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Media Literacy for a More Inclusive and Sustainable Society: Situating the Field in the Communication Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT
In this article, we make the case for media literacy as an essential element in the health of the communication ecosystem by mapping the field to a theory of change. This article shares an element of the broader project, whereby the theory of change was used to evaluate the last decade of media literacy interventions for the UK Government, and in collaboration with the UK regulator Ofcom. We argue that people using their media literacy for positive consequences *can* improve ecosystem health, but through this research, we see the need for the field of media literacy to *claim less to change more*.
KEYWORDS: *Media Literacy; Theory of Change; Communication Ecosystem.*

Ecosystem

Mark Cocker concludes his book about the migration of swifts with a four page single sentence to describe the rapidly increasing toxicity of the natural environment, how our species has done this, and yet - how the transient and fleeting presence of swifts in our environment is reason for hope, if we can only look up.

The communication ecosystem is no less polluted, clearly. And yet, also – if the field of media literacy were bolder about what we can change, more credible in generating evidence, more accepting of the limits of our powers, but also more focussed on social justice, more eco-centric and epistemologically diverse - to then be more ambitious for incremental, collaborative impact, perhaps Cocker's reassurance can resonate - 'Together, we are hope' (2023, p.273).

A communication ecosystem is a dynamic ecology of networks, actors, relationships, processes and structures. It is a complex and fluid intersection of citizens, media producers and information providers, platforms, regulators and cultural, legal and political influences.
This analogy works in its resembling an environment in which organisms interact with the system and with each other. The organisms in question are in complex socio-material relations. In a communication ecosystem, energy flows in the form of an economy of attention between people, technology, organisations and the digital environment. These attentive relations are happening in the broader contexts of socio-cultural and geo-political structures and events.

Media Literacy

Media literacy is now an over-arching term to include media, information and digital literacies and can also be used to absorb other related literacies (such as visual literacy, news literacy, data literacy and algorithmic / AI literacies), as an expanded way of being in the world. In short, it is the repertoire of literacy skills and practices required to be a full citizen in the communication ecosystem at any point in the history of the human race and in any specific communications context. However, as Tessa Jolls asserts in her recent report for NATO, while interest in media literacy has expanded greatly in the times of AI and misinformation, the field is mature:

> "Media literacy is not a new discipline: it has existed for well over 50 years and has an academic research base that has helped establish and demonstrate its effectiveness in teaching skills of discernment to disparate populations. Media Literacy is a global movement, as well as a field of research study with a solid academic base; and a pedagogy for teaching and learning." (Jolls, 2022, p.5)

This NATO commission situates media literacy as a form of 'strategic defence' and in this framing, the key tension, between protectionism and empowerment, regulation and education, is clear. Media literacy is vital. However, the approaches this project seeks to validate are those which move beyond solutionism to work more in the complex 'problem spaces' of media literacy. These are interventions which endeavour to find ways to identify how citizens can 'defend' themselves more agentively, *using* their media literacies (Bennett et al, 2020) to make the communication ecosystem healthier in the future, so that there is simply less danger to be resilient *to*.

Dynamic Relations

The communication ecosystem describes the full range of media content and information distributed in the digital environment. It is a dynamic system of relations. It is useful to think about how we access, engage with and share media and information this way because it helps us to see the ways in which structure and agency work. In an ecosystem, professional media, content and information providers coexist with citizens. These citizens can be, if they so wish,

only audience members, or they can take agency with how they publicly respond to, share, and modify what they access. They can also be producers and providers of content and information themselves. An ecosystem also includes institutions who regulate media and information, and of course governments. However, a communication ecosystem will often extend beyond national borders, restricting the influence of state power. On the other hand, a company may use the ecosystem metaphor to generate their own communications strategy (see BBC Media Action, 2021) In this article we are concerned with a) the communication ecosystem a citizen is inhabiting, b) how healthy it is and c) the role of media literacy in making it healthier:

> "We have always used and relied on media to experience, express and comprehend our humanity, and it is up to us to take responsibility for the world we want in media." (Deuze, 2023, p.18)

An ecosystem approach is helpful because of the situation Deuze observes, that we are always-already living a 'life in media' now. We no longer commit particular time to engaging with media as a discrete activity or to accessing information online. Rather, these practices are deeply embedded in our everyday lived experience. This also means that the health of the communication ecosystem we inhabit influences the quality of our lives, just as the health of the natural environment makes a difference to our physical wellbeing.

As we are now living in 'postdigital' life, whereby the digital is only present when absent, like air or water, we can understand that media literacy comes to be about "the *consequences* of the digital, for diversity & the challenges of living together, after the digital." (Pasta & Zoletti, 2023, p. 27). This literacy, then, is not a solution, but a *process* of change.

> "When communication ecosystems are unhealthy, the populations they serve face multiple crises. This is not an exhaustive list, but the main areas of concern include: A lack of viable economic models; the capture of media by political or economic actors; low levels of public trust; polarisation of views; decline in media freedom and lack of equity, diversity and inclusion in the media." (BBC Media Action, 2021, p.3).

This article asserts a necessity to seize the moment to improve the health of our communication ecosystem, with and through media literacy, just as we need to take actions to reduce climate change. Crucially, to signpost climate change here is not merely a neat analogy, because there is

compelling evidence that health and science misinformation are key elements in people's inertia to the toxic natural environment. Therefore, the health of natural ecosystems and communication ecosystems are closely linked:

> *"A perfectly healthy communication ecosystem is one that is never achieved but that is always strived for. It is necessarily human, where solidarity, care, reciprocity, and love are prioritized. when criticality, difference, and diversity shine. It is healthy when community is seen, felt and heard. It is healthy when it focuses on relationships. To strive for healthy communication ecosystems is to strive for ecosystems that are connected to our physical communities, free from actors that intend to exploit, to commodify, and to extract. They support equitable representation for public life to thrive, and they do with a mix of forms of engagement, oversight, and shared principles."* (Paul Mihailidis, direct contribution to this project, 2024)

Scolari's articulation (2022) of a theory of media evolution which is itself a 'proto-discipline' begins to foreground energy flows, rather than form, content and medium. Media both create an environment which surrounds us, which we inhabit, but also relations between media are constructed by this environment. Crucially, this holistic framework can account for both ecology and evolution, spatial (synchronic) and temporal (diachronic) perspectives, and also moving between the study of the singular device and the transformations to which they contribute … " *… in the same way that Charles Darwin needed to collect fossils to build his grand theoretical framework, the media evolutionist must often work with media fossils that are located at the micro perspective level*." (Scolari, 2022, p.18).

The ecological study of communication ecosystems is commonly traced back to Marshall McLuhan's '*The Medium is the Message*'. (2003) The academic study of media environments, and our engagement with media as holistic and sensory, is often attributed to this intervention, casting a scholarly lens on "complex communication systems as environments" (Nystrom, 1973, p.1). The communication environment is not something we enter and exit, but rather inhabit, and our thinking and perceptions happen within it. Media interact dynamically with one another in this environment, like species and elements within an ecosystem (McLuhan, 2003; Scolari, 2022).

However, to essentialise or universalise communication in the interests of a coherent metaphor is counter-productive to the intentions of media literacy for social change. In the communication

ecosystem, communication is always in flux and a site of struggle, and the relative health of the ecosystem is also about the shift from appropriation of communication to communicative equality and respect for difference so that the ecosystem in full health overall promotes diversity in the pursuit of social justice. Thus, when Global Minority media literacy scholars like us are seeking to use theories of change to both position media literacy as essential for a healthier future and at the same time to unsettle the media literacy field, this is a challenging epistemological project. For the future trajectory of media ecology, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun moves us 'After McLuhan':

> "..to weave and spin outside the Eurocentric mirror, to follow wires and miss files, to punch through indices and stand on platforms. To shelter by refusing and by fabricating. Because after is not less. Rather, to come after is to change what remains in store for the future." (2022, p.225).

This 'after' is important. When the media ecology field and the media literacy community use the ecosystem metaphor in such ways as to imagine 'the media' as an actual place, this is self-defeating and resonates with the 'After the Media' provocation which formed part of the trajectory to the current project (Bennett, Kendall and McDougall, 2011) and is also pertinent to Lopez's (2023) more current critique of 'medialandia'. By 'after the media', we did not posit a temporal shift, we were not arguing that 'the media' had ceased to be. Instead, we conceived of this as akin to the postmodern – a way of thinking 'after' or 'awry' - that resists recourse to the idea of 'the media' as external to media literate agents in social practice. 'The media', as more than merely a technical grammatical plural, is constructed out of a need to preserve a status outside of it, to maintain it as other, consistent with a version of media literacy for which there exists 'the media' to be literate about.

This communication ecosystem approach departs from situating humans and media as distinct, through an anthropocentric lens on the ecosystem and a human-centred motivation for its health, for our survival. The way we are thinking now makes less, if any, distinction between human, media, machine or between nature / technology and is focussed less on ecosystem balance than on how power is exercised. It is environmental in the sense Karen Fry describes, as an intersect of context, content, power and paradigm, always differently inter-related in geo-

cultural context "in the impulse to "*understand the whole environment of possibility*." (2022, p.157)

McLuhan's metaphorical legacy must be problematised for other reasons. Firstly, feminist scholars draw attention to the frequent othering, misogyny and racism in his writing, whilst still seeking to reutilise his theoretical contributions for current concerns. Secondly, the tendency among the 'McLuhan school' to 'faithfully' project his imagined thinking onto the contemporary communication ecosystem essentialises people and machines in profoundly unhelpful ways:

> "Much of the extension of McLuhan's theories to the digital age interpret his notion that media determine culture as a singular affect upon the same singular universal human subject McLuhan was concerned with. Such a view parallels the dangerous and uncritical view of technology espoused by Elon Musk and is evidenced by the Tech-Bro culture of Silicon Valley, who remain wilfully blind to the realities of the uneven technological futures they are increasingly responsible for." (Sharma, 2022, p.4)

When thinking about the communication ecosystem and about postdigital media literacy, both *after the media* and *after McLuhan*, often this thinking works with ideas from Deleuze and Guattari (1993) and is thus considered to be 'rhizomatic'. The difference in Deleuze's thinking to McLuhan's is useful for communication ecosystem analysis, most prominently in the shift from media as extension to assemblages of people, machines and other moving parts. The argument is that 'the medium is the message' was a contribution to this thinking, so they are not in conflict, but now we are understanding that these assemblages are the starting point and not a result of things in combination:

> "When we understand humans as machinic assemblages, 'I am watching TV' no longer makes sense because TV is me in this moment. The person-remote-TV-couch assemblage is my mode of being, which means I am not in another mode of being." (Jenkins and Zhang, 2019, p.60).

Nothing comes prior to the assemblage, not a person, a machine, a medium, but also – making this very difficult – to acknowledge that the theoretical position we take is in itself an assemblage. For those seeking to adopt Deleuze's theoretical approaches to studying communication ecosystems, this is an ethical position, as the motivation must be to understand – and act on – the ways in which we can be reflexive about the assemblages we plug into. This now extends to algorithms, which, using a broadly ecological approach, we need to understand as culture, as opposed to being distinct from culture, or in culture, or transforming culture. As assemblages,

through the collective engaging practices of 'ordinary people' they are, then "*part of culture, constituted not only by rational procedures, but by institutions, people, intersecting contexts, and the rough-and-ready sensemaking that obtains in ordinary cultural life.*" (Seaver, 2017, p.10)

Using a theory of change for media literacy to improve the health of communication ecosystems is likely to struggle to avoid the problems identified in the 'conventional' use of the metaphor, it must be conceded. To apply the criteria for health, at the level of media literacy, since the subject of more or less literacy of this kind is human, the risk of a normative approach which understands the human person, or 'citizen' at the centre of change, is obvious. However, the theory of change presented here is overtly about the fostering of ecosystems for social cohesion, and it is hoped, at least, that this can at least integrate eco-media ethics, rather than reproducing the kind of ecological thinking that naturalises the capitalist order of competition and market / state equilibrium for human citizens and institutions. Crucially, the relationship here between human media literacy and the communication ecosystem does not see the latter as natural, but constructed by ideology and decisions, so the theory of change is motivated 'beyond solutionism' (McDougall and Rega, 2023) to promote media literacy as a force by motivating it with different values. This means that media literacy is not just for making people more resilient to a toxic environment. It also means that whilst the initial, achievable project might be to use media literacy to make the existing ecosystem health*ier*, the longer term, sustainable project is to use media literacy to reconfigure the ecosystem as something very different to what we inhabit today.

Care must be taken, then, when unpacking essentialising terms within the criteria formulated for ecosystem health *and* the discursive framing of media literacy for social cohesion. Care to contribute, as far as possible from England, UK, Europe, The West, to "*situate media literacy as a movement that first attempts to address problems of the margins and the marginalized and work toward designing for and with the margins*." (Melki, 2024).

We have established, then, that media literacy is productively complicated. It is profoundly dynamic.

Dynamic Literacies

To say that literacies are 'dynamic' is to embrace the ever-shifting and always contested theories of literacy which intersect and develop between semiotics and multimodality, media education, cultural studies and the new literacy studies. These perspectives share a resistance to the framing of literacy as static – a set of competences which can be easily measured. This framing is, regrettably, prominent in formal education in both curriculum and policy.

It really matters how we define 'literacy' (of all kinds and in all contexts). Perhaps we agree that literacy is a fixed, apparently neutral set of skills and competencies for engaging with texts, meaning making and communicating with other humans. This way of thinking about literacy can adapt to different situations, languages, environments, but there is a 'core business' of what literacy is that can be applied, universally. Or perhaps we agree instead that literacy is always-already changing, fluid and contested, responding all the time to socio-cultural and economic, geo-political and technological conditions. Literacy in this way of thinking is also epistemologically diverse, so we can't apply a universal framework. Which of these ideas of literacy we land upon will make a difference to *everything* we think about media literacy. Therefore, it is essential to state that the field review, findings and recommendations which follow apply the dynamic version and, since this dynamic media literacy develops and makes positive change through exchange and negotiation, it follows that much of the work cited as consequential for the health of the communication ecosystem will be operationalised in 'third spaces' (Gutierrez, 2008; Bhabha, 1994; Potter and McDougall, 2016) which can be literally and physically located or metaphorical. What they share is a fundamental resistance to media literacy being possessed by some and transmitted to or developed in others.

The autonomous modality for literacy believes in developmental stages and expectations for humans to acquire literacy at particular ages, as a series of knowledge and skill levels to be acquired individually, in the human brain. The ideological modality for literacy sees development as being about communicating between people in socio-cultural contexts. These contexts are not just there, not only 'around' literacy, but they generate it. And, of course, as we

think about media literacy, they are not only socio-cultural but socio-material and socio-technological. These are literacies of assemblage.

Crucially, for our interests here, media literacy is not dynamic literacy 'known', to be measured. Media literacy is no less dynamic, no less subject to constant transformation. Dynamic literacy is the ongoing (dis)order of things, the constant way that what it is to be literate responds to shifts in how we are making meaning through living with others in the world with and through digital media, instead of asserting (and pretending to believe in) fixed, static definitions of literacy is and isn't. It seems entirely uncontroversial to suggest that the intensely dynamic shifts in our lived experience of communication and culture have transformed literacies at equal pace, because literacy is context-bound and cannot be understood in abstraction from the means of textual production, circulation and engagement with which humans live in the world with one another. Frameworks and models for developing and measuring media literacy therefore need to include equal and safe access to critical reading to the active, creative and / or civic making *of* media. Media literacy can provide reflexive awareness of the values and ideologies reproduced in media and information, which can in turn increase citizen engagement and full democratic citizenship. This understanding of media literacy is clearly about much more than skills, competence and resilience and is informed by the radical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, transferable to the contexts in which people develop and use media literacy according to their environments, needs and available resources (see Chaiveeradech, 2022).

This movement towards these dynamic literacies is an attempt to make sense of liminal, spatial and technological aspects of human communication and is also both *synchronic*, inclusive of current situated practices, and *diachronic*, bearing witness to movement through time as an incorporated principle. Again, it cannot be reconciled with the (still) prevailing sense of literacy as static in performative systems and frameworks. Taking account of the dynamics of literacy is not only desirable but an absolute condition of possibility for an agentive and inclusive media literacy which can address – to resolve - inequality and disconnection, oppression and exclusion. Only a *dynamic* media literacy is going to change the world for the better.

Theory of Change

To restate, the change we want this dynamic media literacy to make is to contribute to a vision of a healthy communication ecosystem.

This 'ideal world' is rich, diverse, generative, eco-centric and rights-protecting. In this ecosystem, the people who inhabit it demand equal and diverse communications and safe online and data environments. Publics are motivated to "interrogate how the technology works, even when we are trying to accommodate it into our everyday lives." (Natale, 2021, p.132). At the same time, in this healthy scenario, communication actors, platforms and technology designers act in the public interest for social good. But this last element may be out of scope for media literacy, or it may be that media literacy can influence change in these domains, partially, incrementally. This is why we need a *theory* of change.

A theory of change sets out to both explain and plan for a desired change in a particular context. Key components of a theory of change include assumptions; long-term goals; activities to move towards change; outputs from the activities and success measures or indicators to evaluate the extent of change achieved. In the context of media literacy, using a theory of change to clarify, understand, plan for and evaluate the difference media literacy makes to people's lives is also in recognition that arts and media projects can struggle to evidence impact, and subsequently that "*The adoption of a theory of change approach enables creative practice researchers to evidence aspirations or intentions just as well as concrete outcomes... and provides a language to narrate their stories and articulate value in terms they understand*." (Boulil and Hanney, 2022, p.127)

This theory of change for media literacy is the culmination of a decade of research, following which the first version was created for BBC Media Action to map the impact of their work in fragile societies and diverse communities. The result was adapted and applied to projects with the British Council, and then as an over-arching framework for their activities in the media literacy space. That work is partly about communication ecosystem change for broader social justice and social cohesion objectives and partly as a specific response to the threats posed by mis, dis and mal-information. It became apparent, in the process of using this theory of change

to evaluate the impact of such organisations' interventions and to design future research, that it is sufficiently robust and adaptable to serve the global field of media literacy.

The next iteration of the theory of change was for the UK Government, in collaboration with Ofcom. This project evaluated the entire UK media literacy field for a decade, situating the impact of media literacy and being more accountable and precise about its limits. At the same time, the UK Media and Information Literacy Alliance became both a registered charity and the UK chapter of Unesco, and MILA also utilised the theory of change for their work in advocacy and capability building. The obvious next step was to apply the framework to the global field, in order to both claim with renewed conviction the difference media literacy makes to peoples' lives and to be more nuanced and rigorous about what is beyond the remit of the field or the resources we have. Perhaps most importantly, working at the 'dotted line' threshold between latent evidence and manifest evidence can sharpen our design thinking when we start new research. So, it is very important to state that reporting a lack of evidence for the longitudinal consequences of media literacy does not mean that we don't believe it is happening, only that we need to think harder about how to provide the proof.

For each of the four inter-related change elements, a set of descriptors were generated. Again, it is vital to state, these descriptors were generated from a decade of research evidence.

Access

Media literacy enables people to have the means to be included as an individual in the full media, digital and information ecosystem, through digital connectivity, technological access and the skills to use the media and digital technology available to them. Access involves who, when, where and how often people have access to media content, information and digital technology, and whether they have the knowledge and awareness needed to use it in the ways they would like to, in the contexts of everyday life, citizenship, education, work and health. It also relates to how people make choices which restrict their own access to parts of the ecosystem. Functioning civic societies require a diverse and pluralist media ecosystem and citizens being literate enough to make informed choices about what to access within the ecosystem.

Awareness

Media literacy enables people to have an awareness and understanding of how media and information represent people, events, issues and places, and are able to assess this from a critical perspective. At a basic level, this may include understanding how media content and information represents people, places, news and issues from particular points of view with particular intentions, in the contexts of everyday life, citizenship, education, work and health. On a larger scale, it includes understanding how the media environment they are engaging with is constructed, for example in terms of how diverse it is, who owns or controls different

media sources and how digital and social media is governed, designed and manipulated, the role of social media algorithms and general data literacy. Increasing awareness will support people to make more informed decisions about what media content and information sources they trust and engage with and to understand the role of media in a functioning civic society.

Capability

People use their media literacy (their access to media and information and their awareness of sources, representation, trustworthy content and the role of data and algorithms) more actively for particular purposes in their lives, rather than as passive consumers of information and content, in the contexts of everyday mediated life, citizenship, education, work and health. These purposes range from access changes, the application of more critical or mindful decision making when receiving information, the use of fact-checking of information or sources, more informed attitudes to sharing content and information, or getting directly involved in the media ecosystem as creators of media content. Increases in media literacy can also lead to new capabilities for civic engagement through digital media and technology and increased employability through the gaining of creative and/or digital skills. When media literacy develops into capability, people can be more civically engaged and societies can function better. However, it is important to appreciate that increasing media literacy capability does not inherently lead to the positive uses of media literacy. There are many examples of how skills in using media and digital platforms can be used to do harm, for instance through the exploitation of children, through the creation of false or misleading information, the production of negative media representations of people

and groups, the sharing of harmful content, commercial exploitation or actions which threaten civic society and equality.

Consequences

The distinction between capability and consequences can be subtle and nuanced, but it is about supporting positive uses of media literacy, informed not just by access and awareness of the role of media in society but also the recognition that one's own individual actions and decisions in how media literacy is used impact on the media ecosystem and society, in the contexts of everyday mediated life, citizenship, education, work and health. Focusing on how media literacy can contribute to significant change in this way encourages individuals to take media literacy actions that can make a constructive and positive impact on the media ecosystem and their lives and the lives of others in a functioning civic society. This may include taking action such as challenging misinformation and thus reducing the negative health consequences of being misled, producing media content and / or online information, sharing trustworthy content on social media, trying to increase the representation of people who are excluded or marginalised in the media or engaging in forms of data activism or even more critical and mindful non-action (e.g. not sharing misinformation, changing data settings). With this in mind, media literacy interventions should focus on how people (including the general population, children, particular 'at risk' groups, but also media practitioners) can not only develop, increase and use their media literacy to improve their lives but also to use their media literacy for positive change for everyone in the ecosystem, similar to taking positive action to improve the natural environment.

These categories of change can be used to evaluate more specifically how media literacy changes things in people's lives and also to help to design projects with more specific change objectives in mind. When we use this theory of change to evaluate a media literacy project, we use the 4 inter-related element descriptions to identify the kind of change a project has made or has the potential to make. Some projects might create change across all four elements, others might only impact on one. This will depend on scale, intentions, funding and scope. In some cases, change will be more evident in projects that focus more on one element with deliverable outcome than

others which are more ambitious but may lack realisable impacts. We think of this as a sliding scale or continuum.

When the relevant elements are identified, we use the criteria for each change element to identify evidence of change or the potential for change for each of the four elements.

Often a media literacy project will create change in more than one of these areas, so it is not about only identifying which one element is relevant, but looking across the elements to see where change can happen. This framework is also flexible so we can identify change, see the potential for change and also include both manifest and latent change.

When we have identified the change elements which the media literacy project or activity can achieve, then we move to a more detailed change objectives matrix to identify which of the specific change impacts can be evidenced or where the potential for change is apparent – for example, new kinds of knowledge developed by people taking part in the activities, or people doing things differently in their lives, and how these changes are related to their access, awareness, capability or the consequences of their media literacy.

Methodology

In the current project, media literacy interventions from across the world are being mapped to the theory of change. *Interventions* describe research, projects and educational curricular. The sampling and selection methodology was proven to work when used for the UK government in 2023. Deductive and collaborative efforts guided the development of the theory of change from the initial stages through a pilot evaluation, refinements were made from feedback from critical friends that highlighted the need for more non-academic language, inclusion of projects from different sectors (e.g., health, educational, social, and political contexts), more coherent alignment with existing resources (eg those provided by the UK regulator Ofcom) and more guidance for 'bottom up' project developers entering the media literacy research field for the first time. Following adaptations from this feedback, the approach was pre-tested in the form of a standardisation exercise. The knowledge and experience from the pilot stage was then synthesised to establish the consistent approach which guided the final review of UK projects.

Interventions included in the UK work and in the interim findings from the global extension show clear intentions, and potential, for media literacy to lead to positive change. The sampling frame is temporal (last 10 years), identifying evidence of positive change objectives, and filtered for tangible evidence-based findings.

The scope is generated through independent (keyword) searches and snowballing for further projects. For the UK exercise, interventions were randomly allocated to research team members, adding to the reduction of bias. This stage, following standardisation exercises, provide safeguarding for an open-minded approach to the global extension of the methodology for this book. A manifest and latent evaluation approach is used for data collection of projects' impact and potential impact, respectively. In this context, analysing the explicit and implicit nature of the evidence generated by projects is at the heart of the research design. In the UK project, evaluated interventions focused on different contexts and ranged from initial stages to completed projects with full impact reports. To analyse those evaluations and establish themes and distinguish types of evidence, the projects were mapped against the four key elements. Evaluations were then shared with project leads in three cases, to sense check the approach taken and gather their responses to our findings. Again, this provides proof of concept and design efficacy for this global extension, which only includes completed interventions.

Using the Theory of Change in the UK

The UK Government's Media Literacy Strategy aims to "*bring coordination to the media literacy landscape and outlines a Media Literacy Framework of best practice principles to inform the content and delivery of media literacy education.*" (UK Government, 2021).

We evaluated media literacy projects and activities in the UK over the last decade, with our focus mainly on the most recent work, including newly funded work in the UK Government Media Literacy Programme. Our sample represented the most common focus areas for media literacy projects in the UK:

- **Educational activities** to develop critical thinking about media and information, which include both small scale pilot or exploratory interventions and larger initiatives delivered across a larger quantity of settings and also including Media Studies as a school subject;

- Projects focussing on **journalism and news literacy**, either fostering news engagement and resilience to misinformation or capacity building for inclusion in journalism practice at various levels;
- **Health literacy** linked to media and information literacy, including projects aiming to reduce health inequalities through digital inclusion; interventions aiming to develop new capabilities in health professionals, activities focussing on media literacy and mental health and work seeing to improve the media ecosystem with the promotion of health information.
- **Online safety** interventions, ranging from building confidence in the online world through media literacy and active choices to more immediate risk reduction and awareness raising about privacy and data.
- Projects either measuring or seeking to increase **access and digital inclusion**.

The projects which stated the amount of funding in our sample ranged from around £10,000 to the highest with around several million pounds. Projects durations ranged from a few months for more exploratory ML projects to the longest ML programme being conducted over 18 years (although this was a long-term observation study, and as such is an outlier in our sample).

Before sharing the findings, from 30 key projects from the decade to 2023, we consulted three project leads from diverse interventions to share our evaluations of their projects and gather their feedback on how they felt about our evaluations of their work.

*BBC Young Reporter***:** feedback from the project lead included agreement that an impact report/longitudinal study would be very valuable to evidence the impact and reach. It was also highlighted that there is a tension/difference between online resources and "live" workshops: this is a fast-moving area and the needs and content have moved on as have the ways in which young people consume news. The challenge for BBC is to ensure that the online resources evolve, whereas the workshops are much more dynamic, with currency and delivered by BBC journalists.

Shout Out UK: feedback from the project team validated our evaluation, after clarification of the latent / manifest threshold and what is indicated by empty cells in the template. It was agreed that limits of funding and time mean that consequences can often only be projected. The team felt that the evaluation was an accurate reflection of outcomes and was useful for considering future improvements to designing projects with change objectives and measurable impacts.

Parenting for a Digital Future: feedback from the project lead included the view that the ongoing project blog had not been prominent enough, as we had focussed on the book and project reports. The blog was felt by the project lead to be the most likely source of outreach and engagement, evidenced by Google Analytics, but it was agreed that this was more about access and potential capability – a parental and caregiving discourse about digital media – than evidence of action or positive consequences. Our assessment of the precise recommendations and 'imagined futures' being a strong example of projected consequences was endorsed.

The review found that media literacy in the UK has created the most evident change (43% of projects / activities) in people's media **awareness.** This involves critical thinking, seeing connections between media, health, civic and educational engagements, economic opportunities and understanding the tools they need to access the full media ecosystem.

Examples: *BBC Young Reporter; Being Alone Together; Changing Conversations; Children's Data & Privacy Online: Digital Exclusion and People with SMI; Empower; GCSE Media Studies; Me & My Big Data; Ofcom's Media Literacy research; NewsWise: Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project; Parenting for a Digital Future; Refugee Journalism Project* and *The Third Space School Library.*

Projects and activities have also demonstrated the most potential (37% of projects / activities) to develop people's media literacies into **capabilities**. There is the most potential, if projects have the longer term impacts they predict, but are not able to evidence within their time-spans, these kinds of capabilities – people developing more active and resilient attitudes towards media, data and information, people feeling more motivated to make better and safer media access choices in the future and to be more mindful in their engagements with media and when sharing media and information with others.

Examples: *The Digital Citizen Project; Active Online Choices; Being Alone Together; Changing Conversations; Children's Data & Privacy Online; Experiences of Digital Exclusion; The Third Space School Library; Empower; Me & My Big Data; Parentzone SEND; The Social Switch Project* and *ShoutOut UK Extremism and Media Literacy;*

Manifest evidence is most commonly qualitative (presented by 80% of projects / activities). This is in the form of interviews and focus groups, and usually relies on self-testimony and attitudinal responses by participants, within or at the end of projects, as opposed to measuring change in action or following up the difference participation makes in everyday life with media. Often change evidence is generated from evaluations of projects. Surveys are both quantitative and qualitative, but the data presented as evidence is more typically qualitative (presented by 43% of projects / activities), with quantitative data often being used for baseline context or recruitment of participants based on selection criteria from survey responses (presented by 36% of projects / activities).

The basis for **potential for change**, beyond the scope or duration of projects, is most commonly in the form of evidence-based recommendations for media literacy work in policy and practice, which, if actioned, will lead to change (presented by17% of projects / activities). Toolkits and resources produced for and during projects are also presented with change objectives, subject to their future use by target groups (presented by 10% of projects / activities). Many projects present stated change intentions by participants, often in the form of direct quotations but also sometimes as quantitative survey response percentages (presented by 23% of projects / activities). These are latent change indicators, subject to the conversion of intentions into action, but projects generally lack capacity for longitudinal follow up to measure this.

Across the projects we evaluated, there was no tangible evidence of media literacy activities leading to positive consequences. Where projects were small scale with limited funding, this is to do with scale and timescale for capturing longer term change. However, where projects were conducted over a longer period, they often had not taken the opportunity to gather impact evidence. However, over a tenth (13%) of the sample presented significant ***potential* for positive consequences**, based on latent evidence.

In some cases, evidence of change is not manifest due more to the ways in which findings are presented than there being a lack of change. Some projects have more tangible change evidence because they include quantitative measurement indicators or particular kinds of testimony from participants which are more robust. Examples include *Being Alone Together; Be Internet Citizens; Digital Leaders; Digital Lifeline; Reaching Out Online; Reboot UK* and *Think Digital*.

In other cases, there are assumptions made, sometimes problematic, about positive change resulting from exposure to an activity, resources or training. Our theory of change is agile in this regard, identifying change potential at the latent / manifest threshold – for example, training has taken place, a measured quantity of people engaged with it and therefore have been given new capabilities (manifest) and so there is potential for the training to lead to behaviour change, such as access changes or consequences in actions (latent potential). Examples include *Digital Citizen Project; GCSE Media Studies, Shout Out UK; NewsWise* and the *Social Switch Project.*

Exploratory projects do not generally offer direct evidence of ML leading to change but can provide insights to inform future project design or practice. Examples include *Third Space School Library*; Hammond et al; *Ofcom Media Lives* and *Digital Families.*

When founded on research (qualitative and quantitative) a project that explores, for example media literacy needs and uses can still make **strong policy recommendations,** without directly offering an intervention. Examples include *Parenting for a Digital Future; Digital Exclusion and People with SMI; Me and My Big Data; Oxfordshire Digital Inclusion Project* and *Widening Digital Participation.*

Implications

One significant issue emerging from our review is **over-claiming positive impacts** from minimal evidence. In this sense a kind of confirmation bias seems 'baked in' to the media literacy field in the UK. This is most likely to be due to short term duration and funding, meaning most work is a pilot study pitching for scale up or continuation, but this places a lot of the change impact in the potential category. Identifying what improvements could be made to achieve a shift from potential to evidence would be a step towards addressing this.

Co-creation and creative methods with beneficiaries appear to be, on the evidence of our sample, the most effective way of achieving positive impacts across several elements of the theory of change. Also, impact reports facilitate evaluation of change and, again, the latent / manifest threshold can be directly addressed through these.

However, if the UK media literacy field is to move from potential to manifestly positive change, in the form of the **consequences** of more media literacy improving the health of the media ecosystem, then this requires (a) a shift in mindset for project design, as currently most projects only progress to capability and don't have consequence objectives, and (b) the funding and resources for longitudinal projects with annual impact reports, for progression and development through stages in the lifespan of activities.

Recommendations

From our findings, we made five key recommendations:

1. Media literacy project design should be realistic and precise with regard to desired change for participants, society and the media ecosystem.
2. Media literacy project design should extend beyond the development of media literacy capabilities to include objectives for the positive consequences of media literacy.
3. Media literacy projects should focus on the threshold between latent and manifest change, identifying what is needed for the shift from potential to evidence, using impact reports to facilitate evaluation.
4. Media literacy projects should use co-creation and creative methods where possible, as the evidence shows this is the most effective way of achieving positive impacts across several elements of the theory of change.
5. For the UK media literacy field to move from potential to manifestly positive change, in the form of the consequences of media literacy, this requires funders to invest in more longitudinal projects with the scope for incremental progression and development through stages in the lifespan of activities.

The Expansion

In the UK recommendation relating to co-creation, we touch upon a key aspect of the theory of change, which is to do with assessing how the configuration of project and intervention partnerships makes a difference to the motivating imperatives of media literacy work in diverse contexts. Our methodology for understanding this has been to think through how the kind of (third) space each project generated relates to the four elements of our theory of change for media literacy (see McDougall and Rega, 2022), asking:

> How do media literacy partnerships in third spaces make a difference to the ways in which people access media?
>
> How do media engagements generated by media literacy partnerships in third spaces develop more reflexive awareness of the relative health of the media ecosystem?
>
> How do media literacy partnerships in third spaces convert access and awareness into capability and how can the capabilities generated by media literacy partnerships in third spaces impact on media ecosystems with positive consequences?

We have, over a decade of research informing the theory of change, extracted transferable design strategies for conducive partnerships in relation to these objectives, These include: negotiating media literacy objectives, nuanced for local contexts, which enable a tripartite capability approach: combining third space inter-cultural knowledge exchange with counter-script media representation and media training and development; working with values for capacity and resilience – sharing across cultures, negotiating, refining, agreeing and reviewing - neither imposing nor evading; respecting difference as a first principle - so that changing media or positive change through media – to make the world more equal' diverse and inclusive - is privileged over 'the media' in all contexts and between them; looking out for both inter-cultural nuance and textual moments that 'change the story' for each partner and going with these shifts. We have observed that every media literacy partnership will be distinct, but all will have equivalent 'sparks' (see Rega and McDougall, 2022).

At the time of writing, the EDMO Guidelines for Effective Media Literacy Initiatives (2024) are newly published. These are congruent with many aspects of our work, most notably in the articulation of how "*a good media literacy initiative promotes critical understanding of the media ecosystem*." However, whilst these guidelines foreground the importance of work being

transparent, inclusive, ethical and accessible, these ambitions for 'raising standards' reproduce the paradoxical neutrality of the field, stopping short of articulating the *nature* of impact in terms of ecosystem change (and the values agreed for what we mean by positive consequences).

The work in progress for the theory of change presented in this article is to map the global field of media literacy through these same approaches. This will be published by Palgrave (McDougall, 2025). The outcome will be a precise identification of the change media literacy makes to people's lives and, again, how media literacy could change more, with clearer thinking and less over-claiming.

To conclude, to reset, to restate, again - what *is* this change we are looking for media literacy to make happen? This conversion of media literacy into capability, for individuals, and then collective positive consequences - what is at the core of this threshold between the person and society? Livingstone (2023) provides a compelling ambition:

> "What's the best we can expect of media literacy? Can it help realise human rights, and facilitate human flourishing?..... I suggest that this question should be answered collectively rather than individualistically. For media literacy to help realise human rights and facilitate human flourishing – including diverse forms of creativity, human connection, community and political participation – the institutions and structures of our society must make room for people's agency, knowledge and self-determination, finding ways to recognise and value and enable these, perhaps transforming themselves in the process…To see the positives of media literacy, we have to imagine a positive vision of society – what it could be, what people want it to be, what they need it to be. I don't know if we can agree on the answers. But perhaps we can agree that the answers matter."

Combining our vision of the healthy communication ecosystem, our 'version' of media literacy as dynamic, eco-centric and epistemic and the evidence we are generating of the difference it makes - and then putting these to work with Livingstone's imaginary - in this motivation, we arrive at the equation, for how media literacy can change things for the better, towards a more inclusive and sustainable society.

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