DCU Institute for Future Media, Democracy, and Society (DCU FuJo)

and the European Digital Media Observatory Ireland Hub (EDMO Ireland)

submission to the

Department of Education and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth consultation on the successor strategy to the National Strategy Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011 – 2020

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Dr Eileen Culloty

Deputy Director, DCU FuJo

Coordinator, EDMO Ireland

Dr Ricardo Castellini da Silva

Postdoctoral Researcher, DCU FuJo

Media Literacy Lead, EDMO Ireland

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. DCU FuJo 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.

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. It is co-financed by the European Union's Connecting Europe Facility.

Introduction

DCU FuJo and EDMO Ireland welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important consultation on the development of a successor to the *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011–2020*.

In particular, we welcome the inclusion of digital literacy in the discussion paper on the *Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy Consultation*[1]. However, we have specific recommendations to ensure that the conception and implementation of digital literacy is fit for purpose. In particular, we advocate for the adoption of the broader concept of *digital media literacy* and a broader conception of literacy outcomes that goes beyond the acquisition of technology skills. This is necessary to recognise the increasingly complex set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes young people require to embrace the opportunities and avoid the harms associated with digital technologies and digital media. That requires that young people are not only confident in their ability to use digital technologies, but are also knowledgeable about and critical of the digital world.

We note that the declaration of *European Digital Rights and Principles*[2], signed by the Presidents of the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council in December 2022, recognises that "digital technologies can be used to stimulate engagement and democratic participation". It further highlights the need "to create a digital environment that protects people from disinformation, information manipulation and other forms of harmful content".

Relatedly, the EU's *Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)*[3] places emphasis on a range of digital challenges relating to false information, online safety, and artificial intelligence. It identifies a crucial role for education and educators in equipping young people, and indeed all citizens, with essential skills and knowledge to navigate digital media.

Drawing on our expertise in digital media literacy and countering online harms, we present our key recommendations below in relation to:
- Addressing relevant literacies;
- Going beyond skills;
- Embedding media literacy in the curriculum;
- Empowering teachers; and
- Empowering parents and caregivers.

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[1] https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/243229/39587b6e-0f9a-4c6c-ab45-d04e2feb80cf.pdf#page=null
[2] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-principles
[3] https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan

Recommendations

Addressing relevant literacies

The discussion paper refers to "digital literacy". Although there is a reference to "the full spectrum of digital literacies, including social media usage", there is no elaboration on other literacies.

The term "digital literacy" is often employed as a variant of media literacy with an emphasis on the practical skills necessary to use digital technologies. In contrast, "media literacy" refers to the lifelong process of acquiring the knowledge, skills and practices that are necessary to be a consumer and producer of media content in a critical, creative, and responsible manner. Fundamentally, media literacy 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"[4]. Consequently, we suggest, media literacy is a more appropriate concept to underpin a core literacy in the national strategy.

We recommend the adoption of the broader concept of media literacy, which encompasses digital literacy.

Going beyond skills

The discussion paper reflects a narrow focus on "digital skills", the "ability to use technology", and "the use of online and blended learning and digital resources".

The emphasis on digital skills and technology use reflects previous concerns about digital divides in the adoption of new technologies. Although those concerns remain valid, digital technologies are now pervasive and it is the design, architecture, and governance of these technologies that determine their impact on individuals, societies, and democracy. Consequently, we suggest it is a mistake to conflate the ability to use technology with the kind of critical knowledge that is required for literacy. For example, a young person may know how to use a search engine but lack any understanding of how the results are determined and why they might be biased or limited. Similarly, a young person may be a regular user of a social media platform, such as TikTok, and adept at uploading their own content while lacking any understanding of how personalisation and commercial incentives influence what is seen.

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[4] Mihailidis, P., 2018. Civic media literacies: Re-imagining engagement for civic intentionality. Learning, *Media and Technology*, 43(2), pp.152-164.

We recommend a broader focus on the critical knowledge, skills, and attitudes that underpin media literacy.

Embedding media literacy in the curriculum

The discussion paper notes the importance of offering "multiple opportunities for the development of digital skills and digital literacy" across the curriculum from primary to senior cycle. It further suggests that "the use of online and blended learning and digital resources" is "key to addressing literacy, numeracy and digital literacy".

We suggest that the use of digital resources may be beneficial from a pedagogical perspective, but should not be confused with digital or media literacy. Moreover, in keeping with the above recommendations for the adoption of the broader concept of media literacy, we note that, across Europe, media literacy education suffers from a lack of harmonisation and inconsistent levels of implementation[5]. In Ireland, some elements of media literacy are spread across the national curriculum. There are opportunities to explore media literacy in Transition Year programmes and a short course on Digital Media Literacy is available to Junior Cycle teachers across the country. However, Ireland follows most European countries in the sense that it lacks a national strategy to implement media literacy in schools and media literacy is often conceived narrowly as an ICT-related subject.

We recommend that media literacy be embedded within the mainstream curriculum.

Empowering teachers

The discussion paper states that "continuous professional learning supports for teachers and early years educators are essential in order to achieve improved learning experiences and outcomes for all our learners in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy."

DCU FuJo is currently investigating the state of teacher training on media literacy in Ireland and other European countries. Based on our preliminary understanding, it appears that teacher education providers typically opt for isolated ICT courses. These courses have been criticised for their narrow focus on technical and information skills that do "not prepare students adequately with the breadth of knowledge and capabilities needed in today's classrooms and beyond"[6].

In Ireland, there are bodies offering broader training to teachers in relevant areas. For example, the Anti-Bullying Centre at Dublin City University created a module for student teachers in the DCU Institute of Education on 'Social Media, Wellbeing and

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[5] Frau-Meigs, D., Velez, I. and Michel, J.F. eds., (2017), *Public policies in media and information literacy in Europe : cross-country comparisons*, Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor and Francis.

[6] Falloon, G. (2020). From digital literacy to digital competence: the teacher digital competency (TDC) framework. *Educational Technology Research and Development,* 68, 2449–2472.

Society'. It covered, for example, cyberbullying, hate speech, and sexting. Relatedly, Webwise, as the Irish Internet Safety Awareness Centre, develops and disseminates resources that help teachers integrate internet safety into teaching and learning in their schools. However, there is an overall lack of a common strategy for teacher training.

We recommend that the new national strategy be complemented with a plan for training student teachers in media literacy in addition to opportunities for continuous professional learning.

Empowering parents and caregivers

The discussion paper notes that parents, families, early childhood carers, and the community play a major role in fostering and supporting literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

Regarding digital literacy, we note that digital technologies and digital media have become a ubiquitous component of the lives of children and young people. These changes are associated with opportunities and risks. There are new opportunities for fostering creativity, self-expression, collaboration, inclusion, and civic engagement. Yet, there are significant risks including adult exploitation, cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, and other harms[7]. A major challenge is that parents and other caregivers may lack fundamental knowledge about relevant technologies and platforms and about the behaviours, media, and personalities that are popular on those platforms[8].

We recommend that resources be targeted at parents and caregivers to empower them to understand the dynamics of digital technologies and digital media.

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[7] https://gdc.unicef.org/resource/growing-digital-world-benefits-and-risks
[8] Livingstone, S. and Blum-Ross, A., eds (2020). *Parenting for a digital future: How hopes and fears about technology shape children's lives*. Oxford University Press.

For further information please contact:

Dr Eileen Culloty

DCU FuJo Deputy Director and EDMO IrelandCoordinator

E: eileen.culloty@dcu.ie

Dr Ricardo Castellini da Silva

DCU FuJo Postdoctoral Researcher and EDMO Ireland Media Literacy Lead

E: ricardo.castellinidasilva@dcu.ie

Web: www.fujomedia.eu

Twitter: @FuJoMedia

Email: fujo@dcu.ie

Web: https://edmohub.ie/

Twitter: @Ireland_EDMO

Email: edmo@dcu.ie