



CANADA'S CENTRE
FOR DIGITAL AND
MEDIA LITERACY

Review of the Canadian Communications Legislative Framework

January 10, 2019

Submitted by MediaSmarts to the Broadcasting and Telecommunications Legislative Review Panel

About MediaSmarts

MediaSmarts is the national, bilingual, not-for-profit centre for digital and media literacy. For the past 25 years MediaSmarts has advanced digital and media literacy in Canadian schools, homes and communities, developed and delivered high-quality Canadian-based digital and media literacy programs and resources, and conducted and disseminated research that contributes to the development of informed public policy on issues related to media. Through our work, we support families with information and tools so they can help children and youth develop the critical thinking and digital literacy skills they need to benefit from the digital economy and society, and derive new opportunities for employment, citizenship, innovation, creative expression and social inclusion.

Introduction

The leadership shown in the past by the federal government is an important part of why Canada is now seen as a world leader in media education. Today there is again a pressing need for the federal government to play a leadership role in promoting digital and media literacy.

In Public Notice CRTC 1996-36, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) recognized the importance of media literacy, saying “the largest part of the solution to television violence lies in long-term public awareness and media literacy.” Today, more than two decades later, it is more urgent than ever that we not only promote media literacy among students and the general public, but that our media literacy efforts be updated to reflect today’s networked media environment.

Where once the typical consumer was at the end of a distribution chain, today they are at the centre of a functionally infinite network – one where they are both audiences and broadcasters. One consequence of this, as stated in the Terms of Reference for this review, is that “various actors are using [digital media] to distribute false and misleading information. The phenomenon of online disinformation has the potential to undermine our democratic institutions, compromise the integrity of our elections and erode public trust.” It is not an exaggeration to say that our

democracy may depend on our ability to teach people not just to identify those sources that they cannot trust, but also be able to recognize those they can.

Misinformation is just one of the aspects of our current media environment that has an impact on democracy in Canada. Another is that the way we select the media we consume has become much less transparent to the consumer. It's difficult to engage critically with media when you are not aware of how you are interacting with it; few youth or adults understand the role that algorithms play in determining which products are advertised to them, what search results they see, and what videos are recommended to them (YouTube reports that 70 percent of views come as a result of their recommendation algorithm). This, too, has important implications for the future of our democracy, as algorithmic decision-making expands into areas such as employment, law enforcement and corrections. Similarly, Canadians cannot be expected to be savvy consumers if they don't understand the contracts they're entering into, or even the economy they're participating in. MediaSmarts' research with youth has found that almost none of the youth we interviewed understand how platforms such as Instagram or Snapchat make money, or why their data is valuable to corporations.

These are only a few examples of the ways in which digital and media literacy have become both essential life skills and fundamental elements of engaged citizenship. A report by the London School of Economics Commission on Truth, Trust and Technology underlines the importance of media literacy to empower citizens to participate in government at all levels:

Citizens need information to participate for social, community and political purposes at all levels from local to global, including to share and [to] organise to act collaboratively. This requires information, communication tools and inclusive access, plus the nurturing of critical skills to weigh information and the communicative skills to contribute quality information.¹

Defining Media and Digital Literacy

Because both digital and media literacy are fairly new concepts, there is considerable debate amongst experts and academics around the world as to how they should be defined. It is generally agreed that skills and competencies for digital literacy and media literacy are closely related to each other and to additional “21st-century” skills that are needed for living and working in media- and information-rich societies.²

For example, the key concepts for media literacy—that media is constructed; that audiences negotiate meaning; that media have commercial, social and political implications; and that each medium has a unique aesthetic form that affects how content is presented—are as applicable to watching TV news as to searching for health information online.

¹ Tackling the Information Crisis: A Policy Framework for Media System Resilience. (2018) London School of Economics Commission on Truth, Trust and Technology.

² Hobbs R. (2010). Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action. The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program. https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2010/11/Digital_and_Media_Literacy.pdf

Although digital and media literacy both draw on the same core skill of critical thinking, the fact that most digital media are networked and interactive raises additional issues and requires additional habits and skills: media literacy generally focuses on teaching youth to be critically engaged consumers of media, while digital literacy is more about enabling youth to participate in digital media in wise, safe and ethical ways. However, it is important to keep in mind that digital literacy does not replace or run parallel to media literacy but rather builds on it while incorporating new concepts that arise from the added dimension of networked interactivity. At the same time, many digital issues cannot be understood without traditional media literacy. For example, youth cannot fully understand why online services want to collect their personal information without exploring the commercial considerations of those services, a traditional concern of media literacy. Even a highly technical subject like the role of algorithms (such as Google’s search algorithm or Facebook’s News Feed) in shaping our online experience and behaviour can really only be understood through a media literacy lens because it depends on recognizing that these were made by people and that they are not neutral tools but rather reflect the biases and assumptions of their creators.

While creating media has always been an element of media literacy education, the interactive nature of digital technology leads it to be as much a *tool* as a medium. As a result, the core skill of traditional media literacy, critically ***understanding*** media, must be supplemented with additional competencies in ***accessing, using*** and ***creating*** digital content³:

- To ***Access*** digital media does not simply mean *having* access to it, though that is of course a precondition; it means being able to select and access the content you need, whether that’s accurate search results or videos that are appropriate for your children.
- ***Use*** represents the technical fluency that’s needed to engage with computers and the Internet. Skills and competencies that fall under “use” range from basic technical know-how—using computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, email and other communication tools—to the more sophisticated abilities for accessing and using knowledge resources, such as search engines and online databases, and emerging technologies such as cloud computing.
- ***Understand*** is the set of skills that help us comprehend, contextualize, and critically evaluate digital media so that we can make informed decisions about what we do and encounter online. This includes recognizing how networked technology affects our behaviour and our perceptions, beliefs and feelings about the world around us, and prepares us for a knowledge economy as we develop—individually and collectively—information management skills for finding, evaluating and effectively using information to communicate, collaborate and solve problems.
- ***Create*** is the ability to produce content and effectively communicate through a variety of digital media tools, from social networks to coding languages. The ability to create using digital media—whether through blogs, tweets, wikis or any of the hundreds of avenues for expression and sharing online—is at the heart of citizenship and innovation.

³ Digital Literacy Framework Navigator. (n.d.) Information and Communications Technology Council.
<<https://roadmap.digitalyouth.ca/>>

This definition of digital literacy, which has been adopted by the National Leadership Taskforce on Education and Skills⁴ and elaborated into a comprehensive digital literacy framework⁵, goes beyond the formal education sector: these are, increasingly, fundamental life and employment skills needed by all Canadians. The specific skills that are needed will vary from person to person depending on their needs and circumstances – which can range from basic awareness and training to more sophisticated and complex applications. While the need to equip adults with digital literacy skills is clear—as research has clearly shown that their lack is a barrier in retaining employability⁶, accessing health information⁷ and government services⁸, and participating in democratic discourse among other activities—we also cannot expect that the challenge will simply go away when today’s young Canadians grow into adulthood. MediaSmarts’ consultations with youth, as well as our quantitative surveys of young Canadians, have shown that while they are enthusiastic users of digital technology, few of them possess either the technical proficiencies or critical thinking skills required to be digitally literate.⁹ (Indeed, our consultations with youth have shown that they themselves feel adults overestimate youths’ tech skills.)¹⁰

The need for national leadership

To address this, we recommend that *the federal government enact a national strategy to promote digital literacy* not only in terms of technical skills, but also including the elements of consumer awareness, verification of information, and digital citizenship that emerge from a media literacy approach.

The federal government has identified promoting digital literacy as an important means of addressing issues ranging from radicalization to violence¹¹ to maintaining the health of democracy in Canada.¹² The recent report by the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics recognized “the need for more research and efforts into digital literacy and public education,” and recommended that the federal government invest in research regarding the impacts of online misinformation, as well as increase its investment in digital literacy initiatives.¹³ Research conducted in 2017 also found strong support among Canadians for a national digital literacy strategy, with 56 percent of respondents rating it as “important” and 28 percent as “very important.”¹⁴ As part of this strategy, the government should *fund a national study to*

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Use, Understand & Create: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools. (n.d.) MediaSmarts. <<http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/use-understand-create-digital-literacy-framework-canadian-schools>>

⁶ Digital Literacy: Canada’s Productivity Opportunity. (2010) Information and Communications Technology Council.

⁷ Borg, K., Boulet, M., Smith, L., & Bragge, P. (2018). Digital Inclusion & Health Communication: A Rapid Review of Literature. *Health Communication*, 1-9. doi:10.1080/10410236.2018.1485077

⁸ Colledge, M., Haight, M. “The risk of building infrastructure without building digital literacy.” The Globe and Mail. September 26, 2016. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/rob-commentary/the-risk-of-building-infrastructure-without-building-digitalliteracy/article32043633/>

⁹ Steeves V. (2014) Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Experts or Amateurs? Gauging Young Canadians’ Digital Literacy Skills.

¹⁰ Digital Youth Summit 2015. (2016) MediaSmarts. <http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/publication-report/full/youth-summit-may-2015.pdf>

¹¹ National Strategy on Countering Radicalization to Violence. (2018) Public Safety Canada.

¹² Democracy Under Threat: Risks and Solutions in the Era of Disinformation and Data Monopoly. Report on the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics. (2018)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Digital Literacy. (2017) Abacus Data.

determine current levels of media and digital literacy among Canadians, as a first step towards promoting digital literacy in the fields of education, citizenship, employment and community awareness.

Benefits of Digital Literacy

A comprehensive national digital literacy strategy will do more than provide Canadians with skills essential to lifelong participation in civil society: it will also provide significant benefits relating to other factors included in this consultation, including:

- Developing the ability to *use* and *create* digital media, along with the media production aspect of media literacy education, will ***increase the pool of media creators in Canada*** and thereby ***support the development of Canadian content*** in both traditional and digital media outlets, as well as the creation of media in French and indigenous languages and which reflects the cultural diversity of Canada's population.
- Promoting consumer awareness as an essential part of digital and media literacy will ***empower Canadians to take a more active role*** in bringing complaints to industry, regulators, and self-regulatory bodies, and to have a better understanding of how to effectively complaint and regulatory systems.
- Promoting greater awareness among Canadians of all ages of the financial, personal and other risks of the online environment will ***increase consumer confidence and trust in the online marketplace***.
- Enhancing the government's capacity to provide support for Canadians who may be socially, geographically or economically disadvantaged or excluded to participate in and benefit from the digital economy – thereby ***bridging digital divides and building capacity amongst all Canadians***.

Role and mandate of the CRTC

While various ministries and other government bodies have recognized the need for digital and media literacy, and in some cases have supported it directly, in order to develop a national digital literacy strategy the federal government ***needs to designate one agency as having an overall leadership role***.

Over the last three decades the CRTC has supported media literacy to the fullest extent that it has been capable within the limits of its mandate: "Governing bodies and regulators have a role to play in promoting digital literacy and encouraging citizens to access and utilize digital information, communications, and technologies... Increased digital, mobile and social media literacy in Canada will contribute to the co-creation of a diverse and richly connected culture benefiting all members and participants."¹⁵ Given the history of media and digital literacy in Canada, as well as examples set in other countries that have established national strategies, we believe it makes sense to ***expand the mandate of the CRTC to make it directly responsible for media literacy***.

¹⁵ Environmental Scan of Digital Media Convergence Trends: Disruptive Innovation, Regulatory Opportunities and Challenges. (2011) Canadian Radio Television and Communications Commission.

As a report by the Australian Communications and Media Authority put it, “media and communication regulatory authorities, in standing between two worlds, [are] also standing between different approaches to regulation: to shield and protect or to prepare people to ‘self-regulate’ through media education.”¹⁶ Eve Salomon, author of the UNESCO/Commonwealth Broadcasting Association Guidelines for Broadcasting Regulation, explains why regulators should take the lead in media and digital literacy: “the regulatory authority is in an ideal position to act as a neutral arbiter and—importantly—as an advisor to government on media literacy initiatives. Furthermore, the legitimisation of the role of the regulator itself depends to a large extent on citizens’ understanding of the purpose and means of regulation.”¹⁷

Many nations have already taken this approach: among the one-third of European Union members which have established a statutory responsibility for media literacy education, the media regulator is most often partly or fully responsible for its support and implementation. These nations take a variety of approaches to funding and supporting media literacy education:

- In **Australia**, the *Enhancing Online Safety Act 2015* created the office of the eSafety Commissioner and directed the Australian Communications and Media Authority to provide support to the Commissioner as needed. While not precisely a regulatory agency, the Commissioner acts as a point of contact between consumers and industry, as well as government and law enforcement on issues such as cyberbullying and offensive or illegal content. It also provides digital literacy resources for parents, children and the general public, both on its own and in partnership with industry, other government agencies, state ministries of education and non-profit organizations.¹⁸
- In **Greece**, the Secretariat General for Media and Communication has directly funded programs to promote media literacy “as a lifelong learning skill within digital inclusion for all citizens,”¹⁹ often in collaboration with international agencies, civil society organizations and other government bodies, particularly the national Ministry of Education.
- The National Media and Infocommunications Authority of **Hungary** funds and operates its own media and digital literacy programs, most notably the Internet Hotline website and “Magic Valley” media literacy centres.²⁰
- The Broadcasting Authority of **Ireland** has supported the development of an annual media literacy work plan, supports a National Media Literacy Network, and supports media literacy research and programs through grants awarded as part of the Broadcasting Funding Scheme, under which seven percent of the TV licence fee paid by consumers is allocated to support media production and media literacy.²¹
- In **Poland**, the National Broadcasting Council has a statutory obligation “to promote media literacy (media education) and to cooperate with other state authorities, non-governmental

¹⁶ Penman, R., Dr. & Turnbull, S. (2007). *Media Literacy—Concepts, Research and Regulatory Issues (Rep.)*. Canberra: Australian Communications and Media Authority.

¹⁷ Salomon, E. (2009). *The Role of Broadcasting Regulation in Media Literacy*. *Comunicar*, 16(32), 147-156. doi:10.3916/c32-2009-02-013

¹⁸ Office of the eSafety Commissioner. n.d. < <https://www.esafety.gov.au> >

¹⁹ Public Policy Status of Media Literacy in Greece. (2017) Camera Zizanio. <https://camerazizanio.net/2017/01/17/public-policy-status-of-media-literacy-in-greece/> >

²⁰ Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28 (2016) European Audiovisual Observatory.

²¹ Media Literacy Policy. (2016) Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.

authorities and other institutions in the area of media education.” The Council has implemented its own initiatives, organized events to bring together researchers and practitioners, and supported non-profit organizations in research and program development.²²

- The **Swedish Media Council** has developed its own resources and also acts as a coordinator for other government agencies and non-profit organizations working in the media and digital literacy fields.²³
- In the **United Kingdom**, the *Communications Act* was revised in 2003 to make the Office of Communications (Ofcom) responsible for research into, and promotion of, media literacy among both young people and adults.²⁴

While there are a number of different models to draw on—and it may, as well, be more valuable to develop a made-in-Canada approach—there is no question that it is critical that the federal government take the lead in promoting media and digital literacy in Canada.

²² Ibid.

²³ Forsman M. (2014) Media and Information Literacy Policies in Sweden.

²⁴ Communications Act. (2003)