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Poacher turned gamekeeper? What is Google's role in improving its users' media literacy?

LSE's Sonia Livingstone, Lee Edwards and Emma Goodman consider the findings of a recent assesment of some of Google's media literacy initiatives, as part of a wider research project on which Lee and Emma were expert advisors.

The problem of misinformation has put media literacy initiatives on the map like never before. No longer just a 'nice-to-have' activity for schoolchildren on a wet Friday afternoon, media literacy is being hailed as a saviour of democracy, driver of a tech-savvy workforce, and vital for individual safety and wellbeing in a digital world. But as digital innovation poses ever more challenges for our hard-pressed and unequal society, the critical question is: who is going to design, fund and implement media literacy to educate the entire public?

What works in media literacy?

A host of well-meaning but often unsustainable initiatives have sprung up in recent years, with divergent methods, audiences and goals. In the UK, the communications regulator Ofcom has recently prioritised independent evaluation of these initiatives, to identify and share 'what works.' Meanwhile, the government has encouraged media literacy initiatives that reach underserved audiences, especially through community partnerships with NGOs. But notwithstanding their many efforts, such proof-of-concept efforts tend to remain local or at the pilot stage. In short, serious money is needed to scale up media literacy to reach a national population, and many commentators believe that this should come from big tech: after all, misinformation, online risks, and emerging technical needs are all characteristic of today's platform society.

In this blog post, we highlight the insights gained from a just-published evaluation of Google-funded media literacy initiatives across Europe. The new "learning review", funded by Google and conducted by research consultancy Ecorys with independent advice from the authors of this blog

post, shows that substantial funding can be effective in bringing media literacy initiatives to scale. With a detailed account of three case studies – Jigsaw's prebunking videos (to tackle election-related disinformation), Be Internet Awesome (e-safety lessons for children), and Super Searchers (a train-the-trainer programme for libraries) – it emerges that these initiatives are generally positively regarded by stakeholders. They are seen as genuine in their intent to improve media literacy, adaptable to specific country contexts and audiences, and largely effective in achieving many of their goals for participants.

Lessons learned from Google-funded initiatives

Indeed, the very success of some of the initiatives, combined with recognition of Google's power and reach, means that expectations are high, and at times in practice these exceeded the delivery and outcomes. The field of media literacy has long been beset by critical, pedagogic, methodological and practical challenges, and these are hardly likely to be eradicated by Google's investment, however significant this may be.

From "Google's media literacy initiatives and partnerships in Europe – a learning review," we observe that:

• Media literacy practitioners are typically funded to implement short-term programmes with easy-to-reach audiences. However, what's needed are longitudinal studies that seek to understand the multiple factors underlying longer-term behaviour change for diverse or disadvantaged audiences that are often underserved by media literacy interventions. These can be complex, expensive and time-consuming. It remains to be seen whether Google will step into the breach left by governments with their shifting policy priorities.

• The broader – even societal – outcomes for media literacy, evaluated as the cumulative effect of multiple initiatives, remain under-examined. Funded interventions tend to take place in schools, community groups or through targeted services, and their evaluation is typically also local in nature. So it remains hard to know whether we are progressing even a little towards a more resilient and critical society able to navigate today's news and (mis/dis)information landscapes. If Google is serious in its media literacy ambitions, then investment in this area is essential.

It is clear from the stakeholder feedback gathered as part of the wider research project, that the principles of Google's media literacy funding – offered at arm's length, tailored to specific needs, and driven by stakeholder priorities – have been important in enabling different countries to build their provision in line with their specific political, economic, social and cultural environment as well as the effectsthese variables have on the ways their populations engage with news and information. Maintaining the arm's length support so that decisions about how and where media literacy interventions should be implemented is essential. Using its connections with practitioners

across Europe to foster dialogue and learning between its partners – not only about its own programmes, but about media literacy more broadly – is also crucial.

At the same time, Google's role in technology change could benefit the sector more widely. Google has already integrated Gemini into its search engine structures, and the impact of this technology on both user behaviour and information integrity remains unclear. Understanding how generative AI works, the effects it has on the information ecosystem and the impact on levels of media literacy is critical. Indeed, it would have been better for policymakers and the public to have understood the critical issues linked to generative AI in advance of it being rolled out. Media literacy practitioners have noted that adapting to the reality of generative AI is one of the biggest challenges they face, and it is urgent that Google acts on its ability to support practitioners with more data and information about how AI operates, and how it is used, if it is to be integrated effectively into media literacy programmes.

Can the poacher turn gamekeeper?

The challenge of generative AI and the importance of arm's length support are both illustrative of a fundamental tension in Google's roles as both a significant funder of media literacy work and a major technology company. Stakeholders recognise the inherent contradiction in the Google business model, which has its foundations in the algorithmic, marketing-oriented infrastructures designed to maximise user attention and advertising revenue, and the growth of mis- and disinformation and online harm that prompts so much contemporary investment in media literacy. Compartmentalising these aspects of Google's business – the market-led and the social interest – is one way to rationalise the existence of both.

Nonetheless, Google'smarket-driven underpinning means that the legitimacy of its media literacy support always has the potential to be undermined, which would devalue the important work that its team is trying to achieve. Moreover, the growing insistence of better regulation of online platforms across multiple territories will only foster publicawareness of this contradiction.

This is not to say that Google should not be funding media literacy work – it should. But it cannot currently consider that funding to be an adequate countermeasure to the vast impact it has on people's daily lives as a commercial entity. Expanding its media literacy portfolio to specifically address some of the societal challenges to which its commercial arm contributes – for example, by supporting research and interventions focused on the impact of generative AI on our collective critical capacities, on the ways in which people are influenced by algorithmic choices over time, on the capacity for users to resist market-driven online models and engage critically with Google's own infrastructures, as well as simply on the information it circulates – would contribute to a much more productive understanding of how online platforms shape our media literacy.

This post represents the views of the authors and not the position of the Media@LSE blog nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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About the author

Sonia Livingstone

Sonia Livingstone OBE is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. Taking a comparative, critical and contextual approach, her research examines how the changing conditions of mediation are reshaping everyday practices and possibilities for action. She has published twenty books on media audiences, media literacy and media regulation, with a particular focus on the opportunities and risks of digital media use in the everyday lives of children and young people. Her most recent book is The class: living and learning in the digital age (2016, with Julian Sefton-Green). Sonia has advised the UK government, European Commission, European Parliament, Council of Europe and other national and international organisations on children's rights, risks and safety in the digital age. She was awarded the title of Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2014 'for services to children and child internet safety.' Sonia Livingstone is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, the British Psychological Society, the Royal Society for the Arts and fellow and past President of the International Communication Association (ICA). She has been visiting professor at the Universities of Bergen, Copenhagen, Harvard, Illinois, Milan, Oslo, Paris II, Pennsylvania, and Stockholm, and is on the editorial board of several leading journals. She is on the Executive Board of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety, is a member of the Internet Watch Foundation's Ethics Committee, is an Expert Advisor to the Council of Europe, and was recently Special Advisor to the House of Lords' Select Committee on Communications, among other roles. Sonia has received many awards and honours, including honorary doctorates from the University of Montreal, Université Panthéon Assas, the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, the University of the Basque Country, and the University of Copenhagen. She is currently leading the project Global Kids Online (with UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti and EU Kids Online), researching children's understanding of digital privacy (funded by the Information Commissioner's Office) and writing a book with Alicia Blum-Ross called 'Parenting for a Digital Future (Oxford University Press), among other research, impact and writing projects. Sonia is chairing LSE's Truth, Trust and Technology Commission in 2017-2018, and participates in the European Commission-funded research networks, DigiLitEY and MakEY. She runs a blog called

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