



**Submission to the  
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment  
for the public consultation on the  
Junior Cycle Digital Media Literacy Short Course**

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**Dublin City University Institute for Future Media, Democracy, and Society (DCU FuJo)** is a multidisciplinary research centre focused on the digital transformation of media, democracy, and society. Our researchers investigate how to counter digital problems including disinformation and digital hate; how to enhance public participation through democratic innovations; and how to secure the future of high-quality media and information.

DCU FuJo leads a number of media literacy projects and works closely with media literacy practitioners and educators. Dr Eileen Culloty and Dr Ricardo Castellini da Silva are members of the steering group of Media Literacy Ireland.

**EDMO Ireland** is the Irish hub of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), which aims to counter disinformation by bringing together fact-checkers, media literacy experts, technologists, and academic researchers. EDMO Ireland comprises DCU FuJo (coordinator), TheJournal, NewsWhip, and University of Sheffield.

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## **Introduction**

DCU FuJo and EDMO Ireland welcome the opportunity to contribute to this timely and important consultation on the review of the Junior Cycle Digital Media Literacy specification.

The implementation of digital media literacy in schools is in line with many initiatives by both the European Commission and the Council of Europe, which recognise the importance of media literacy in the digital age and the need to integrate it into education. The development of this short course has been one of the most significant achievements for media literacy education in the Irish educational system as it opened the opportunity for thousands of post-primary students to engage in topics that are crucial for their development as young adults and citizens.

Digital Media Literacy (DML) is a broad field of study that encompasses various concepts, topics, and theoretical perspectives. For this reason, DML is understood as a life-long learning process with different stages of development that should start from early age and continue beyond the school years. This means that any DML initiative that is limited to a fixed period of time is faced with the challenge of selecting the most relevant concepts and topics that should be addressed by the target cohort. We have reviewed the DML specification and find that, overall, it succeeds in addressing relevant concepts, topics, and practices in the field. However, we believe that there are opportunities for improvement.

The public consultation will gather feedback from teachers and other professionals involved with the short course, which will certainly be crucial to understand the current state of the learning activities and reflect on how they can be improved in the years ahead. Even though the consultation has some specific questions that can only be answered by the professionals involved with the short course, we are contributing based on our extensive experience with media literacy practice, research, and initiatives both in Ireland and abroad.

Taking into consideration the prompts of the consultation template and drawing on our expertise in digital media literacy, we offer some recommendations below.

## **Recommendations**

### **A. Aim of the Digital Media Literacy specification**

The first item of the consultation presents the aim of the DML specification “to extend and refine students’ ability to use digital technology, communication tools, and the internet creatively, critically and safely, in support of their development, learning and capacity to participate effectively in social and community life”.

The aim is narrowly focused on the acquisition of technology skills, but skills are an insufficient basis for DML and the wider aim of advancing digital citizenship. Foundational and critical knowledge about media and digital media is required to ensure students can assess and respond to the major challenges that typify their online worlds (e.g., disinformation, manipulation, hate speech, cyberbullying etc.) and the major opportunities (e.g., communication, learning, creativity, cooperation etc.). Foundational knowledge includes knowledge about the digital/media industries, and their influence on society.

In addition, we suggest there should be more emphasis on digital citizenship, critical awareness, and cultural engagement. Fundamentally, DML is about empowering citizens to make well-informed decisions about the content and information they consume. In this sense, media literacy underpins fundamental values including democracy, equity, justice, and tolerance. In relation to digital technologies, media literacy “can be approached as including an understanding of the internet's potentials and limitations for civic life and democracy”.<sup>1</sup>

DML should also support individuals in becoming active participants in digital spaces, as it enables them to create and share digital content, express their opinions, and engage in online communities. DML facilitates civic engagement by providing tools and platforms for individuals to voice their concerns, mobilize for causes, and participate in digital activism and social movements. In this sense, young people can contribute positively to digital communities, promote ethical practices, critically evaluate information, and use digital platforms as tools for social change and civic participation.

In relation to foundational knowledge about the media, the short course should aim to promote the importance of addressing power imbalances, challenging biases and stereotypes, examining media representations, and promoting inclusivity by advocating for more equitable media coverage and representation.

## **B. New topics**

The second item of the consultation is about the topics that should “be given more emphasis within the specification.” As outlined above, we recommend that factual knowledge about the digital media environment needs to be given equal, if not greater, importance to the acquisition of skills. At the same time, we acknowledge that it is difficult to give the same importance and weight to all relevant topics within the media literacy field. However, there are two topics that have recently acquired significant status in media literacy debates all over the world and have a major influence on digital

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<sup>1</sup> Mihailidis, P. (2018) ‘Civic media literacies: Re-imagining engagement for civic intentionality’. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 43(2), pp.152-164.

citizenship: artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms. Though related, they are separate subjects. Research and development of educational resources on these topics within DML are still at the early stages, so we don't expect them to have the same relevance as other topics in the specification, at least for now. Nevertheless, we still believe that it is important to include them in the specification and provide a basic guidance on the importance of understanding AI and algorithms for the development of students DML knowledge and skills.

AI is increasingly being addressed in media literacy studies as its impact on media and information ecosystems becomes more significant. UNESCO<sup>2</sup> and the Council of Europe<sup>3</sup> have published important reports with studies and recommendations on the relationship between AI and education. In schools, learners can be introduced to key concept of AI, its basic principles, and various applications in media and information environments. They can learn how AI technologies are used in recommendation systems, personalised advertising, content moderation, and other aspects of the digital media landscape. It is also important to explore the potential biases and discriminatory effects that can arise from AI systems, as well as how AI can be used to manipulate media and information environments. Learners may explore how AI-generated deepfakes, misinformation campaigns, and algorithmic manipulation techniques can influence public opinion, undermine trust, and spread disinformation.

In relation to algorithms, a new discipline called algorithm literacy (or algo-literacy) calls for a deeper understanding of the influence of algorithms on the curation, recommendation, and filtering of media content. Learners should learn to critically evaluate the potential biases, impacts, and ethical implications of algorithmic decision-making in media environments. Furthermore, algorithmically literate individuals “are able to apply strategies that allow them to modify predefined settings in algorithmically curated environments, such as in their social media newsfeeds or search engines, to change algorithms’ outputs, compare the results of different algorithmic decisions, and protect their privacy.”<sup>4</sup>

Crossover<sup>5</sup>, a European project that measures the influence of content recommendation by algorithms on social media, has developed some educational resources on the topic that can be used as a guide by teachers in Ireland. By addressing AI and algorithms in DML, learners are better equipped to navigate,

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<sup>2</sup> Shnurenko, I., Murovana, T. and Kushchu, I. (2020) *Artificial Intelligence: Media and Information Literacy, Human Rights and Freedom of Expression. Collection of Papers*. Kushchu, I. and Demirel, T. (eds) UNESCO IITE and TheNextMinds.

<sup>3</sup> Holmes, W. et al. (2022) *Artificial Intelligence and Education: a Critical View through the Lens of Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law*. Strasburg: Council of Europe Publishing.

<sup>4</sup> Dogruel L., Masur P. and Joeckel S. (2022) *Development and Validation of an Algorithm Literacy Scale for Internet Users*, *Communication Methods and Measures*, 16(2), 115-133, DOI: 10.1080/19312458.2021.1968361

<sup>5</sup> <https://crossover.social/>

critically evaluate, and responsibly engage with digital media platforms, understanding the broader societal implications of these technologies and making informed decisions in the digital media landscape.

### **C. The four DML strands**

#### **STRAND 1 – MY DIGITAL WORLD**

This strand focus on the student's experience in the online world, and this is an excellent first approach. It is important to emphasise that the everyday practices and the cultural repertoire of students should shape the learning activity and underpin how the teacher addresses the content of the class. DML is fundamentally about young people's everyday cultural practices in which they participate<sup>6</sup> and this concept should guide teachers' understanding of how to design and deliver the learning activity.

*LO 1.3 - Debate the ethical and legal issues around downloading music and video content from the internet.*

We understand that this learning outcome could have a broader approach by debating the ethical and legal issues around the use of online content in general. It could be combined with LO 1.4 to discuss these issues in the context of users' responsibilities in the online world.

*LO 1.6 - Create a charter of online rights and responsibilities for the class.* This is an excellent idea, but it is important to include an understanding of who grants rights and decides what's acceptable online. The power dynamics between political institutions, digital media companies and citizens must be addressed in this learning outcome.

#### **STRAND 2 – FOLLOWING MY INTERESTS ONLINE**

*LO 2.1 Analyse the characteristics of digital media texts which make them different from analogue media texts.*

*LO 2.2 Demonstrate how digital media texts are published on the internet.*

When students learn about digital content, it is imperative that they cover the following topics:

Literacy practice: digital media literacy understood as literacy in the context of digital media and culture. The traditional definition of literacy (ability to read and write printed text) is no longer enough to describe the meaning making practices that take place in the digital world. The concept of literacy must be expanded to encompass all the modes of communication (multimodality) and semiotic resources available for communication<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Buckingham, D. (2003) *Media education: Literacy, Learning, and Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>7</sup> Potter, J. & McDougall, J. (2017) *Digital Media, Culture and Education: Theorising Third Space Literacies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Representation: media messages are constructed. This is a foundational knowledge that must be developed from young age. Young people are exposed to representations of reality, narratives that depict the world in a certain way according to specific interests, agendas, and ideologies. Here the concept of *editing* is very important. Through editing we construct meanings and represent ideas.

We believe that it is also important to emphasise the characteristics of digital media platforms, not only texts. The platforms are conceptualized, designed and structured to shape the online experience in a specific way. In this sense, the content that young people access online is also shaped by the affordances of each digital platform. Algorithms, for instance, are an intrinsic part of the way the platforms function and they directly interfere in the experience of the user, especially in relation to the personalization of this experience. A topic called “following my interests online” must address the role of algorithms and personalization.

### STRAND 3 – CHECKING THE FACTS

*LO 3.4 Act as a critical consumer by presenting digital media texts that highlight bias.*

When ‘looking for bias’, students should also learn how to look at their own bias. There is extensive research on the many psychological traits that influence the way we consume and react to information, and we understand that it is not possible to cover all of them in this strand of the short course. However, it is still possible to cover at least one of the most popular of these traits, which is confirmation bias<sup>8</sup>. Students should learn that this bias makes us more inclined to believe or trust information that confirms our previous beliefs. Even though it is not possible to get rid of it completely, being aware of confirmation bias can make us more cautious when analysing online content before jumping to conclusions.

### STRAND 4 – PUBLISHING MYSELF

*LO 4.2 Document young people’s online rights – the right to information, free expression, protection of minors, and the role of parents, governments and civil society in enforcing their rights.*

*LO 4.3 Discuss the concept of privacy and its application by young people on social networks.*

These LOs do not mention the role, influence and power of digital platforms. It is inadequate to discuss people’s online rights without including how these rights are subjected to rules and policies created by digital platforms. The same applies to privacy. Major platforms collect people’s data in many ways and use this data to create a kind of digital profile of users that will be used for personalisation (tailor their services to individual users) and targeted advertising. Responsible data handling and privacy policies are crucial to ensure user trust and protect sensitive information, and this must be discussed with students.

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<sup>8</sup> Kahne, J. and Bowyer, B. (2016) ‘Educating for democracy in a partisan age: Confronting the challenges of motivated reasoning and misinformation’. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), pp. 3–34.

*LO 4.5 Publish an item online presenting their views on a subject or topic that is relevant to their lives.*

We welcome this learning outcome as it gives students the opportunity to express themselves through digital media. We believe that this strand could also promote the idea that students can use these communication tools to practice their citizenship. Digital media has become a powerful tool for activism and social change, enabling individuals and communities to raise awareness, mobilize supporters, and advocate for important causes. Here are some ways digital media can be used to achieve this:

**Digital Storytelling:** videos, podcasts, and other forms of digital media can be used to share meaningful stories and experiences, humanizing social issues and fostering empathy. These narratives can be shared through social media, websites, or online communities to raise awareness and create important connections with the audience.

**Citizen Journalism:** digital media gives young people the opportunity to report events and express their concerns in relation to their communities. Through digital media platforms, young people can shine a light on underreported issues and hold institutions accountable.

**Online Education and Awareness:** young people can create educational resources, such as videos, infographics, and online courses to inform and engage the public on specific topics. Social media platforms and websites can be used to share these materials, promoting learning and understanding among the public.

#### **D. Teacher training and resources**

To date, there is no information available about the teachers who teach this short course and their needs in terms of training and educational resources. We hope that the report following the consultation will provide more information to ensure teachers have the necessary supports.

In Ireland, teachers already have access to resourceful platforms and organisations such as Scoilnet, Media Literacy Ireland, and Webwise. Moreover, teachers are not restricted to Irish sources as there is no shortage of free DML resources in English. As such, our main concern is not with the lack of resources, but with the provision of training and guidance for teachers to enable them to use resources with confidence. DCU FuJo is currently participating in a European project<sup>9</sup> to investigate the need to provide digital media literacy supports within teacher-training education. Moreover, in our own experience providing training on DML topics to post-primary teachers, we have regularly discussed training with participants and the vast majority say they would welcome more opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills on DML. Even though the number of participants in our workshops is not representative of all teachers in the country, we understand that it suggests that more training is needed.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://media-and-learning.eu/project/teamlit/>



PDST Technology in Education already provides training in topics related to digital technology, online safety and digital citizenship, but it is still insufficient to cover all the needs of teachers who teach the DML short course.

Training in DML involves not only the provision of knowledge and skills, but also practical guidance on how to make the most of the resources available, including suggestions of practical activities, pedagogical frameworks and learning formats. FuJo and EDMO Ireland in partnership with Media Literacy Ireland have the capacity to provide both online and face-to-face free training to post-primary teachers in topics related to all four strands of the specification. There needs to be a national coordination managed by the Department of Education so that we have access to schools that offer the DML short course and teachers who teach it.

## **E. Assessment guidelines**

The guidelines for the final project are comprehensive and contain many important pedagogical elements, such as:

- Students can choose a topic of their own interest;
- The topic may arise from interests of a cross-curricular nature;
- Students can decide the digital format in which the project will be presented and published;
- Students might be given the opportunity to present elements of their project to a suitable audience and appropriate format on completion of the work.

In relation to levels of achievement and features of quality, we recommend that these guidelines also include an evaluation of critical knowledge – or critical thinking skills. Assessing critical thinking is a complex task as it involves evaluating people's ability to analyse information, think logically, and make reasoned judgments.

Group discussions and debates with students can be a good way for teachers to assess this. They can observe students' interactions to evaluate their ability to ask thoughtful questions, articulate their opinion, consider different perspectives, and provide well-reasoned arguments. Depending on the topic, teachers can present students with real-world problems that require critical thinking skills to solve. In this way, they can assess their ability to identify the most important issues, collect and analyse relevant information, and propose logical solutions.

Teachers may also ask students to keep a reflective journal throughout the length of the short course, where they can document their thoughts and critical reflections on various topics over time. Teachers can regularly review these journals to assess their improvement and development in critical thinking skills.

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