

## INTRODUCTION AND TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

A good way to prepare the audience would be to assess their level of awareness regarding the subject matter, whenever you begin explaining a subtopic. This can be done using the following method:

Spark a conversation and create a dynamic atmosphere by asking some introductory questions, such as:

- What do you know about literacy?
- In what context have you encountered the term literacy?
- What about media and digital literacy? What is the difference between the two concepts?
- Could you give some examples of types of literacy?
- What is “functional illiteracy” and how does it affect the perception of information?
- Do you know what are the main factors leading to a fair level of digital media literacy?
- What social categories, age groups, etc., are more vulnerable to disinformation?
- How would you describe someone who is “media illiterate”?
- Are you familiar with the idea of lifelong learning and its implications?

## GLOSSARY

**Literacy:** 1. the ability to read and write; 2. literacy also refers to the knowledge of a particular subject, or a particular type of knowledge. (Cambridge Dictionary)

**Functional literacy:** Person who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing, and calculation for his or her own and the community’s development. (UNESCO)

**Media literacy:** Media literacy refers to all the technical, cognitive, social, civic, and creative capacities that allow us to access and have a critical understanding of and interact with media. These capacities allow us to exercise critical thinking while participating in the economic, social, and cultural aspects of society and playing an active role in the democratic process. This concept covers all kinds of media interactions (broadcasting, radio, press, the Internet, social media) and addresses the needs of all ages. (Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28, European Audiovisual Observatory, Strasbourg, 2016)

**Lifelong Learning:** All purposeful learning activity is undertaken on an ongoing basis to improve knowledge, skills, and competence. (European Commission, 2000)

**Non-formal learning:** Learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time, or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective.” (Cedefop, 2014)

**Informal learning:** *Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family, or leisure. It is not organized or structured in terms of objectives, time, or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. (Cedefop, 2014)*

**Prosumer:** *a customer who helps a company design and produce its products. The word is formed from the words "producer" and "consumer". (Cambridge Dictionary)*

## LITERACY AND MEDIA LITERACY: CONCEPTUALISATION AND STATISTICS

When we talk about **'literacy'** in our present-day context, oftentimes the discussion will take us straight to **'digital literacy'** and **'media literacy'**, since digital tools, the media environment, and the digital revolution are creating the norm and painting the picture of the world as we know it – through the media, in academical and formal education contexts, in European urban areas, to name just a few common settings. From this perspective, it becomes easy to forget that the world experiences today uneven levels of development and that there still exist places in 'our world' where digital literacy is not the norm – in some places, we cannot even consider 'literacy' as the norm, since there still exist **illiterate and functionally illiterate people**, as we will discover further along.



Source: pixabay.com

To grasp the meaning of media literacy, we will start with **defining the basic element: the term 'literacy'**, understood primarily as **"the ability to read and write"** (Cambridge Dictionary). This first level of literacy is considered 'basic literacy'.

**A second meaning of the term** reveals the fact that **"literacy also refers to the knowledge of a particular subject, or a particular type of knowledge"** (Cambridge Dictionary). This indicates that literacy can be associated with

a specific field of knowledge, and thus understood as **expertise in a certain domain** such as finances – 'financial literacy', or ICT – 'computer literacy'. In light of this second meaning of the term 'literacy', we can conclude that **literacy also means 'competence' in a specific field**. Of course, competence varies greatly when considering both basic literacy and media literacy.

We started by talking about one type of literacy, which is the gateway to a world of knowledge, and we ended up concluding that there are many types of literacy, contextual uses, and particular socio-cultural settings. David Mallows describes this aspect of the term in his article "What is 'literacy'?", on the EPALE platform website: "[...] literacy is highly contextual – what we are required to do with our literacy is always contextualized – situated within a particular socio-cultural setting. Indeed, it has become common to refer to literacies, rather than literacy, to emphasize the point that literacy is a social practice and so there is no one form of literacy that everyone needs. Instead, we all need (and use) different literacies depending on our social or professional group (e.g. nurses, teenagers, academics); the kinds of activities we engage in (e.g. shopping, dealing

with bureaucracy, studying, etc. ); and the different social and institutional contexts in which we act (school, work, home, etc.).” <sup>1</sup>

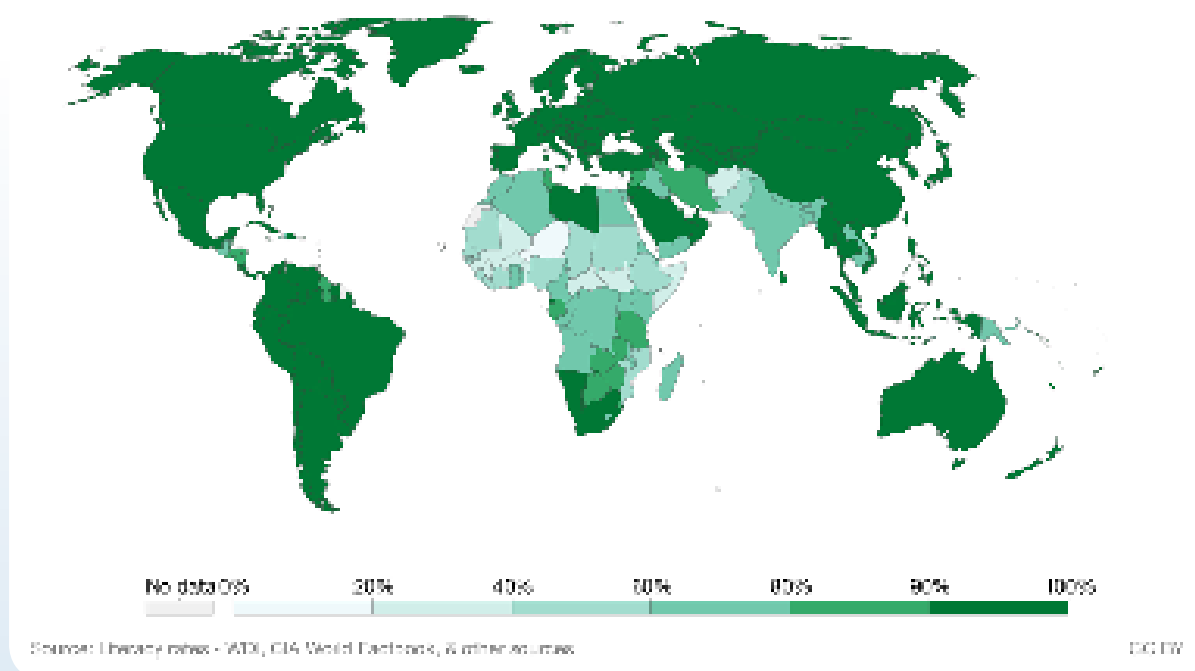
When addressing the topic of literacy, the opposite phenomenon also needs to be taken into account: illiteracy, the lack of reading and writing skills. Being completely illiterate has become quite rare, but functional illiteracy is still a serious challenge. According to UNESCO, a person is functionally literate if they can “engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for the effective functioning of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing, and calculation for his or her own and the community’s development”. In other words, being functionally illiterate means not being able to use the basic abilities to read and write to cope with everyday challenges.

For the modern European living in an urban area, it is quite difficult to grasp the fact that there are still illiterate people around the world (even in Europe) who have very little to no access to the sphere of media literacy altogether. In 2015, in many countries more than 95% of people aged 15 and above had basic literacy skills: “can both read and write with understanding a short simple statement about their everyday life”. This percentage stood right next to a 20% rate of literacy, encountered in some areas of the world, according to the study quoted below.

According to the same source, “[...] literacy levels have risen drastically only in the last couple of centuries: while only 12% of the people in the world could read and write in 1820, more recently, the share has reversed: only 14% of the world population, in 2016, remained illiterate. Over the last 65 years, the global literacy rate increased by 4% every 5 years – from 42% in 1960 to 86% in 2015.” <sup>2</sup>

### Adult literacy rates, 2015 or most recent observation, 2015

Adult literacy rate is the percentage of people aged 15 and above who can both read and write with understanding a short simple statement about their everyday life. Definitions may differ in some countries. See source for more details.



<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/blog/what-literacy>

<sup>2</sup> Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina (2020) - “Literacy”. Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/literacy>

It is worth mentioning that there is no universally accepted definition of **media literacy**, therefore you may find many definitions based on similar core views. We will start the process of defining this concept with the definition given by the EU Media Literacy Expert Group since it touches all the main aspects we have found in various other definitions: “**Media literacy** refers to all the **technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities** that allow us to **access** and have a **critical understanding** of and **interact with media**. These capacities allow us to **exercise critical thinking** while participating in the economic, social, and cultural aspects of society and playing an active role in the democratic process. This concept covers all kinds of media interactions (broadcasting, radio, press, the Internet, social media) and addresses the needs of all ages.”<sup>3</sup>

This definition encompasses a set of key principles found in most other definitions: having both the technical skills, as well as a critical understanding of the media, while employing it in different aspects of our lives to facilitate our existence in society. In other words, we educate our media literacy by refining different skill sets in order to critically assess media messages and have an active role in the information society and under the influence of the widespread availability of digital technologies.

Since media literacy is used in close relation to **digital literacy**, we feel it is important to distinguish between the two: while media literacy refers to all types of media, as we can see in the definition above (be it broadcasting, radio, press, the Internet, social media), digital literacy narrows its focus onto digital means of communication.

Media literacy arguably includes digital literacy, although according to some digital literacy would require particular skills due to network communication and interactivity.



Source: <https://tracyvanderschiff.com/2017/07/28/facilitating-the-evolution-of-human-capabilities/>

On the whole, media literacy and digital literacy imply the acquisition of the same core skill set:

- **Technical skills or practical & functional skills** > ability to access and make use of (digital) media;
- **Critical thinking & evaluation** > ability to analyze and curate information critically;
- **Collaboration and good communication** > necessary to achieve network communication and interactivity;
- **Cultural and social understanding** > necessary to establish a common ground for collaboration and network communication;
- **Creativity** > media and digital literacy proficiency empower the user toward producing content;
- **Communication ethics** > shared values based on practice norms;
- **Safety & security** > safe use of technology (especially of the internet).

<sup>3</sup> Source: “Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28 by the European Audiovisual Observatory”, Strasbourg 2016

One of the challenges when it comes to digital literacy is understanding the importance of acquiring the skill set described above in order to keep a logical order of steps and to become truly digitally literate and a fully functioning, confident member of the digital society.

Literacy as we know it is thus a relatively recent product of the modern age. What is even more evident is that **without basic literacy there can be no media literacy**. Even though a significant number of people are not directly in the sphere of media literacy, they are still affected by phenomena such as disinformation, which arise and spread through digital means and mass media. These types of phenomena work at a community scale: they start and/or are spread through the means mentioned above, but they are ultimately carried from individual to individual and from community to community using all communication means. The illiterate, functionally illiterate, and media illiterate people are bound to become victims of disinformation because they do not have the means to counter it – these categories are the most vulnerable to distortion, inaccuracy, and misrepresentation of information. We will discover some of the profiles of these vulnerable categories in the next section, to better understand their behavior about disinformation.

### ***PROFILES OF ADULT LEARNERS WITH LOW MEDIA LITERACY***

No one is completely immune to disinformation, regardless of their level of media literacy. This is because, as we will see in the following sections, hoaxes are often subtly engineered to bypass critical thinking, aiming at emotional rather than logical reactions. However, there is no doubt that certain profiles may be more exposed and affected by the spread of false information. We have built the profiles of three different characters, falling within the following categories:

- Young adults: 19-30 years old
- Adults: 31-65 years old
- Elderly people: 65+ years old



**PAUL**

**22 YEARS OLD**

After getting through compulsory education, Paul didn't have the opportunity to continue with his educational path and go to university.

As a consequence, his motivation went down, and he now only works occasionally as a delivery man.

Paul reads very few books or newspapers and spends a lot of time on social media pages or browsing YouTube videos.

He does not trust traditional media outlets or sector-specific journals, with their long and complicated articles.

On the other hand, he believes in many conspiracy theories which he shares daily on his Facebook account through heated posts, asking his followers to spread the word.

Today, he is a strong supporter of the theory claiming that 5G technology helps transmit coronavirus, although this has been firmly rejected by the scientific community.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/52168096>



Source: pixabay.com

**MIKE**  
**50 YEARS OLD**

He has a nice family and two children.

His son and daughter, who are now entering their teenage years, have introduced Mike to the world of social media.

He was sceptical at the beginning, as he never really got along with digital technologies and he blamed people for spending so much time with their eyes glued to the screen.

A few months later he received a brand-new smartphone as a gift, very fast and intuitive to use.

He started looking up his friends on social media and he created several chat groups to talk with them.

Within these groups Mike shares and receives a lot of news, chain messages and memes of uncertain source which carry controversial statements on politics, society and science.

He now checks his smartphone continuously, as social media and his circle of friends have become his main source of information.

When Mike first heard of the concept of “confirmation bias”, he thought that was complete nonsense.

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Source: pixabay.com

## **MARIA**

**86 YEARS OLD**

Maria was born in 1934. Her childhood unfolded during World War II, away from any and all media sources other than a few, scarce newspapers.

She received her first TV set when she was 34 years old, and to this day it remains a trusted source of information and life guidance. We do not know how many of her life decisions have been based on something that she learned on TV.

52 years later, she still tells stories of people in TV series as if they happened in real life.

Maria believes everything she sees on the news. She is also a great news spreader, since she shares what happened in the news with anyone willing to listen.

Interestingly, the same is true for books: the written word has the same strong impact on her and she does not grasp the meaning of 'fiction'. "Why would anyone bother to write a story if it wasn't true?", grandma Maria argues.

"If it's in writing or if they say it on TV, it must be true", she concludes.

The digital age is a parallel universe for Maria. Technology, other than her TV and landline, is a thing of complete mystery.

She enjoys FaceTiming her niece, however, if a young relative is willing to help with that.

In Maria's world view, the medium is what makes the message credible.





## TIPS FOR TRAINERS

Sketching profiles of learners always implies some degree of standardization while building different types of characters.

*Can you think of other characters that you would describe as vulnerable to disinformation? How would you describe them?*

Try to build three more characters according to your knowledge and experience with adult learners. Then, use these fictional characters to design personalized training strategies to enhance their media literacy skills.

*How would you change your approach? Would you adopt different methodologies or go for one-size-fits-all?*

Use these examples to practice with the different target groups you might find in your classes. If you find it appropriate, you may also present them to your learners to raise their awareness about how different personalities are affected by disinformation.

## IMPORTANCE OF LIFELONG LEARNING AND MEDIA LITERACY IN THE EU CONTEXT

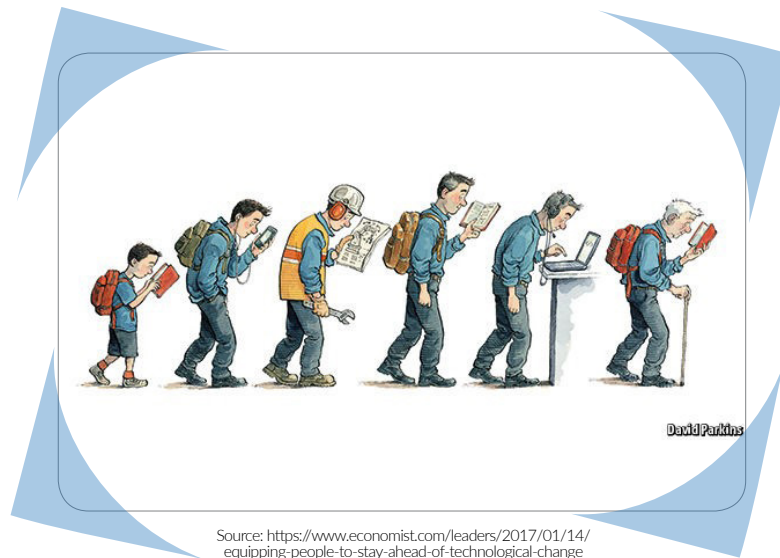
*Lifelong Learning* is a common notion used by the EU institutions working on Education and Training. It lays the ground for a crucial component of democratic life and participation inside the entire European community.

A basic definition of *Lifelong Learning* can be traced back to the “Memorandum of Lifelong Learning”, issued by the European Commission in 2000 with the purpose to launch a European-wide debate on a comprehensive strategy for implementing lifelong learning at individual and institutional level. This concept is there described as “[...] *all purposeful learning activity undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence. [...] All people living in Europe, without exception, should have equal opportunities to adjust to the demands of social and economic change and to participate actively in the shaping of Europe’s future. The term ‘lifelong’ learning draws attention to time: learning throughout life, either continuously or periodically.*”<sup>5</sup>

Discussions around the topic have increasingly started to focus on the critical factor of people’s motivation, showing how the **internal push** and a **voluntary commitment to learning** are what really makes the difference in its efficacy. People learn something when they are truly motivated to do so. In this context, non-formal and informal learning (i.e. occurring away from conventional school or academic settings) are coming under the spotlight of research and innovation in education, looking for the best methodologies to make this kind of learning emerge and be validated. This would lead to a fairer and more complete profile of people’s competences, considering the multiple facets of learning take-ups.

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2000

Lifelong learning implies a constant engagement and the willingness to take up new challenges at work and within our own personal and social role. But the act of learning also includes the necessity to keep yourself informed and up-to-date with the latest news and facts. And, of course, the ability to access, read and understand the information reported.



This is where media literacy finds a strong link with lifelong learning. Media can be defined as **means of communication for a large (or massive) audience**, and we should not take their intelligibility for granted, especially when we consider the fast pace that has characterized their evolution in the past few years. The EU has defined media literacy as the “[...] *capacity to access, have a critical understanding of, and interact with different media (broadcast, radio, press) and distribution channels (traditional, internet, social media)*”<sup>6</sup>, addressing the needs of all ages.

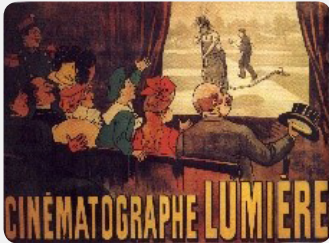
The process of digital transformation has heavily affected the world of media, to the point that they are now gathered under the collective term “digital media”. The main steps of the transition from analogically- to digitally-supported media outlets encompassed the entire 20th century, with a notable acceleration of technological development in the second half of this period.

The diagram in the next page illustrates the main milestones in this process, although we all know that many other steps and facets can be found in-between each step. **Digital media, and the way we use it, are changing rapidly.** Just think of the huge shift brought on by the internet and social media, which enabled users to abandon their previously passive role for a new proactive one. The old model of news consumption (one-way transfer of news items from a publishing/broadcasting source to an audience) is now outdated, surpassed by a new one where users are turned into “**prosumers**”. This is a relatively new term (coined in 1980 by American futurist Alvin Toffler) that blends together the words “producer” and “consumer”, efficiently describing how people on social media become at the same time producers and consumers of information, engaged in a wide activity of posting, reposting and sharing news items.

<sup>6</sup> Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/media-literacy>

**1895**

The Lumière brothers unveil the first projected **cinematographic motion pictures**



**1901**

Guglielmo Marconi raises the first **radio antenna**



**1950s**

**Television sets** begin to appear in people's homes



**1965**

Two computers communicate with each other: the **invention of the Internet**



**1998**

The **Google search engine** is born



**2004**

**Facebook goes online**, launching the social media era



The process of digital transformation comes with a great deal of **new opportunities**, but also with several **related responsibilities**. A bad or shallow use of digital instruments can lead to negative or even harmful consequences in real life. "Fake news", disinformation and misinformation can instantly reach every corner of the globe travelling across the net, with a steadily growing impact.

And who knows what is coming next? What will be the next big disruption in digital media?

Whatever that will be, media literacy skills in the context of lifelong learning (i.e. learning to learn) will be a crucial educational tool for every citizen to keep pace with the swift changes.

Picture sources:

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cin%C3%A9matographe\\_Lumi%C3%A8re.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cin%C3%A9matographe_Lumi%C3%A8re.jpg)
2. [https://ethw.org/Guglielmo\\_Marconi](https://ethw.org/Guglielmo_Marconi)
3. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/brizzlebornandbred/9283849102/sizes/m/>
4. <https://computerhistory.org/blog/the-earliest-unix-code-an-anniversary-source-code-release/>
5. <https://money.cnn.com/gallery/technology/2015/09/01/google-logos/6.html>
6. <http://blog.logomyway.com/facebook-logo-history-company/>

## **TIPS FOR TRAINERS**

Use the diagram on the evolution of media to start a brainstorming session on how the concept of “digital media literacy” has been changing over the last century.

Ask your learners to work in a group and come up with different definitions of digital media literacy based on the main technological advancements indicated in the diagram.

Finally, ask them to write what “digital media literacy” means for them today.

*What can you notice if you compare all the different definitions and their evolution?*

*What might “digital media literacy” mean in the future?*

Highlight the role of lifelong learning and why it is critical to building a safe environment for fair use of digital media that should be beneficial to society as a whole.