

Engaging and meeting the needs of underserved populations

Policy brief #3

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At a glance



Why is it so important to engage underserved populations with media literacy efforts?

- › Research into media literacy levels in society is limited across Europe, but that which does exist¹ consistently indicates² that media literacy levels are far lower than ideal among Europe's citizens.
- › Hence, many people are at increased risk from mis/disinformation as they lack the critical thinking skills, evaluation strategies and knowledge of the online media ecosystem that would help them to engage critically with misinformation,³ and likely leaves them more vulnerable to other online harms, as well as likely missing out on the opportunities offered by engaging with media. It is therefore crucial to engage as many people as possible.
- › There is likely a significant overlap between underserved populations and vulnerable communities,⁴ who tend to be more at risk from potential harms.
- › Unless they are targeted and adapted appropriately, media literacy efforts, like all educational programmes, risk exacerbating existing inequalities in society.



How can the media literacy needs of underserved populations be met?

- › Improve the coordination of media literacy efforts and research to identify and meet the needs of underserved populations.
- › Reach underserved populations via organisations that already engage them and understand their needs (even if not through media literacy efforts). This increases the likelihood that interventions will be effective, as establishing trusted relationships is crucial.
- › Reach audiences where they already are, either in the online or offline world.
- › Adapt resources and programmes appropriately to meet the specific needs of underserved populations, actively engaging them in the design and adaptation process.
- › Make media literacy relevant to the lives of underserved populations: this is vital if they are to engage in initiatives or interventions. It involves an in-depth understanding of their habits, motivations and challenges, and a proactive approach to show how improved media literacy skills can help their online activities.

1 Unzicker, K (2023) *Disinformation – a challenge for democracy*, Bertelsmann Stiftung: <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/disinformation-a-challenge-for-democracy>

2 Ofcom (2022) *One in three internet users fail to question misinformation*: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/attitudes-to-news/one-in-three-internet-users-fail-to-question-misinformation/>

3 Edwards, L, Stoilova, M., Anstead, N., Fry, A., El-Halaby, G. and Smith M. (2021) *Rapid Evidence Assessment on Online Misinformation and Media Literacy: Final Report for Ofcom*: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/online-nation/2021/rea-online-misinformation.pdf?v=326529>

4 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2022), *Media Literacy Programme Fund*: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/media-literacy-programme-fund>

Background

In September 2023, Google commissioned Ecorys and LSE's Department of Media and Communications to carry out a *Media Literacy Policy Study*. This document is one of a number of positioning papers informed by the research findings. The recommendations build on data collection and analysis carried out between September 2023 and April 2024.

Further information about the study, including the methodology and full set of reporting outputs, is available on the dedicated web page:

www.ecorys.com/MediaLiteracyEducation

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What are the main challenges when it comes to engaging and meeting the needs of underserved populations?

The key challenges around engaging and meeting the needs of underserved populations can be divided into several steps: identifying these populations, establishing what their needs are, finding ways to reach them, and finally engaging them in ways that are relevant to their lives. It is crucial to remember that unless targeted appropriately, education risks exacerbating existing inequalities.⁵

Identifying underserved populations is not necessarily straightforward, and includes a diverse range of individuals

Underserved populations are far from being a homogenous group, and they differ from country to country. In many countries, it is arguable that a lack of media literacy⁶ education means that most populations are in fact underserved, particularly those outside formal education where there is no obvious route to reaching them. There also tends to be a lack of research about who is served by media literacy initiatives, making it harder to tell who is being left out, but there are several groups that are worth highlighting as being particularly at risk of this.

- › Our country-focused research teams consistently identified **older people** as an underserved group, and highlighted the need to develop more media literacy initiatives with them in mind. Older people, however, are not a homogenous group and are defined in different ways, with different age groups having distinct needs.
- › **Children with special educational needs** will not necessarily be adequately served by initiatives and resources that target the general school population, and might not be reached if they are outside the mainstream school system.

- › Equally, **adults with physical or mental disabilities** are likely to be underserved as a result of varying access needs, and a 2019 mapping exercise in the UK found that only 4% of media literacy initiatives were tailored to disabled people.⁷
- › **Financially disadvantaged citizens** might lack digital access or interest in media literacy, due to their complex lives and competing demands on their time.
- › Those with **low digital skills and access** – in some European countries such as Romania, the proportion of people with basic digital skills is low (28%),⁸ and in others such as Italy there is a significant in-country digital divide – are likely underserved as most initiatives assume a certain level of digital skills.
- › Among all demographics, those **living in rural areas** tend to be underserved compared to those in living in cities and towns, simply due to a lack of services outside urban centres, and in some cases, a lack of digital access.
- › **Migrants, including refugees and asylum seeker families**, who were identified in our UK-based research as being particularly concerned about financial scams and struggling to identify these, are less likely to be reached by interventions that address the wider population.
- › **Minority language groups**, such as Russian speakers in Eastern Europe, or Roma communities in Southeastern Europe, are often excluded from interventions which target majority language populations.

5 Livingstone, S. (2018) *Media literacy: what are the challenges and how can we move towards a solution?* Media@LSE blog: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2018/10/25/media-literacy-what-are-the-challenges-and-how-can-we-move-towards-a-solution/>

6 We define media literacy as an umbrella expression that: 'includes all the technical, cognitive, social, civic, ethical and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access and use information and media effectively, and to safely and responsibly create and share media content through different platforms'. This definition aims to capture media literacy's dynamic and multifaceted nature and aligns with the broad operational definition outlined in the EU 2020 Council conclusions. For more, please see: Council Conclusions on media literacy in an ever-changing world 2020/C 193/06: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020XG0609%2804%29>

7 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (2022), *Media Literacy Programme Fund*: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/media-literacy-programme-fund>

8 European Commission (2023), *Digital Decade Country Report 2023, Romania*: <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/redirection/document/98631>

Having identified underserved populations, it is necessary to establish their specific needs and potential vulnerabilities

It is commonly believed that many among these underserved populations are more at risk from online harms such as exposure to mis- and dis-information, scams, bullying, manipulation or radicalisation. Some evidence suggests that this is indeed the case, such as the UK's [sector mapping](#)⁹ carried out in advance of the 2021 Online Media Literacy Strategy, which found that those "most vulnerable to online harms in general are often the most underrepresented in regard to provision of online safety and digital literacy provisions," but it is not always clear cut.

In Romania, the European country with the lowest level of basic digital skills according to Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), our country-focused research found that older people, individuals with limited education, and children were particularly vulnerable to disinformation. Factors contributing to their susceptibility include a tendency to trust information at face value, challenges in verifying the credibility of sources, and for older individuals, their relatively recent introduction to the internet.

A UK report by Internet Matters from 2021 found that children with three or more 'vulnerabilities' were significantly more likely than their peers to experience online bullying, be the victim of a scam, or come across distressing content. However, while many vulnerable children likely belong to underserved populations – such as children with special educational needs – the extent of overlap is not clear.

Older people are not 'digital natives' and therefore might struggle with digital skills and understanding the online world,¹⁰ although their critical thinking levels may well be higher than those of young people.

Therefore, for each group it is necessary to establish what their specific needs are in order to understand how to meet them. Even within each category there are likely to be wide variations in terms of needs and these must be addressed.

9 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2021) Online Safety – Media Literacy Strategy. Mapping Exercise and Literature Review – Phase 1 Report: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61129392e90e0706c3dbe78e/2021-02-25_Phase_1_final_report_-_ACCESSIBLE.pdf

10 <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/fehlt-den-ue50-generationen-medienkompetenz-100.html>

It is extremely hard to reach many underserved audiences, given the lack of effective high-level coordination of media literacy efforts

Reaching anyone outside formal education with media literacy initiatives is a pervasive challenge as there often aren't obvious routes to access and engage the attention of adults outside of the education system. There are even those inside formal education who are likely to be missing out, such as children with additional needs.

Public institutions such as libraries can play a role here, but resourcing can be an issue, and many adults do not have contact with a library. National, multi-platform campaigns can also be helpful in putting the issues in people's minds, and on the national agenda.

The efforts that do exist are unlikely to be comprehensive – our country-specific research in France, for example, found that media literacy provision was concentrated in the Ile-de-France region (which includes Paris), including initiatives targeted at young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, who were considered more at risk, while services in other regions were often insufficient.

Many people do not see media literacy as relevant to their lives

Those who have complex lives are less likely to have the time and motivation to engage with media literacy initiatives that are not immediately relevant to their lives, so general programmes targeted at a wide audience might not be appropriate for these communities.

There might be other reasons why they don't want to engage, for example, our research in Germany noted that older citizens might harbour scepticism towards digital devices due to privacy concerns related to Germany's history.

Additionally, many people (not just underserved populations) are likely to be overconfident in their media literacy skills, as shown by Ofcom's annual Media Use and Attitudes research¹¹ which showed, for example, that 39% of people had misplaced confidence in their ability to interpret advertising in search results. These populations may not see a need to engage with media literacy programmes. A survey conducted by Accenture in Ireland in 2020 found that of 42% of Irish adults describe who themselves as being 'below average' for digital skills, 40% did not see a need to improve, suggesting a lack of motivation and/or a possible absence of services to which they can relate.

11 Ofcom (2023) Adults' Media Use and Attitudes report 2023: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0028/255844/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf

What can be done to better meet the needs of underserved populations?

In order to better meet the media literacy needs of underserved populations, it is crucial to address some of these challenges: first by seeking to identify these populations and their needs, and then by working out how to reach them and how to effectively engage them. Throughout, it is essential to involve the target communities themselves in the process of designing and delivering interventions to ensure their relevance and effectiveness.

Improve country-level coordination of media literacy efforts to identify underserved audiences and ensure that they are reached

Effectively identifying underserved audiences and their specific needs requires time and resources. Once this is done, it is essential to communicate the information widely so that media literacy initiatives in different areas can benefit from the insights made. Our stakeholder interviews and country-level research suggested that a national media literacy policy or strategy can enable more effective identification of underserved audiences and their needs, and more comprehensive media literacy provision.

Mandating the value of media literacy as a national concern provides it with a certain legitimacy and lends those investing in it an authority to do research and take action. As noted above, more research is needed in many countries to identify underserved audiences, and what their specific needs are. Even with research, additional qualitative work may be required to refine insights. For example, research commissioned in 2023 by the UK's Department for Science, Innovation and Technology into 'hard to reach' audiences for media literacy,¹² identified that those who were 'not engaged' with media literacy in the UK (23% of the sample) were more likely to be older, female, White, have low or medium socioeconomic status (SES), live in rural areas, or be unemployed. In other words, no demographic group stood out; nor was it the case that the majority of people with any of these characteristics were 'not engaged.' It is clear that a nuanced approach to identifying and targeting underserved audiences is needed, and a national strategy could encourage funding and resources to be invested in the area, from both private and public sector sources.

Work with those organisations who already have established, trusted relationships with these populations

Credibility and expertise are crucial in reaching underserved communities. For example, stakeholders consulted for our country-focused research in Spain highlighted that many do not trust initiatives driven solely by tech companies and platforms, while they prefer those which are run by local organisations that understand the needs and requirements of different populations. The UK DSIT report on 'hard to reach' citizens found that trustworthiness of the messenger was a key enabler of engagement with media literacy activities or initiatives.

Working with organisations who already have established relationships with these populations is a way to ensure this. According to those interviewed for our analysis of the Super Searchers programme, the initiative was more successful when local partners were used. Local partners might be grassroots civil society organisations, or national charities which target specific sectors of society, or community groups. As long as they have specialist knowledge of the groups they work with, understand their needs, and have a trusted connection, they could be valuable media literacy partners.

Reach underserved populations where they already are, either online or offline

Underserved populations have complex lives and may not have the flexibility or the capacity to proactively search out media literacy initiatives, even if they wanted to. Several stakeholders interviewed for our country-level research cited programmes whose success relied on actively reaching audiences in the spaces where they were already spending time. This might involve travelling to rural areas where rates of older populations are higher, or seeking out young people in the physical or online spaces that they gravitate towards.

12 DSIT (2023) Media literacy uptake among 'hard to reach' citizens: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6511619206e1ca000d616116/media_literacy_uptake_among_hard_to_reach_citizens.pdf

Our country-specific research in Ireland suggested a need to expand opportunities for lifelong learning, including improving the resources and programmes offered by adult education institutions, public libraries, civil society, and businesses. While such initiatives may not provide universal access for people outside formal education, they are an important existing channel that is associated with learning and skills development for those who use them, and could provide an important complementary channel to exploit alongside formal education and delivery tailored to more specific contexts.

Adapt existing resources and training appropriately for different audiences

As noted, there is a significant overlap between underserved populations and vulnerable communities, and vulnerability often aligns with diversity – whether in the form of special educational needs, physical disabilities, mental health vulnerabilities, socio-economic status or social marginalisation (e.g. migrants, refugees, racialised populations, travelling communities, LGBTQ+ communities). Tailoring both accessibility and content of media literacy programmes is essential if they are to be taken up by groups as diverse as these.

Efforts to tailor content could include translation, adapting resources to produce dedicated versions for specific educational needs, and developing accessible programmes for disabled adults. Programmes can also be structured to accommodate different skill levels in relation to media technologies, so that those who engage with a programme start from a level of knowledge that they are comfortable with.

When adapting resources or programmes, it is important to engage with the target communities and ideally involve them in co-designing the adapted activities, in order to ensure that they adequately meet their needs. These communities might also need additional support to access and engage with resources or training, so this should be taken into account in the design.

Make media literacy initiatives relevant to people's complex lives

The UK DSIT report on 'hard to reach' citizens, which surveyed more than 5000 people in the UK, found that "media literacy is perceived as relevant to engage with if it aligns with the activities that people perform online rather than as an abstract concept or general skill for people to acquire."¹³ The report further recommended that media literacy activities be tailored to people's specific online activities and needs, and that they should be marketed and signposted at the point at which people see them as being most pertinent.

This can be done in various ways. Raising awareness among the general population of the importance of media literacy, possibly via mass campaigns, is one way to go about this, but it is also important to keep relevance in mind when developing content. Cases and examples used in lesson plans can be tailored to align with the kinds of issues targeted audiences face in their own lives, for example, while the choices of media platforms and social media tools used in programmes should also be based on those that are actually used by the target audience, wherever possible.

Of course, in order to do this effectively it is necessary to understand what underserved populations do online or want to do online,¹⁴ what they need to know at that point, and how to reach them then with relevant information. For this, more research and benchmarking is needed, and then involvement of the target communities themselves in the development of interventions. Media literacy messages and concepts need to be presented in a way that makes their relevance and practical application clear. For example, the UK research into hard-to-reach audiences explained media literacy competences in ways that their sample population could easily relate to, such as:

- › Understanding about the risks of sharing personal information online and how to protect online privacy
- › Recognition of paid promotions and sponsored ads vs non-commercial content
- › Knowing how to find reliable information, what the key signs of false information are and the consequences of spreading false information online.

¹³ DSIT (2023), *op. cit.*

¹⁴ For more detail on this topic, see: [Helsper, E.J. \(2021\) *The Digital Disconnect: The Social Causes and Consequences of Digital Inequalities*. SAGE: London, UK.](#)

Box of resources

Good practice examples



Lumières sur l'info, France

Lumières sur l'info provides an example of proactively reaching young people where they are. For example, one of its workshops targeted at disadvantaged young people was organised on a sports field. This bottom-up approach focuses on the interests of young people and has proved particularly effective, as has the interactive aspect which empowers young people.

For more, please see: <https://lumieres.info/>

BuloBús, Maldita, Spain

Supported by the Google News Initiative

This initiative provides an example of reaching people where they are in the offline world, and targeting older people in rural settings. Over a period of nine months, journalists and media literacy experts from Maldita.es visited 17 municipalities in Spain aboard a small bus, engaging local populations with activities and theatre-style workshops on how to resist misinformation and online scams. Maldita targeted communities with fewer than 40,000 inhabitants and those where people over 65 comprised 15% to 30% of the population. Maldita found older people appreciated being given new information face to face and having the possibility to ask questions and interact with journalists and experts.

For more, please see: <https://media-and-learning.eu/subject/media-literacy/the-bulobus-hoax-bus-route-against-disinformation/>

Be Internet Legends SEND Resources, ParentZone, UK

In partnership with Google

These dedicated resources provide an example of how to adapt a programme aimed at a general audience and re-target it for a group with more specific needs. The resources focus on a lesson from the BIL's 'Alert' pillar which explores scams and disinformation. The adapted version uses clearly scripted Powerpoint presentations, with unambiguous language and bold, easy to read keywords.

For more, please see: <https://parentzone.org.uk/BeInternetLegends/SEND>



SuperSearchers, Google, Europe

The SuperSearchers information literacy programme is designed to address the challenge posed by misinformation that is accessed via search engines. It is targeted at librarians and aims to improve their ability to teach library patrons about how to search effectively, reflect on the credibility of information and confirm accuracy when engaging with search results. As such, it is a good example of how programmes can use a trusted channel to reach audiences who may not otherwise be easily accessible, in a location that they are already using in the normal course of their lives.

For more, please see: <https://publiclibraries2030.eu/2022/10/super-searchers-launch/>

Les Complots Rigolos, Association Generation Numerique, France

This media literacy programme is focused on developing reflexive engagement with news and information online, enabling students to understand how information is produced, why we react to it in the way we do, and why critical thinking is necessary in the current information environment. The five-lesson structure uses case studies, class exercises and interactive activities, and is designed to be accessible to a range of diverse student needs.

For more, please see: <https://asso-generationnumerique.fr/actions/action-demi-de-lutte-contre-les-theories-complotistes-pour-les-4e-et-plus/>

Be Internet Awesome, Foundation Szkoła z Klasą (School with a Class), Poland

Supported by Google.org

This offers an example of adapting media literacy programmes for multiple different audiences. The programme was initially aimed at a general school audience but has now introduced several strands that address the needs of particularly vulnerable groups, including the youngest children in preschools, neurodiverse youth, deaf and sight impaired children, the Roma population, and refugees from Ukraine.

For more, please see: <https://bia4all.eu/impact-stories/>

Be Media Smart, Media Literacy Ireland, Ireland

Although not specifically targeted at underserved populations, this initiative offers an example of collaboration between multiple organisations to reach a significant proportion of society, reaching them where they already are. The campaign messages appeared on multiple media, from local radio, to TV stations, to TikTok and other social media platforms, and a survey showed that 23% of the adult population reported unprompted recognition of the campaign in late 2023.

For more, please see: <https://www.bemediasmart.ie/>



Ofcom community pilot projects, Ofcom, UK

Ofcom funding enabled pilot media literacy projects to support specific underserved audiences: older adults, people living with disability, children aged 10-14 and communities experiencing financial disadvantage. These initiatives provide examples of the value of implementing media literacy programmes via charities who already worked with the target communities. Some did not specialise in media literacy, but incorporated it into their existing programmes through the grant.

For more, please see: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2023/ofcom-supports-organisations-boosting-online-literacy-skills-in-local-communities> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I35JuvszW5M>

Behind the Headlines SEND resources, Guardian Foundation, UK

These resources provide a valuable example of adapting a programme with input from those who will be using them. The news literacy-focused Behind the Headlines resources were adapted for teachers to use with secondary SEND students – along with a media literacy training for teachers – with input and guidance from secondary SEND teachers themselves.

For more, please see: <https://theguardianfoundation.org/programmes/behind-the-headlines/media-literacy-resources-send-students>

DigiÄKK, University of Tartu/BECID, Estonia

University of Tartu/BECID, Estonia – this initiative provides an example of reaching an underserved audience – preschoolers – in a way that made media literacy accessible for them in a familiar space. The event was held in a park, run by organisers dressed as cats, and the learning about digital security took place through age-appropriate games that focused on discussion and movement.

For more, please see: <https://becid.eu/news/estonias-first-internet-safety-drill-for-preschoolers-digiakk/>

Seniors United against Misinformation, Verificat, Housatonic, University of Lapland, Spain, Italy and Finland

Provides an example of seeking to reach people within their existing communities, and working with trusted partners with existing connections. The project's goal is to develop a peer-to-peer learning strategy, training seniors to facilitate workshops within their communities to create engaging learning environment.

For more, please see: <https://www.wearesum.eu> and <https://media-and-learning.eu/subject/media-literacy/seniors-united-against-misinformation-a-european-initiative-for-media-literacy/>

DISERA, New Horizons, EKE, CPM, EurAV Italy, Ireland, Slovakia and Republic of North Macedonia

Aimed at older people in rural areas, this project offers an example of meeting people where they are, with resources that are primarily audio-focussed so that they are radio-friendly. Many older audiences are more likely to tune into the radio rather than watch content online, and the resources consist of media literacy lessons followed by studio discussions.

For more, please see: <https://disera.eu/> and <https://eurav.eu/?p=134>

Further resources

The European Digital Economy and Society Index, 2014-2022 – provides a longitudinal mapping of digital skills in the EU28: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi>

The European Digital Competence Framework for Educators is a tool that educators can use to assess their digital competences in the classroom. It is suitable for educators engaged with a wide range of student cohorts: adult education, non-formal education, special needs, vocational education: https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/digcompedu_en

Shaping Europe's Digital Future: Media literacy. This webpage is a hub for multiple resources on media literacy being developed across the EU28 for multiple audiences. Includes case studies, awards, media literacy week events, mapping media literacy practices: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/media-literacy>

Mihailidis, P., Ramasubramanian, S., Tully, M., Foster, B., Riewestahl, E., Johnson, P., & Angove, S. (2021). Do media literacies approach equity and justice?. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 13(2), 1-14: <https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2021-13-2-1>

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Hobbs, R. (2013). Improvization and strategic risk-taking in informal learning with digital media literacy. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 38(2), 182–197: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2013.756517>

Edwards, L. Obia, V., Goodman, E. & Spasenoska, S. 2022. Cross-sectoral challenges to media literacy: Final report. London: Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/651167fabf7c1a0011bb4660/cross-sectoral_challenges_to_media_literacy.pdf

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Answering
tomorrow's
challenges
today

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