



## Fake, Real, or Ad? Media Literacy Matters

The stakes for requiring a global commitment to media literacy education could not be higher. The spread of misinformation and disinformation on the Internet is impacting democracy and public safety, and it has become imperative that users develop the skills to assess the reliability of online content. 2020 has seen a global pandemic that has crippled national economies, left millions unemployed, and killed hundreds of thousands. Accurate information about COVID-19 is a matter of life and death. This public health information determines how people act to keep themselves and their families safe. Misinformation has also had a significant impact on national elections, and it is vital for democracy that voters are able to determine the truthfulness of the information that they are receiving on and offline.

In the United States, the [National Association for Media Literacy Education](#) (NAMLE) defines media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication.” In the United Kingdom, [Ofcom](#) describes it as “the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts.” UNESCO focuses on what a 21st century citizen should be able to do online, i.e. what is necessary for modern life and work. This FOSI Brief acknowledges how essential digital skills are for all Internet users and aims to explore the state of media literacy education in the US and around the world.

Social media is a significant source of news for [55% American adults](#). As more people get their news online, it is essential that peoples’ digital media literacy improves substantially. Being able to determine the veracity of incendiary headlines, political bias, sponsored advertisements that are made to look like organic content, and simply false information can be very hard to do online.

Media literacy is not just for children, rather it is essential for people of all ages. Even digital natives, those who have grown up with high speed Internet and are fluent in navigating smartphones, apps, and the Internet generally, have been [documented](#) failing to accurately evaluate digital news online. While young people may be more comfortable navigating the online world, they still need comprehensive digital media literacy education to determine fact from fiction.

There is also evidence that suggests adults and older citizens have the most to gain from media literacy lessons. Adults over 60 years old are [the most targeted population](#) for online scams, phishing, and other cyber crimes. Older adults are also [the most likely to share fake news](#) on social media, regardless of political ideology. In a [study](#) on the spread of misinformation in the 2016 US presidential election, researchers found that one of their “most robust and consistent finding[s] is that older Americans were more likely to share articles from fake news domains.” However, there are far fewer opportunities for adults and older citizens to learn new skills, and this is an area that requires more work.

The teaching of media literacy has been approached differently around the world. In some countries it has been led by the government, and in others NGOs have taken responsibility. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to this, but what follows are examples of the different methods.

The United Kingdom has taken a national approach to media literacy education, integrating it into national curriculum for all 5 - 18 year olds. Children are taught critical thinking skills and to consider the role that media plays in society. Furthermore, under

the Communications Act 2003, [Ofcom](#) has a statutory duty to promote media literacy and research into adults' and children's understanding and use of electronic media.

Canada's efforts have been driven by the provinces and territories. [Ontario](#) lists media literacy alongside reading, writing, and oral communications as the four broad areas of its language curriculum. At the national level, organizations like [MediaSmarts](#) offer resources and materials that allow teachers to implement age-specific lesson plans and activities that incorporate digital media literacy across all disciplines. While Canadian provinces have made progress in establishing standards and including these topics in their curricula, there is not a national baseline requirement to teach the subject across the country.

The United States does not currently have a national literacy program, leaving the states, NGOs, and companies to fill the void. Florida and Ohio require media literacy education across curriculum and in all grades, and 12 other [states](#) have similar requirements.

Meanwhile, in the classroom, a [middle school](#) in Brooklyn, New York incorporated news literacy into its English language arts curriculum and students became better equipped to fact check and evaluate the veracity of a news article than their parents. A high school [teacher](#) in Lincoln, Nebraska witnessed significant changes in his students after one semester of media literacy education, from believing headlines and articles at face value to questioning and fact checking sources. Another [teacher](#) in Cedar Falls, Iowa commented on how much students have to learn in distinguishing news from opinion from advertisements, but saw excitement and engagement from those in his classes when it was discussed. Despite these encouraging examples, there is still significant variation between (and even within) each state's program, especially when comparing the leading districts and states with those that have no requirements for teaching the subject.

At the Federal level, Senator Amy Klobuchar and Representative Elissa Slotkin introduced the Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act, [S.2240/H.R.4668](#) in the 116th Congress. The bill would establish a competitive grant program for states and school districts to create, expand, or improve media literacy education for K-12 students, a promising step towards prioritizing this critical area in the United States.

NGOs have filled in the gaps in curriculum and research in the US. The [Center for Media Literacy](#) and the [Stanford History Education Group](#) have produced lesson plans, resources, and professional development training for teachers to use in their classrooms. While [NAMLE](#) and [Media Literacy Now](#) have conducted research and produced annual reports on media literacy education across the US. These groups drive the conversation and target efforts to improve education by highlighting examples of effective state laws and local efforts.

Additionally, the technology industry has taken steps to educate users. [Microsoft](#) is offering interactive lesson plans for students through a partnership with the BBC. [Twitter](#) has a handbook for educators developed with UNESCO, which encourages young users to critically analyze news and information they see online and offers teachers best practices and reading lists. [Facebook](#) has a Digital Literacy Library with resources tailored to teachers and instructors. [Google](#) has its Be Internet Awesome curriculum, which teaches kids the foundations of safety and citizenship. All of these programs aim to improve the media literacy of young Internet users and to assist teachers in arming students with the skills needed to recognize and resist misinformation they encounter online.

At a transnational level, [UNESCO](#) has created model curricula for teachers, developed guidelines for national policies and strategies, facilitated international cooperation, and worked with the UN to establish an international clearinghouse on media literacy. Meanwhile NATO and the European Union have acknowledged the considerable dangers associated with misinformation and have supported education efforts as a strategic defense priority. The US Department of State [addressed](#) the importance of media literacy at the international *Defending Democracy through Media Literacy* workshop, highlighting comprehensive education as a way to boost resilience against disinformation campaigns.

Experts at [FOSI's July 2020](#) webinar on media literacy agreed that the ability to evaluate sources and discern fact from fiction is an essential skill in the 21st century. The responsibility for educating users rests with us all, from defense experts at NATO to a teacher in Brooklyn, from UK schools to global Internet companies, and from parents to lawmakers. It is only through this level of holistic cooperation that we will be able to combat the spread of misinformation, protect public health and democracy, and keep children and families safe on and offline.

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## About FOSI

The Family Online Safety Institute is an international, non-profit organization which works to make the online world safer for kids and their families. FOSI convenes leaders in industry, government and the non-profit sectors to collaborate and innovate new solutions and policies in the field of online safety. Through research, resources, events and special projects, FOSI promotes a culture of responsibility online and encourages a sense of digital citizenship for all.