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Is media literacy an effective tool against misinformation?

LSE's Nick Anstead, Lee Edwards, Sonia Livingstone and Mariya Stoilova reflect on the findings of a recent rapid evidence analysis of media literacy interventions. They observe the benefits of encouraging critical thinking and reflexivity, as well as evidence that gamification can reduce vulnerability to dis- and misinformation. But they also note many evidence gaps, which suggest promising directions for future research.

In discussions about misinformation, media literacy is often called upon to help users critically engage with the information they encounter, but the **scope of interventions** and the level of their **effectiveness** is variable. In an article **published this month**, we conduct a rapid evidence assessment (REA) at the intersection of media literacy and misinformation. Are media literacy interventions effective against misinformation on social media platforms? We reviewed studies published between 2011 and March 2021, and found 36 focused on research about media literacy and misinformation on social media platforms. Here we highlight four key findings:

- **Digital and information literacy training supports critical engagement with information, but results can vary.** There is evidence that instruction in digital and information literacy correlates with the ability to identify misinformation or engage critically with information. However, some studies showed some unexpected results, including **less success in bot** detection after training or a **lack of impact on the quality of source selection**.
- **Incorporating reflexivity in interventions can support resilience to misinformation.** Some studies suggest that interventions promoting critical reflexive engagement with learning and decision making led to greater resilience to misinformation.
- **Gamification techniques can help.** Some studies explored the potential of gamification techniques. At least some of these studies suggested that games could **support players in**

identifying misinformation and improving their confidence (although other studies found more mixed results).

- **Preexisting media literacy can reduce vulnerability to misinformation.** Some studies found that knowledge of media industries, systems, and effects was correlated with the ability to recognize misinformation, although different types of literacy had different effects.

Collectively, the studies highlighted the value of critical thinking, encouraging reflexivity, and gamification. However, our REA also demonstrates continuing gaps in our knowledge. The vast majority of published research presented misinformation as content, neglecting the wider context which had shaped it. Only a limited number of media literacy variables were considered, and research sites were mainly located in the Global North.

Looking forward

Looking forward, we identify four promising directions for future research.

- 1. Extend cross-disciplinary approaches in research.** Two approaches to research dominated studies in the REA. First, psychological approaches that isolate and measure an individual's behavioral variables and outcomes. Second, studies on more general media literacy abilities. Each approach addresses different aspects of media literacy, but we suggest that they would be usefully combined – for example, in multimethod studies linking users' overall orientation and abilities with their specific behaviors.
- 2. Focus on factors influencing variability.** The REA suggests that the outcomes of media literacy interventions can vary significantly. Given the growing complexity of the information environment, this variability will certainly persist and potentially increase. Therefore, a reorientation toward understanding how and why variability emerges might be more productive, including considering the impact of generative AI and/or multimedia content.
- 3. Improve the quality of data and methodology.** Many of the studies were constrained by the lack of access to high-quality data about behavior online, particularly over prolonged periods. This largely because platforms do not make data accessible for research. Better access to data and information about platform architectures would greatly help researchers, and could help pinpoint how media literacy efforts might be targeted. Instead, at the moment, we are hugely reliant on uncontrolled or self-reported data, and experimental methods. There is also scope to include a broader range of methodologies alongside existing quantitative and experimental approaches, including observation and ethnographies, longitudinal research, diaries and interviews, enhancing our understanding of user engagement and decision making in real-life.
- 4. Clarify context and sampling.** Future research could be explicit about who and what is being investigated, and should seek to extend the range of sites and populations being studied. More

generally, **comparative research** can show how different cultural, social, political, and economic conditions change user attitudes and behavior. Other major sampling gaps include vulnerable and neglected audiences, including those outside formal education and older populations, and groups most affected by the **negative effects of misinformation** (for example racialized, gendered, differently abled groups)

While the REA offers some insights into which media literacy interventions might work, applying them at scale would be an enormous task and leaves open questions about their potential success. The complexity of both media literacy and misinformation also suggests that to be really effective, multiple measures would need to be implemented simultaneously.

Our final recommendation is therefore to work with complexity rather than trying to eliminate it from study conditions. Specifically, we need to think about media literacy in broader terms, centering user agency by asking how users are empowered by understanding media industries, and by applying media literacy skills. Users should be thought of as creative agents and citizens, operating in a wider institutional, social, political, economic, and cultural environments. They make complex decisions (which are sometimes contradictory) about when and how to engage with different types of media and information. Thinking in these terms, combined with the other proposals we suggest, will open up new avenues for evaluating media literacy's contribution to democratic engagement and participation, and ultimately to societal resilience to misinformation.

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

Featured image: Photo by **Jezael Melgoza** on **Unsplash**

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Nick Anstead is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His archive of research can be accessed at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/view/creators/Anstead=3ANick=3A=3A.html> including his comparative work on TV debates in Parliamentary democracies.

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