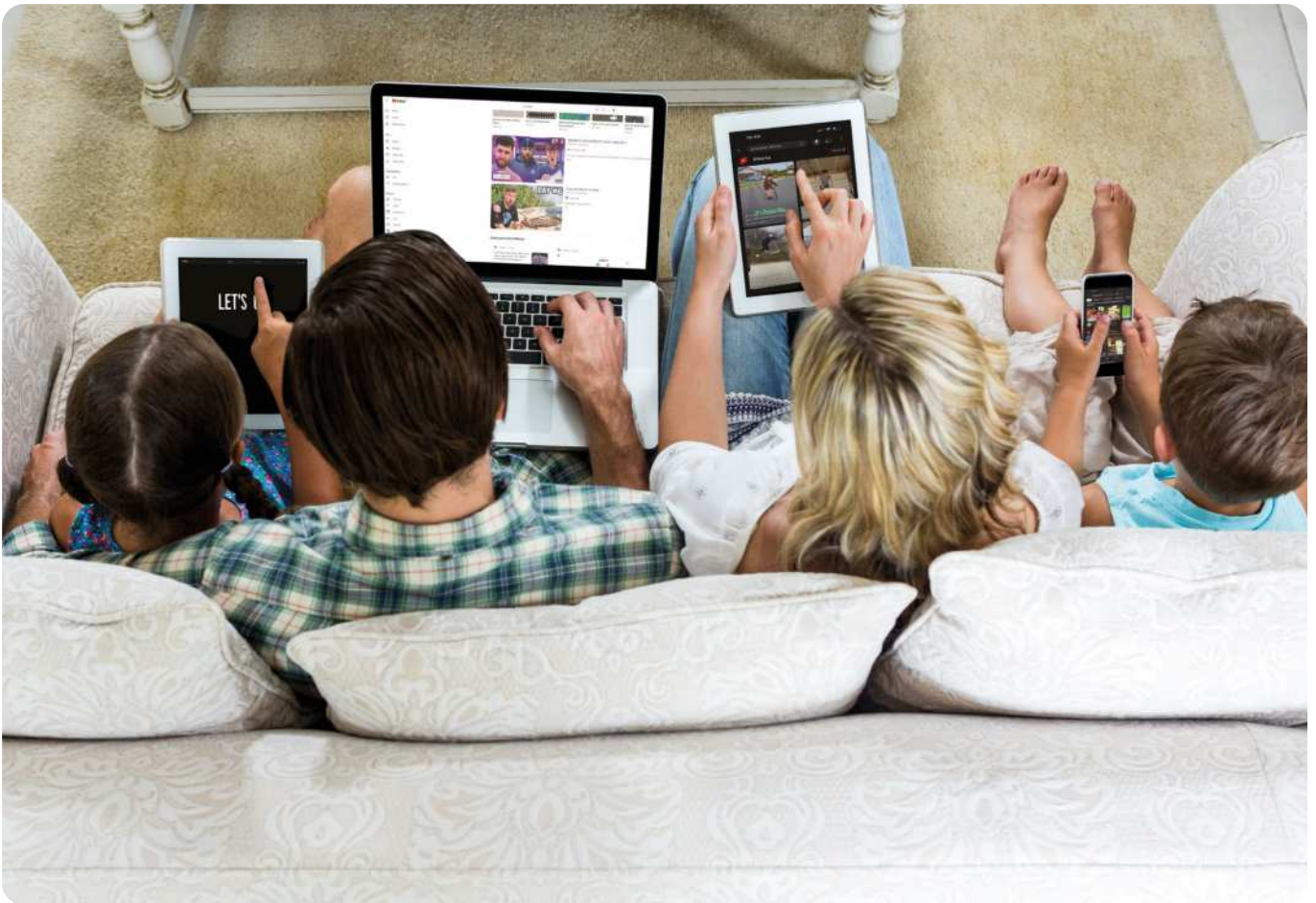
Health and wellbeing

Mental health

For the majority of children, being online makes them happy.^{xxv} But it can also have a negative impact on children's mental health, including by creating or amplifying worry and anxiety. The most common drivers of this are online bullying, viewing harmful content and comparisons to peers.^{xxvi} It's also heavily researched that time spent online drives anxieties around body image, with 12% of children reporting they worry about appearance and body image when spending time online.^{xxvii} Worry about appearance not only has negative psychological consequences but can also lead to physical impacts in the form of eating disorders. Furthermore, while being online is a source of community, many children also experience isolation and loneliness online. Research shows this is increasing with 14% of children in 2023 reporting they experienced loneliness due to time online compared to 11% in 2022.^{xxviii} In the most extreme cases, online activities can fuel and exacerbate poor mental health with tragic consequences, including suicide.^{xxix}

Physical health

Prolific use of screens can also have a significant impact on children's physical health, with 63% of parents reporting that time online has negative physical health consequences for their children,



including 57% of parents reporting screen time effecting children's sleep.^{xxx} Children too know that time online impacts on their physical health, with 12% of children reporting that they often stop sport or exercise in favour of sedentary online activities.^{xxxi}

Health misinformation

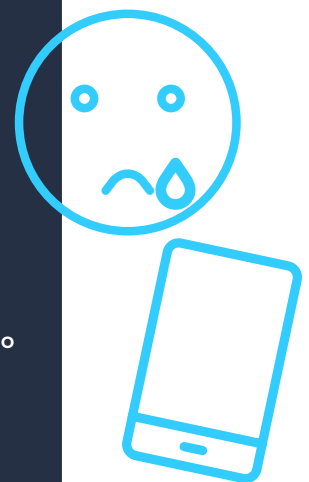
In recent years we have also seen a rise in the spread of health misinformation online.^{xxxii} This misinformation is usually relating to the untruthful impacts of medication or vaccines, or unsubstantiated health claims, and can come with significant consequences.^{xxxiii} An example of this can be seen in the wake of Roe vs Wade being overturned in the US, when videos began trending on video sharing platforms advising viewers that they could carry out a 'DIY' abortion at home, through the consumption of a range of plants. These videos were eventually taken down, but not before having tens of millions of views.^{xxxiv}

Public health

At a societal level, the negative consequences of poor media literacy can have significant and long-term consequences for the population's health. For example, vaccine hesitancy (often driven by unsubstantiated health claims such as adverse side-effects) can lead to widespread outbreaks of diseases that were once under control, like measles.

DANGEROUS CHALLENGES

Dangerous challenges, which gain popularity and trend online, are another threat to children's safety and physical and mental health. These challenges are often designed to seem enticing to young people who may feel pressured to take part and are often based on misinformation. They may encourage individuals to harm themselves, others, or property and can result in injury or even death.



Furthermore, widespread health misinformation can also result in increased pressure on health resources, which in the UK are already at breaking point. Long-term, in a nation where obesity levels are already high, especially amongst children, ensuring time online is not at the expense of physical exercise, can prevent high rates of avoidable diseases such as type two diabetes.

Family life

Research is also showing that increased engagement with devices and online platforms is contributing to a shift towards solitary digital engagement over shared family time.^{xxxv} This was illustrated in Internet Matters' recent Digital Wellbeing Index report which showed an 11 percentage point increase in parents strongly agreeing with the statement 'we often find ourselves spending time on our own devices (e.g., phones, consoles, TVs) rather than doing things together'.^{xxxvi} While this in and of itself may not be negative, it does increase the risk of harm with children spending more time online and receiving less supervision from parents. Furthermore, parents are also concerned that they are not modelling a positive relationship with online activities for their children.^{xxxvii}

Extreme views

Exposure to online content which contains views and perspectives that children may not have the opportunity to engage with can have positive outcomes, such as expanding their world view. However, without the media literacy skills needed to decode fact from opinion it can also lead to division, extreme views and even radicalisation. This is particularly common when people get trapped in 'echo chambers' or 'filter bubbles', where they are only exposed to information that confirms their existing beliefs and biases.^{xxxviii} This problem may be further exacerbated by chaotic information environments, which are characterised by an abundance of information sources that often present opposing ideas. These can be exploited by bad actors, who seek to influence public attitudes for their own gain.

For example, there has been a well-documented rise in misogynist influencers (notably Andrew Tate) who leverage recommendation algorithms with short-form content. Misogynistic opinions have been seen to play out in real-world behaviour – with rising reports of sexist behaviour and language directed to female pupils and teachers in UK schools.^{xxxix}

Citizenship and democracy

Core to any functioning democratic system is informed citizens who are able to make reasoned decisions and participate meaningfully in democratic processes. While online spaces can facilitate this by providing a forum for the free exchange of information and ideas, the prevalence of mis –

“In a diverse and pluralistic society, the study of media helps youth understand how media portrayals can influence how we view different groups in society: it deepens young people’s understanding of diversity, identity and difference.” EXPERT INTERVIEW

and disinformation online poses a risk to these democratic values. The need to increase the population’s resilience to this is particularly important given that children – and increasingly adults – often get their news from non-traditional news outlets. For example, around a quarter of children get their news from Tik Tok (28%), YouTube and Instagram (25%).^{xliii}

Furthermore, with technological advances new challenges for democracy emerge. An example of this can be seen with deepfake technology. Audio and visual deepfakes of politicians have been created, showing them doing or saying things that haven’t happened. An important line of defence against these impacting elections is a media literate population.



National security

While the nature of the internet means that we can interact with people we are unlikely to meet in real life, this comes with risks for national security. Extremist groups are able to utilise the web to misguide, radicalise and recruit people, particularly the vulnerable. Media literacy can contribute to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism by giving individuals the skills to recognise, resist and prevent the spread of extremist ideologies propagated through digital platforms.^{xiv}

Workforce

Media literacy skills are central to the modern jobs market. While hard digital skills such as coding will be needed, there is also an increasing need for media literacy skills such as critical thinking. This is proving to be even more pressing with the evolution of generative AI which has the potential to disrupt both how content is produced, but also how we learn and problem solve.

Research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) found that some of the most in-demand skills needed in the 2035 workforce will be 'information literacy' - the ability to gather, process and use information, including in a digital context.^{xiv}

**Media literacy
is key to a
functioning
society**



**"I think particularly in schools,
we're not preparing people for life
in the workplace" EXPERT INTERVIEW**

Who is responsible for media literacy?



Who is responsible for media literacy?

The focus of this report is how the school system can be used to much greater effect in enhancing children's media literacy.

However, given the complex interactions between online platforms, and the regulatory regimes which govern them, along with families and the services that support them, media literacy is – and will always be – a shared responsibility.

Before our deep-dive on the specific challenges and opportunities for media literacy in schools, this section speaks to the bigger picture.



Government and regulation

Over the last decade, government policy has largely focussed on the role of regulation of online services in keeping users safe. While regulation of this kind is critical, and ground-breaking, the online safety regime will not be a silver bullet, and will not be capable of eliminating all risks and harms from online platforms. Regulation is focussed on the systems and processes which lead to cumulative harms and, as such, it will take time (possibly years) for the positive effects to be felt. As a result, children will continue to be at risk of encountering harmful content and behaviour online.

Government and regulators have a key role to play in setting strategy and priorities for media literacy, and in funding research and interventions. Both DSIT and Ofcom conduct programmes aimed at building the media literacy of the population.^{liii liv} This includes conducting research to determine the levels of media literacy in the population (both children and adults) and funding targeted projects at so-called 'hard-to-reach' groups, such as care leavers.^{lv}

Media literacy strategies, recently published by both DSIT and Ofcom, are significant steps in the right direction. But government efforts have suffered from a lack of strategic priority and long-term, sustained funding. Pilots are piecemeal, and often lack follow-on funding. This restricts the ability of media literacy organisations to robustly evaluate projects and coordinate efforts and learnings.

The Government should articulate a strong and clear vision for media literacy, for children as well as adults, recognising the positive role of media literacy in public health, national security and democracy.

The Secretary of State for Technology should be responsible for media literacy. The media literacy portfolio should include coordinating the efforts of various Departments with responsibility for media literacy – including Education, Culture and Media, Defence, as well as Ofcom.

Ofcom and DSIT should fund and evaluate large-scale projects with children and families. These projects should be delivered in partnership with the DfE, drawing on the DfE's capacity for scale through early years settings, schools, family hubs and other settings.

Industry

Online platforms – including social media, gaming, messaging and search engines – play a fundamental role in shaping how children use and understand digital media.

Aspects of platform design can promote media literacy – such as advice contained in notifications and pop-ups. On-platform functionalities can support users to make informed choices, such as nudge techniques.^{li}

However, many platforms simply weren't built with media literacy in mind.

Many platform features (especially in combination) can actively frustrate a child's ability to navigate content safely, and the accumulation of risky features can be greater than the sum of their parts. For example, algorithm-driven feeds, anonymous and unverified user accounts and minimal content moderation can each contribute to a chaotic information environment, accelerating the spread of harmful content.

In recent years, there has been a welcome increase in investment in on-platform 'media literacy by-design'^{liii} interventions, designed to build users' media literacy skills. But there is little publicly available data on the efficacy of these interventions.

Tech companies should consider users' media literacy when designing platforms and products. All major social and search platforms should contain features that reduce the spread of harmful content, such as effective moderation, robust flagging and reporting mechanisms, and tightly controlled recommender algorithms which filter out harmful and inappropriate content.

Platforms should also look to actively support the media literacy of users, with a particular focus on promoting the media literacy skills of children and parents. Tech companies should collect data on the efficacy of on-platform media literacy by-design interventions, and should publish evaluation data to inform the work of the wider media literacy sector.



Parents

Parents are the primary protective force in children's online lives.^{xlvi}

Wider research demonstrates that parents play a role as media literacy 'mentors' by:^{xlvii} modelling digital behaviour and competencies;^{xlviii} answering questions and dealing with issues as they arise; and by having conversations with children about media literacy, including how to deal with risks and harms.

Parents also play an important role in reinforcing expectations outside the school gates – for example setting boundaries (and sometimes technical controls) around access to inappropriate content, such as pornography, and appropriate behaviour online, such as bullying.

Parents should be aware of the risks that their children may face online. All parents should understand how to maximise the benefits of digital tech for their children – for example in learning, creativity and play – while mitigating risks and harms.

Every parent should have a consistent, independent and trusted voice to turn to for media literacy advice.



MANY PARENTS FIND MEDIA LITERACY DESPERATELY HARD

Many parents find media literacy desperately hard – struggling to keep up the various functions, rules and controls across different platforms, especially if they don't use the same apps as their child. They can also feel pressured into making decisions about device use (for example – what age to allow their child to use a certain platform), by the choices of other parents. It's undeniable that children are experiencing online at scale, and naturally this is deeply worrying for parents and caregivers.

It is no surprise that this sense of powerlessness has translated



into parental campaigns to ban smartphone and social media use for under-16s altogether.^{xlix} Many of the concerns driving these conversations are important and justified, and it is true that taking away young people's access to smartphones would help to protect them from the risks of being online, at least in the immediate term. However, it would also prevent them from enjoying the many benefits of being online, and leave young people – and society – underprepared for a future in which technology will inevitably play a key role.

At the time of writing, Internet Matters is in the process of a deep-dive research project, exploring parents' views on these issues in detail and we will share our findings in due course.

Schools

Schools are the primary service that regularly interact with children and families, and the classroom is arguably the best place to teach children media literacy skills.

There are various subjects in the school curriculum that have aspects of media literacy to offer. For example, critical thinking skills are developed through English and History, while both functional and safety skills are taught through Computing. Important reforms to the statutory RSHE curriculum also mean that all schools must teach media literacy topics, including privacy, data protection, online relationships and dealing with harmful content – although the quality of this provision is highly variable, as the next section of this report will explore in detail.^{lvi}

Schools are also responsible for children's welfare and for responding to online behaviour and safeguarding concerns, such as online sexual harassment and bullying. Media literacy is often delivered in response to safeguarding and behaviour incidents, via ad-hoc sessions.

Schools can also perform an important role in bridging the gap with home, and in ensuring that all children have appropriate boundaries and protections outside the school gates. This is particularly important for vulnerable children who are at the greatest risk of harm online. Few parents will have received formal media literacy education through their own time at school, which makes parental outreach by schools all the more important.

Every child should leave school with the skills they need to stay safe online.

The remainder of this report explores the role of schools in delivering media literacy education in greater depth.



Barriers to good media literacy education in the classroom



Barriers to good media literacy education in the classroom

Media literacy education in English schools is a postcode lottery. While parents, teachers and children alike think media literacy is important, teachers face many obstacles in delivering good media literacy education – from disjointed curriculum guidance to inadequate resources. As a result, a fragmented and inconsistent media literacy offer for children has emerged – ultimately leaving children vulnerable to online harm and without the skills and knowledge needed to be healthy, happy and engaged digital citizens.

As discussed previously, although schools are not the only vehicle for achieving this, we are focusing on schools as they have the potential to deliver change at scale; through both educating children in the classroom and through being an influential institution in family's lives, providing an opportunity to support and educate parents too. Furthermore, the role of schools in the media literacy landscape has been relatively neglected and under-explored in recent years.

Beyond schools

Barriers to good media literacy education in the classroom begin before children even enter the school gates with the broader socio-economic environment, technological change and government structures creating challenges for schools to deliver good media literacy education in the classroom.

Funding and time pressures

For more than a decade, school funding (once adjusted for inflation) has been decreasing.^{lvii} Although this decrease has been felt by all schools, schools with high levels of disadvantage have experienced more negative impacts.^{lviii} This comes at a time when 4.3 million children in the UK are living in poverty, 600,000 more than a decade ago.^{lix} As a

result, teachers up and down the country are being asked to do more with less. It is widely thought this is contributing to a reduction in teacher retention and a shortage of staff which in turn puts further pressure on school staff.^{lx}

For education in the classroom, including media literacy, this environment has a number of significant consequences, including:

- Less funding to bring in external partners to deliver content which can result in teachers, without the relevant expertise and training, having to fill this role, or the content not being delivered at all.
- Greater need amongst pupils often diverts teaching resource away from lesson planning and non-statutory education to support pupils' basic needs, especially where safeguarding concerns are present.
- Outdated or a lack of technology limiting teachers' abilities to teach media literacy in a practical way with some schools not having reliable wi-fi or enough laptops or being able to afford subscriptions to EdTech platforms.^{lxi}

Technological change

A significant challenge facing teachers and policymakers is the rapid pace of technological change. With new technologies emerging continuously, and children and young people

“There is often a lot of things in the media like ‘Teachers need to do more on this, teachers need to do more on that’. But then there’s also a lot of pressure to deliver for results and ever squeezing budgets meaning that we are teaching more and more, with less and less free time. Yes, there is knowledge that online safety is important and many other issues, but also we’re a grammar school, we’re all expected to get the very highest grades.”

**SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER,
NORTH WEST ENGLAND**



spending more time on a range of platforms, apps and sites, it is difficult for teachers to keep lessons and resources, relevant and engaging. [see Challenge (4) – Resources]. This is exacerbated by limited time for teachers to research and update their teaching materials, as well as a lack of guidance for teachers to know what good quality media literacy resources look like. Alongside this, and linked into the funding challenge discussed above, often teachers are required to teach media literacy skills in an analogue way, due to schools lacking the technological hardware to deliver teaching online. This can limit the breadth of what they are able to teach or means they can’t always use online resources available.

Accountability in government

The haphazard approach to media literacy education that exists in English schools is also a product of the fact that responsibility for children’s media literacy is split across different government entities. These entities appear to have differing views on both what media literacy is and how media literacy education should be delivered. While the DfE is responsible for setting the curriculum and ensuring learners are safe and thrive, it does not have expert knowledge of media literacy and overall ownership of the policy area, which sits with DSIT. In contrast, DSIT lacks services through which to deliver large scale programmes to children, and shares responsibility for media literacy promotion with

the regulator, Ofcom. In 2021, DSIT (at the time DCMS) launched its Online Media Literacy Strategy^{lxii} and later the same year Ofcom published Ofcom’s approach to online media literacy.^{lxiii} While both acknowledge the need for greater children’s online media literacy education, to date, action in this space has been sparse. DSIT has largely limited its focus to adult media literacy, while Ofcom has focused on ‘out of school’ interventions, which typically lack scale.

“I don't think media literacy has a coherent sense of what it might be. I think if I said to people what other topics the term media literacy covers, I don't think there'd be a coherent understanding of that across the school sector and that is in part because there's never been an effective approach to media literacy within education, within curriculum policy, within [the] Department for Education.” EXPERT INTERVIEW

90%

of teachers want the national curriculum to specifically include media literacy^{lxiv}

77%

of children agree that being taught how to stay safe online and identify trustworthy information is just as important as subjects like English and Maths^{lxv}

72%

of parents agree that being taught how to stay safe online and identify trustworthy information is just as important as subjects like English and Maths^{lxvi}

“What I wouldn't want to see, which some people do call for, is we should have a subject of media literacy for example, which would just be silly, but further focus within PSHE, strengthening stuff in citizenship, thinking about what media literacy means in the context of other aspects” EXPERT INTERVIEW

The curriculum

Media literacy in English schools is taught via a cross-curricular approach. It is taught at each key stages through both core and non-core subjects including English, Computing, Citizenship and Media Studies, and non-assessed subjects such as PSHE/RSHE. Elements of media literacy are also delivered through ad-hoc assemblies, form time or in reaction to behaviour or safeguarding incidents.^{lxvii} Throughout key stages 1-3 there are a number of opportunities for all pupils to engage with media literacy, however, by key stage four a significant amount of the media literacy curriculum is delivered through non-core subjects including Citizenship and Computing, where pupil uptake is low. For example, in Summer 2023 just 85,500 pupils were enrolled in a Computing GCSE and 22,500 in Citizenship, compared with 787,000 in Mathematics.^{lxviii} As a result, by the end of secondary school there is likely to be significant variation in pupils' media literacy skills.

“By the time it gets up to key stage 4 and 5 - where you could argue that these particular areas are not only more complex but also impact more on things like, the consequences of reputation, your preparation for life, in the professional environment, your entry into higher education - and yet it isn't really done any real justice to it?” EXPERT INTERVIEW

The DfE acknowledge there are “many opportunities across the curriculum to improve digital literacy, in subjects such as Computing, English, History and Citizenship.”^{lxix} There was also consensus amongst the experts we interviewed that media literacy is best taught through a range of subjects.

This approach, however, carries the risk that media literacy might be overlooked and not integrated at all, as responsibility for teaching it is not dedicated one single subject or area of the curriculum. To avoid this, clearer government guidance on what to teach, where and when is needed in order for schools to effectively deliver media literacy education. When we examine what guidance does exist for teachers and school-leaders, we find it is split across at least

13 statutory and non-statutory documents (see annex one). This leaves it up to individual schools and staff (who may not be experts and who are often time poor) to decide how the key competencies that make up media literacy are taught. As a result, a fragmented and piecemeal approach to media literacy education has emerged, with some learning objectives heavily overlapping across subjects, while other key knowledge areas and competencies are overlooked altogether.

“There is no sort of coordinated media literacy approach within education.” EXPERT INTERVIEW

“It's impossible to go into one school and know what they have in place. We've all got different approaches to it... There's no real guidance in terms of Department of Education about what we should be doing and about specific age groups and all of this.”

EXPERT INTERVIEW

Evaluation in the curriculum

Another driver of poor media literacy is a lack of evaluation or emphasis on assessment. This is a barrier as what isn't measured, is easily ignored. While some schools do use informal assessments such as quizzes or traffic light systems, outside of GCSE subjects (which noted above often has poor uptake), many schools conduct no form of assessment at all.^{lxx} Although assessment of media literacy can be challenging, as often what children report they know is different to the actions they take, it is still beneficial.^{lxxi} It can tell us what is being taught well and what works. It also provides a baseline for what skills are missing, which is important when there is no set guidance between year groups and schools, meaning students have different starting points. Furthermore, if we were to track progress then this would give more impetus to Ofsted and government to use this data to develop a robust curriculum that benefits all pupils.



OFSTED

Ofsted play an important role in ensuring that education in the UK is delivered equitably and to a high standard for all children. As part of this, they inspect schools to ensure that they are providing a broad and balanced curriculum that prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.^{lxxii} While Ofsted has many roles, often Ofsted inspectors do not have a particular impetus to evaluate how schools are delivering on media literacy, outside of safeguarding.^{lxxiii} Furthermore, many inspectors have not had any training in the role of media literacy in a broad and balanced curriculum. Without this focus from Ofsted, then there is the potential for media literacy to slip further from the curriculum as schools and government aren't held accountable for its delivery.

Staff training

Ensuring teaching staff have the relevant knowledge and skills, as well as confidence to apply these, is key to effective subject delivery. Yet, many teachers do not feel confident or equipped teaching media literacy due to inadequate training.^{lxxiv} Internet Matters' own research, conducted with secondary school teachers^{lxxv}, found:

30%

of teachers cited a lack of relevant training as a barrier to effective online safety education

**OVER
half**

of teachers indicated that there was at least one area of online safety they felt less confident on

It is unsurprising that teachers feel this way, as media literacy is not delivered as a standard part of initial teacher training (ITT). While those training on subjects more closely linked to media literacy including Computing, English, Media Studies and Citizenship will likely cover some of the competencies, outside of these subjects there is little emphasis on media literacy.

This means media literacy training for teachers is primarily delivered through CPD. While CPD is vital for keeping skills relevant and for building confidence and greater understanding of subject areas, there are challenges in relying on CPD as the primary mode of delivery for training. Choices around CPD are often determined by what a school's senior leadership team decides to invest time and resource in, or what funding is available. Our research suggests that while some schools do ensure media literacy is included as part of compulsory CPD, this is not the case for many.^{lxxvi} Furthermore, many schools incorporate media literacy training with safeguarding training, limiting the scope of what is covered.

"...all teachers have safeguarding training. So if you're looking at things like criminal exploitation, prevent training, all of that would be part of all teachers annual training on safeguarding. But that specifically isn't covering those skills about recognizing mis/dis/mal-information, that sort of skills." EXPERT INTERVIEW

Right now, we rely on teachers to electively use their own time to upskill and build confidence in this space. We heard in our interviews that school leaders and governing bodies should be doing more to champion and prioritise quality media literacy training as part of their schools' CPD. This can only be beneficial when teaching something as evolving as media literacy.

"You can't really expect people to train about something as important as this on their own time, we need to make sure it's part of their actual working hours." EXPERT INTERVIEW

Inconsistent resources

While there are many media literacy programmes and teaching resources on offer, there is little coordination or evaluation across providers in both the commercial and third sectors, and some resources are better than others. Our interviews suggest that deciding on which resources to use to teach media literacy is a key issue for schools, along with a lack of direction or quality assurance - for example in the form of kitemarking of resources.

"[An issue is] consistency across schools. It's impossible to go into one school and know what they have in place - we've all got different approaches to it ... There's no real guidance in terms of Department of Education about what we should be doing and about specific age groups and all of this." EXPERT INTERVIEW

In an Internet Matters survey of teachers in English secondary schools, over a fifth (21%) of teachers said that lacking relevant resources was one of the biggest challenges to teaching media literacy.^{lxxvii} One expert we interviewed discussed the challenges for schools in delivering effective, sustained media literacy programmes – in terms of the staff and time investment needed for media literacy initiatives:

“These [media literacy] initiatives are successful and work on a fairly small scale, but it's labour-intensive.” EXPERT INTERVIEW

In the same survey we found that when teachers do access resources, they tend to take a ‘pick and mix’ approach, drawing from a range of providers.^{lxxviii} This includes commercial companies in the curriculum and/or safeguarding space, tech companies, charities and not-for-profits, school networks and the local authority.

Sometimes this approach works well. For example - some schools we interviewed had developed their own bespoke media literacy curriculum, drawing from the best of the resources across the sector:

“I have a really robust curriculum that I've designed. I've taken parts of the amazing work that you do at Internet Matters, along with some other leading organisations as well, where I have then designed a six-week scheme of work focusing on digital citizenship for every year group”
EXPERT INTERVIEW

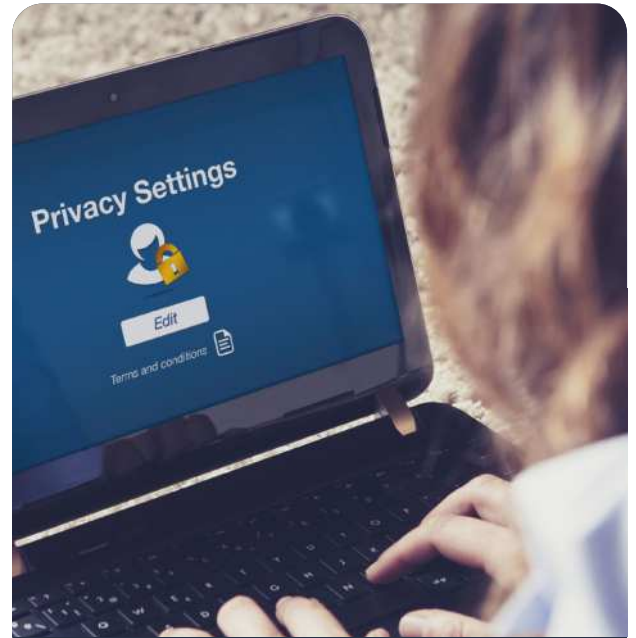
But that is not the case across the board. In fact, only

36% OF TEACHERS

would rate the resources they had used in the past year as good or excellent.

21%

of teachers said that lacking relevant resources was one of the biggest challenges to teaching media literacy.



THE ROLE OF THE THIRD SECTOR

Charities and not-for-profit organisations play an important role in developing media literacy teaching resources – which teachers view as credible and trustworthy.

“I would have concerns about the social media platform's ability to be honest about the use of its own services.”
SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER
SURVEY RESPONDENT

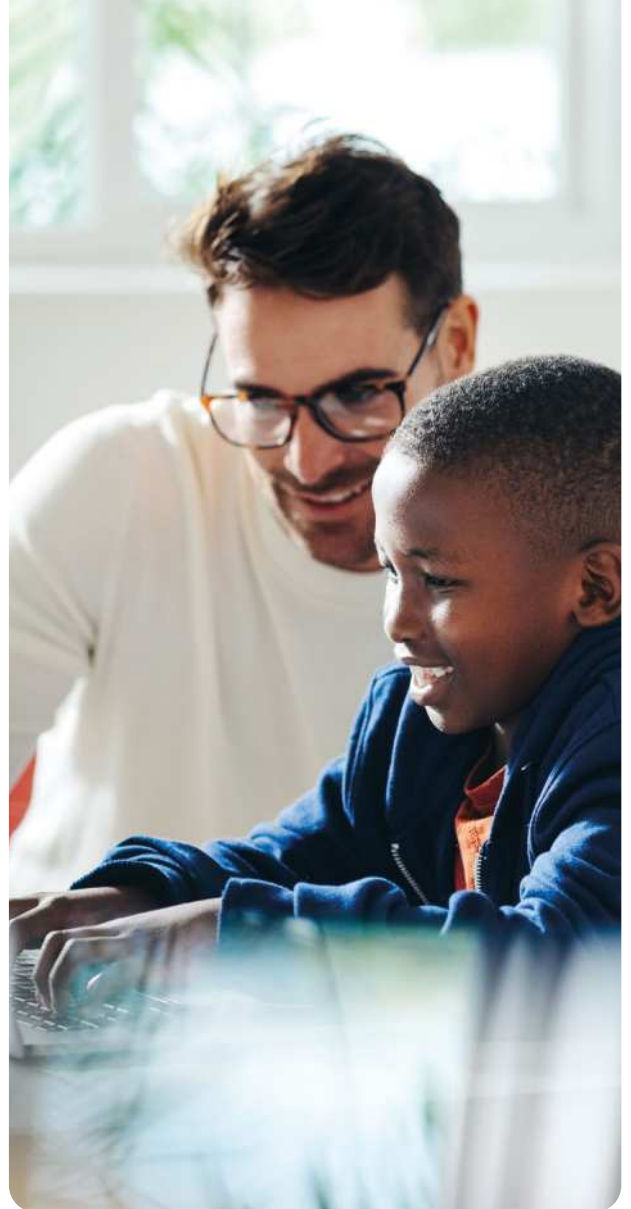
However, inconsistent funding and a lack of evaluation and coordination across the third sector^{lxxix} can limit the quality and the extent to which resources produced by charities and not-for-profits feel relevant and ‘up to date’.

“It's basically an unsustainable funding model ... So what you have is a lot of NGOs and stuff chasing funding pots, so they never become specialised”
EXPERT INTERVIEW

Connected to issues with fragmentation in the curriculum, teachers lack a one-stop-shop for comprehensive and quality resources on media literacy. Many teachers find it difficult to keep pace with the curriculum and safeguarding requirements, and to source materials which are both relevant and high-quality. This is doubly the case in a field which evolves so rapidly, with new issues (such as AI-generated mis- and disinformation) emerging and quickly evolving.

“I think increasingly, as AI makes it much easier to create mis- and disinformation ... the role of fact checking organisations to try and help young people navigate truth now that truth is contested is going to be really important... I think that school is an interesting place to promote those sorts of services.”

EXPERT INTERVIEW



WHAT TEACHERS WANT FROM MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

Our research found that media literacy resources which are valued most by teachers are those which:

ENGAGE PUPILS WITH RELEVANT INFORMATION

From our research, the top (and perhaps unsurprising) preference for teachers was for resources to be engaging for pupils. Teachers preferred video and interactive content that referenced popular platforms and trends of the day.

HELP TO UPSKILL THE TEACHER

Teachers also expressed a preference for resources that served a dual purpose of building their own knowledge of platforms, trends and digital safety/literacy issues. This is particularly the case for issues that teachers – generally – feel less confident dealing with, such as viewing sexual and violent content, and sharing sexual images.

BRIDGE THE GAP TO PARENTS

While few do at present, the majority of teachers said that they would use a resource with parents, if the right one existed.

INVOLVE COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN TECH FIRMS AND THE THIRD SECTOR

While some teachers are concerned about the extent to which resources from platforms can be ‘trusted’, the majority (59%) of teachers in our survey

are likely to use resources produced by social media platforms. This is on the basis that platforms are most likely to have up-to-date information about their services. However, teachers expressed a desire for more partnerships between tech platforms and the third sector – to overcome both issues of trust and credibility (in industry resources), and relevance and appeal (in resources produced by charities and not-for-profits).

Inconsistent parental engagement

Parents and caregivers are the first port of call for many children when it comes to media literacy issues. Parents are the first adults that most children turn to when something goes wrong online,^{lxxx} and they are often best placed to lay the foundations for strong media literacy skills.^{lxxxi}

Schools occupy a central position in this landscape – as particularly at primary school, teachers engage frequently with both parents and children, and can serve as a means of reaching both groups effectively.

And at a time when many issues (including bullying, child-on-child abuse and harmful content) permeate the boundaries between school and home, via digital devices, it's important for schools and parents to establish a united front. There should be clear and consistent lines about what is acceptable and good behaviour online, and what is not. This requires a community approach for all children – so that conversations about safety at school complement conversations at home, and all children within a given area receive the same messages and expectations about online behaviour.

Some schools – particularly primary settings - have a thoughtful and well-developed strategies to engage with parents. As one media literacy coordinator interviewed for this research explained:

“We have an active programme of parental engagement using your resources. Every Thursday, I offer a drop-in surgery as a Barclays Digital Eagles Champions volunteer, where families can talk about any aspect of their children's well-being, or concerns about the way their children are interacting with technology. We can work together and find a way of supporting their concerns.” EXPERT INTERVIEW

23%

of school teachers said that difficulty engaging parents was a major barrier in effective media literacy teaching.

This approach has many benefits – not least, providing effective parent-teacher join-up on emerging safety or safeguarding issues. And by proactively sharing media literacy resources, schools can also scaffold important and ‘informal’ teaching moments between parents and children – supporting parents’ roles as ‘media literacy mentors’ for their child.^{lxxxii}

However, our research with parents and teachers suggests that outreach between school and home is inconsistent – and, more often than not, limited.^{lxxxiii}

This is driven, at least in part, by the lack of clear guidance from the Department for Education on how schools should achieve effective outreach to parents.^{lxxxiv} Schools are also limited by time and resource to invest in more intensive and more effective forms of outreach (such as parental workshops) and parents’ willingness to engage in in-person sessions.

PARENTS OF VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Our research also suggests that parents of vulnerable children experience less meaningful outreach from their children's schools, than parents of non-vulnerable children. In a survey of over 2,000 parents' views on media literacy teaching, 15% of parents of vulnerable children said that their school's approach was fairly or very poor (rising to 20% of parents with a child in a special school), compared to just 7% of parents of a non-vulnerable child.^{lxxxv}

“I did some training for working with parents for a school down in Wales in a very impoverished area and I think part of the issue there was that the parents... couldn't afford come to the school and some had such bad experiences in school. They didn't want to come to school to do a workshop or anything, [they were] frightened I think” EXPERT INTERVIEW

This is particularly concerning because our wider research consistently shows that vulnerable children are at greatest risk of experiencing online harm.

“I think it can't just be for the students in those marginalized communities. I think it's got to be the whole family and I think that there is a need for general media literacy education.” EXPERT INTERVIEW

Other approaches to media literacy





Other approaches to media literacy

Media literacy in the UK is struggling to keep up with changes in the digital world. As discussed in this paper - challenges to effective media literacy education in the UK include insufficient funding for teacher training and resources, as well as the piecemeal ways in which media literacy is delivered via the curriculum.

But this problem is possible to fix. Other societies have recognised the importance of media literacy in a digital age, rethinking their national curriculums to equip a media literate generation of the future.

Media literacy in Finland

Finland has a long history of teaching media literacy skills, and the Finnish school system is the cornerstone of this effort.

Media literacy is taught at all levels of school – starting in early childhood education and continuing through primary and secondary levels. The strength of this approach is reflected in the population's resilience to mis- and disinformation. Finland is one of the most media literate populations in the world, consistently topping the European Media Literacy Index.^{xvi}



NATIONAL STRATEGY AND PRIORITY

Media literacy is a cross-subject component of Finland's national curriculum, just as it is in the UK. Teaching begins in pre-primary settings and continues over the course of multiple subjects of the curriculum.^{xvii} However, unlike the UK, a strong and clear strategy underpins media literacy in Finland.

A DEVELOPMENTAL CURRICULUM

Finland provides a helpful reminder of how even younger children are able to grapple with media literacy concepts, when teaching is delivered in an age-appropriate and accessible way.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A THRIVING MEDIA LITERACY SECTOR

Finland's approach also underscores the importance of a thriving media literacy sector to support schools.

- The National Audiovisual Institute funds the Finnish media literacy sector and the development of programmes, teaching resources and evaluation.^{xix}
- The Institute also operates a platform for teachers to source free and quality-assured media literacy resources.^{lxxxvi}
- School learning is supported by public campaigning. For example, Media Literacy Week brings together organisations from the public, private and non-profit sectors, encouraging the public to collectively strengthen media literacy skills and reflect on the importance of media literacy in the digital age.

Five big ideas for change: the future of media literacy in schools



5

big ideas for change: the future of media literacy in schools

Digital platforms have brought a range of wonderful opportunities for the youngest generation, broadening their capacity to socialise and form communities, as well as providing new avenues for learning and play.



However, over the 10 years of Internet Matters' existence we have also witnessed how, with every new advance in technology, families are presented with a new set of risks and harms. Children – who are often the earliest adopters of new technologies – are typically the first to experience online harms before they are more widely understood.

Industry and regulation have a central role to play in anticipating these risks, and mitigating them before they occur.

But alongside firmer safety efforts by industry, overseen by regulation, schools and families will continue to play a central role in educating, supporting and protecting children from online risks. Compared to the policy focus in recent years on the Online Safety Act and regulatory regime, we are concerned that media literacy has not received anywhere near the same level of thought, investment and scrutiny – and in particular the role of schools.

We are in urgent need of a fundamental rethink of media literacy education. Every child must leave school with the core skills and knowledge that they need to confidently and safely navigate the online world. Currently this is not the case.

Many schools already go above and beyond in this space and do a stellar job of both keeping pupils safe online, and equipping them with the media literacy skills they need now and in the future. But the role of schools has not been clearly articulated, any many lack the time, experience or knowledge to prioritise this issue. In this context, with so many other demands on schools, it is understandable that many do not have an effective offer in place.

These are our five big ideas to transform media literacy education for all children and families through schools – building the digital resilience of this generation, and of those to come.



1 Raise the status of media literacy and fully embed it in the curriculum

Media literacy is split across various aspects of the English curriculum, including both core and non-core subjects, as well as through reactive responses to behaviour and safeguarding incidents.

There is nothing fundamentally wrong with the current approach to media literacy. As demonstrated in other countries, such as Finland, a cross-curriculum approach to media literacy can deliver a broad and strong offer. But for a cross-curricular approach to succeed, it must be underpinned by a coherent strategy with clear guidance for schools to ensure it doesn't fall through the gaps. A central strategy should focus minds and ensure media literacy is treated as a priority.

Media literacy should be taught at all four Key Stages across the curriculum.

This could be achieved through a review of the curriculum. A review of the curriculum should ensure that media literacy skills and knowledge are covered adequately across subjects, including core subject requirements at Key Stage 4.

Much like reading, writing and numeracy skills, media literacy should form a core basis of education for all pupils in England.

Media literacy should be built upon at each key stage, resulting in a strong and broad education in critical thinking, online safety and digital citizenship.

For example, a review of the curriculum could consider integrating media literacy in the following ways:

- Through English and History pupils should gradually develop skills to critically assess, evaluate, create and communicate online media – both safely and responsibly.
- In STEM subjects, pupils should learn complementary aspects of media literacy – such as how to assess statistical information, and how the design of digital technologies shapes what users see online (for example, the role of recommendation algorithms in presenting and disseminating information).
- Critical thinking skills should be supported by a strong provision of teaching about keeping safe and respecting others online, via PHSE/RSHE and Citizenship, as well as non-subject and safeguarding interventions.

To support schools, a media literacy framework – modelled on the national 'reading framework'^{1xxxvii} – should be published by the government.

The media literacy framework should consolidate existing guidance to clarify expectations on schools. It should also provide schools with an overview of research on the importance of developing strong media literacy skills, best practice approaches to teaching media literacy, and advice for engaging parents on media literacy. The DfE should collaborate with the media literacy directives in DSIT and Ofcom when developing a media literacy framework for schools, working with experts in both Departments to understand the latest evidence on effective approaches to media literacy.

2 Embrace a whole-family approach to media literacy

If we are to raise a media literate generation, it must come with the full support and buy-in of parents and caregivers.

This is because parents are the first and most important teachers of media literacy, with four in five children reporting that parents are their main source of information about staying safe online.

We think that schools can, and should, play a key role in supporting parents to mediate young people's access to technology. Tricky decisions about rules and expectations in the online world – including the age that children should have their own smartphone, or access to social media – should be discussed at a community level by parents.

Schools should be required to engage in outreach to parents on media literacy, with support from the Department for Education.

Join-up between school and home is crucial, but schools need support and resourcing to do this effectively. The Department for Education should consider updating the statutory Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) guidance with clear advice on parental engagement. Schools should state how they approach engaging parents on media literacy, they could do this by:

- Sharing research with parents on the importance of strong media literacy skills.
- Setting out clear advice on appropriate use of connected devices at each year group.
- Hosting regular in-person sessions with parents to establish rules around acceptable use of devices.

A dedicated approach for vulnerable families

We also know that parents and carers of vulnerable children – such as those with special educational, physical or mental health needs, children eligible for free school meals,^{lxxxviii} and looked after children – often struggle the most with media literacy.

Our research consistently shows that offline vulnerabilities translate into a greater array and severity of risks online.^{lxxxix} But parents of vulnerable children are less likely to report satisfying support from their child's school.

We further recommend that schools tailor parental engagement on media literacy for the families of vulnerable children, recognising how some groups of children may experience online risks differently from their non-vulnerable peers. Schools will have the best knowledge of their own pupil cohorts, but specific considerations may include tailored advice for parents and caregivers of children with SEN and disabilities, mental health needs and care experience.

3 Train teachers for the digital age

Transforming media literacy education in schools will require upskilling the teacher workforce. Currently, the majority of teachers feel under-equipped to deliver media literacy: 42% of teachers cite a difficulty with keeping pace with changes in technology, 33% with understanding the platforms children use, and 30% a lack of relevant training.^{xc}

Media literacy can feel like a formidable challenge for many staff who are currently teaching these topics in PSHE/RHSE without any training on subject matter or delivery.

All teachers should be trained in media literacy education, via the following routes:

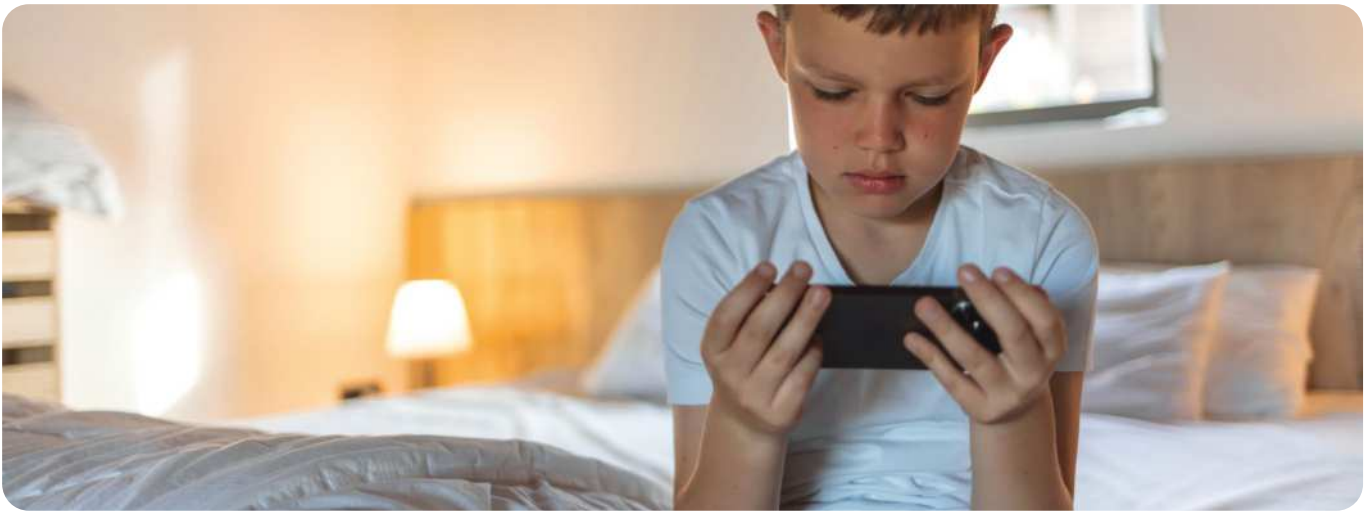
- A foundation of knowledge in media literacy should be included as a component of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) for all teachers.
- Ongoing training through CPD modules to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills to teach media literacy, including staying safe online, digital citizenship and critically assessing content.

Teachers should be supported to deliver media literacy with the necessary funding and support – for example to ensure that all schools have adequate access to technology.

Digital skills should be taught with digital technology. But currently, some schools lack the technology needed to teach in this way,^{xcii} such as laptops and or stable wifi, meaning that media literacy is often taught via analogue means, such as printed handouts and worksheets.

We would like to see the roll-out of digital devices during the Covid lockdowns to be maintained with an ambitious provision of tech for schools, to equip the next generation for media literacy.

As with the Covid device rollout, priority should be given to schools in deprived areas, for example schools with a high FSM-eligible cohort.^{xciii} Children with FSM eligibility are less likely to have independent access to devices at home, but are more likely to experience risks from being online.^{xciii} It is vital that these children have access to devices to develop media literacy skills in safe classroom settings, with support and oversight by teachers.



4 Set standards and generate insights

Updates to the curriculum should be underpinned by a strong assessment framework.

Schools are already grappling with the fallout of poor media literacy among pupils, for example in rising rates of online bullying and self-generated image sharing. While Ofsted inspects the safeguarding aspects of device use, little oversight or support is given to schools on best practice to deliver effective media literacy interventions.

Ofsted should update the education inspection framework (EIF) to include assessment of schools' efforts to develop media literacy skills among the pupil population.

Clear expectations around media literacy should be embedded within Ofsted's assessments of education and personal development, alongside existing online safeguarding requirements.

It is likely that Ofsted inspectors will struggle with gaps in knowledge about media literacy, as many teachers do, given the pace of change of technology and online harms. It is therefore important that Ofsted inspectors are fully equipped to assess media literacy interventions, with relevant training on online harms and best practice for media literacy. We recommend that Ofsted collaborates with Ofcom on developing media literacy training for inspectors.

A mass-rollout of media literacy education across English schools will also provide an invaluable source of data to assess the efficacy of different programmes and interventions. Ofcom and DSIT must upscale their understanding of what works in this space, beyond smaller scale and more targeted pilots.

5 Build a cross-sector coalition

We see schools as the backbone for a successful overhaul of media literacy education.

But schools must be supported by a broader, joined-up approach from the wider ecosystem reinforcing media literacy principles outside the classroom. The media literacy sector is currently underfunded and fragmented, suffering from an emphasis on smaller and shorter-term projects which make robust evaluation and achieving scale difficult.^{xciiv}

There are lots of forms this could take, but ultimately the media literacy sector needs sufficient and sustained funding to coordinate efforts, and a clear direction to rally behind.

We would like to see the Government take a public health approach to media literacy, coordinating the collective efforts of various Departments, the third sector, schools and industry. For this to succeed, there must be ownership of media literacy at Cabinet level.

A Secretary of State whose portfolio included national media literacy would be accountable for driving media literacy as a public health matter, and for funding and setting direction within the media literacy sector. The success of Ministerial level accountability can be seen in other countries where media literacy is seen as a high-priority issue, and even a matter of national security.^{xciv}

A Minister responsible for national media literacy should also coordinate efforts across industry and in schools, alongside the third sector, to build a cohesive public health approach to media literacy. A media literacy campaign that unites around a central day (such as Safer Internet Day, or the creation of a media literacy week) would also ensure that media literacy remains prominent and widely understood.

Conclusions





Conclusions

Ten years on since Internet Matters was founded, the imperative to support children and parents to safely navigate life online is more important than ever. New technologies continuously emerge, and the amount of time spent online for work, study and leisure continues to grow. If we are to ensure the next generation are healthy, happy and engaged citizens then developing their media literacy knowledge and skills is crucial.

We know a key element to achieving this is through improved media literacy education. Schools are an effective vehicle, as a stable and trusted institution in the lives of families up and down the country, who can deliver at scale. Right now, we have a fragmented and inconsistent approach to the media literacy education in schools, but it doesn't have to be this way. Some schools are already integrating media literacy creatively into a range of subjects and many are prioritising media literacy as part of their safeguarding duties. But through co-ordinated, adequate and sustained investment, we can ensure that every child, in every school, is taught the necessary skills and knowledge needed to engage safely in the digital world.

Of course, while effective media literacy delivery through schools is important, it is not the panacea. Any focus on enhancing media literacy education in schools must not come at the expense of action elsewhere. There needs to be a continued, collective effort. Government must continue to regulate and hold industry to account, industry must design platforms that are safer and reduce harm, and

the third sector is needed to provide support beyond schools. Yet we know that regulation can be complicated, industry slow to respond to the challenges of the day and the third sector underfunded to deliver at scale. By ensuring that children, and therefore future generations, have the skills to safely create and engage online, then this can act as a first line of defence to current and future challenges.

As a new government and parliament forms, there is an opportunity for the next government to show leadership and determination in this space, building a population that is resilient to the challenges of the future – and ready to embrace its opportunities. Internet Matters stands ready to support them.

Annexes



Annex 1: DfE guidance

Guidance for schools related to online safety teaching and oversight responsibilities (ordered by date of publication or last update, whichever is later).

DOCUMENT	STATUS	DATE PUBLISHED / LAST UPDATED
Mobile phones in schools: Guidance for schools on prohibiting the use of mobile phones throughout the school day (link)	Non-statutory	10 February 2024 (published)
National curriculum in England: computing programmes of study (link)	Statutory	11 September 2013 (published)
Safeguarding devices: Information on content filtering and mobile device management to ensure devices are safe to use by young people and families (link)	Non-statutory	19 April 2020 (published)
Teacher training: online relationships and media (link)	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Teacher training: internet safety and harms (link)	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Teacher training: being safe (link)	Non-statutory	24 September 2020 (published)
Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people (link)	Non-statutory	23 December 2020 (published)
Harmful online challenges and online hoaxes (link)	Non-statutory	12 February 2021 (published)
Support for parents and carers to keep children safe online (link)	Non-statutory	22 February 2021 (updated)
Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) guidance (link)	Statutory	13 September 2021 (updated)
Safeguarding and remote education (link)	Non-statutory	24 November 2022 (updated)
Teaching Online Safety in Schools (link)	Non-statutory	12 January 2023 (updated)
Keeping Children Safe in Education (link)	Statutory	1 September 2023 (updated)
Teaching about Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)	Non-statutory (forthcoming)	Unpublished, expected 2024.

Annex 2: Glossary of key terms

Bad Actors:	a person or organisation who is responsible for actions that are harmful, illegal or morally wrong.
Deepfake:	an image, video or sound clip of a person that has been altered or created by a computer.
Disinformation:	False information which is deliberately spread with the intent to deceive or mislead.
DfE:	Department for Education.
DSIT (DCMS):	Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (responsibilities previously held within the Department for Culture, Media and Sport).
Free School Meals (FSM):	In England, a statutory benefit available to school-aged children from families who receive other qualifying benefits and who have been through the relevant registration process. Often used as a proxy for disadvantage or low income.
Misinformation:	The dissemination of false or misleading information, not necessarily knowing it to be false.
Ofcom:	The Office of Communications, the UK's communications regulator.
PSHE:	Personal, Social and Health Education.
RS(H)E:	Relationships, Sex (and Health) Education.
UKCIS:	UK Council for Internet Safety.

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