

## MODULE 1: Common Understanding Of Media Literacy In The EU Context

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## 1. GET READY

### Introduction

This first module provides a theoretical introduction to **digital media literacy**, exploring the roots of this concept, its multi-faceted definition, and the current situation about the overall literacy level within the EU. We will find out that the ability to understand what we read, see and hear on media, be them on paper or digital, should never be taken for granted, and that functional illiteracy is still a major issue in many contexts. Education, especially **lifelong education**, plays a key role in the fight against any form of illiteracy, and this is even truer in the era of **social media**.

### Contents

Towards this goal, it presents

- Conceptual background for the concepts of literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, and illiteracy
- Relevant statistics regarding literacy levels around the world;
- Profiles of “media illiterate” adult learners;
- How lifelong learning can help to enhance digital media literacy

### Objectives

This section will help teachers and learners develop a deeper understanding of the concepts mentioned, which are crucial when dealing with the topic of disinformation and provide the appropriate context around this phenomenon.

After completion of this module, adult educators will be able to:

- Understand, explain and compare the concepts of literacy/illiteracy; alphabetism; media and digital literacy
- Distinguish between the terms *illiterate* and *functionally illiterate*
- Identify the core skills which define media literacy and digital literacy
- Provide statistical data regarding digital literacy worldwide and from a historical perspective
- Assess and describe the different profiles of “media illiterate” adult learners
- Understand and explain the concept of lifelong learning
- Explain why lifelong learning is critical to fighting media illiteracy and disinformation

## Methods

In terms of methods to be used, we advise developing a PPT or Prezi presentation, since the content of the module is theoretical and having visual material would convey the message more effectively and be more appealing to the students. If you opt for a visual presentation, the necessary equipment would be a laptop/PC; projector, projection board. You may need a flipchart and colored markers to take notes of the main ideas to be remembered by the audience or invite the learners to write down themselves keywords or exercises.



## Introduction and teacher instructions

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

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

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



## Glossary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Literacy and media literacy: conceptualization and statistics

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

Image source: [pixabay.com](https://pixabay.com)



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

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

it becomes the **expertise in a certain domain**, such as

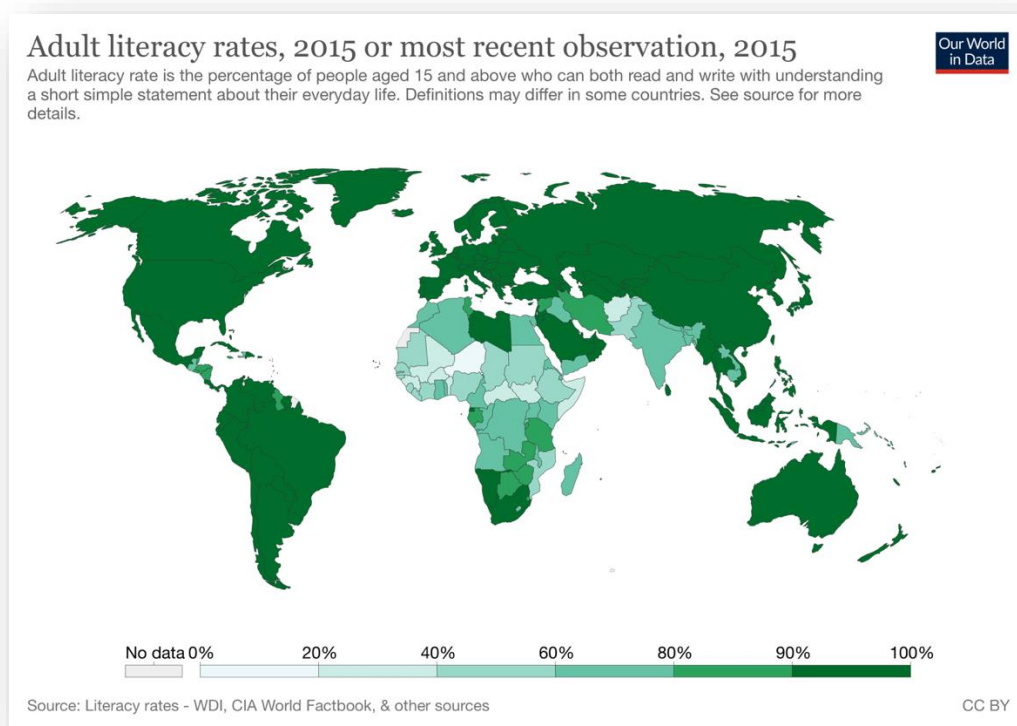
finances – 'financial literacy', or ICT – 'computer literacy'. Following this second meaning of the term 'literacy', we conclude that **literacy also means 'competency' in a specific field**. And, of course, competence varies greatly when considering basic literacy and also when considering media literacy.

We started by talking about one literacy, which is the milestone for a world of knowledge, and we ended up concluding that there are many types of literacy, contextual uses, and particular socio-cultural settings. David Mallows describes this aspect of the term in his article "What is 'literacy'?", on the EPAL platform website: "[...] *literacy is highly contextual – what we are required to do with our literacy is always contextualized – situated within a particular socio-cultural setting. Indeed, it has become common to refer to literacies, rather than literacy, to emphasize the point that literacy is a social practice and so there is no one form of literacy that everyone needs. Instead, we all need (and use) different literacies depending on our social or professional group (e.g. nurses, teenagers, academics); the kinds of activities we engage in (e.g. shopping, dealing with bureaucracy, studying, etc.); and the different social and institutional contexts in which we act (school, work, home, etc.).*" (Source: <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/blog/what-literacy>)

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

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

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



Data and chart source: Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina (2020) - "Literacy". Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: '<https://ourworldindata.org/literacy>' [Online Resource]

It is worth mentioning that there is no universally accepted definition of **media literacy**, therefore you may find many definitions, based on similar core views. We will start the process of defining this concept with the definition given by the EU Media Literacy Expert Group since it touches all the main aspects we have found in various other definitions: *“Media literacy refers to all the **technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities** that allow us to **access** and have a **critical understanding** of and **interact with media**. These capacities allow us to **exercise critical thinking** while participating in the economic, social, and cultural aspects of society and playing an active role in the democratic process. This concept covers all kinds of media interactions (broadcasting, radio, press, the Internet, social media) and addresses the needs of all ages.”* (Source: *“Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28 by the European Audiovisual Observatory”, Strasbourg 2016*).

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

Image source:  
<https://tracyvanderschyff.com/2017/07/28/facilitating-the-evolution-of-human-capabilities/>



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

Arguably, media literacy includes digital literacy, though arguments are stating that digital literacy requires particular skills, due to network communication and interactivity.

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

- **Technical skills or practical & functional skills** > Ability to access and make use of the (digital) media;
- **Critical thinking & evaluation** > to analyze and curate information critically;
- **Collaboration and good communication** > concepts such as networks and interactivity are based on mastering collaboration and a fluid communication process;
- **Cultural and social understanding** > for collaboration and network communication to be possible, you need to build common cultural grounds and norms;
- **Creativity** > media and digital literacy proficiency empower the user toward producing content;
- **Communication ethics** > common values mutually agreed on practice norms
- **Safety & security** > safe use of technology and especially Internet

It should be mentioned that one of the challenges when it comes to digital literacy is understanding the importance of learning the technical skills and also all the other skills mentioned to keep a logical order of steps and to become truly digitally literate and a fully functioning, confident member of the digital society.

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

### Profiles of adult learners with low media literacy

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

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



## Meet Paul!



Source: [pixabay.com](https://pixabay.com)

Paul is 22 years old.

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

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

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

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

On the other hand, Paul believes many conspiracy theories, that he daily shares on his Facebook account with heated posts, asking his followers to spread the news.

Today, he strongly supports the theory claiming that 5G technology helps transmit the coronavirus, although it has been firmly rejected by the scientific community. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/52168096> )

## Meet Mike!



Source: *pixabay.com*

Mike is 50 years old.

He has a nice family with two children.

His son and daughter, who are now entering the teen age, have introduced Mike to the world of social media.

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

But then, some months before, he received a brand-new smartphone as a gift, very fast and intuitive to use.

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

With these groups, Mike shares and receives a lot of news, chain messages and memes from uncertain sources, carrying controversial statements about politics, society and science.

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

When Mike heard the term “confirmation bias”, he thought that was completely nonsense.

## Meet Maria!



*Image source: pixabay.com*

Maria was born in 1934. She turned 86 this year, in 2020.

She lived her childhood during the 2nd World War, away from anything media, other than a few, scarce newspapers.

She had her first TV set when she was 34 years old and it remains a trustworthy source of information and life guidance ever since. We do not know how many life decisions are based on something which she knows from the TV.

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

She still believes everything she sees on the news. She is a great news spreader since she shares what happened on the news with everyone willing to listen.

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

Likewise, *"If it's written or if they say it on TV, it must be true"* – she says.

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

However, she enjoys the face time with her niece, if a young relative is willing to help with that.

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

## TIPS FOR TRAINERS

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

Can you think of other characters that you would define vulnerable to fake news and disinformation? How would you describe them?

Try to build three more characters according to your knowledge and experience with adult learners. Then, use these fictional characters to design personalized training strategies to enhance their media literacy. How would you change your approach? Would you adopt different methodologies or go with one-fits-all?

Use these examples to practice with the different target groups you might find in your classes.

If you find it appropriate, you may also present them to your learners, making them reflect and be aware of the most common personalities affected by disinformation.

### Importance of Lifelong Learning and digital media literacy in the EU context

*Lifelong Learning* is a notion from EU action within the field of Education. It lays the ground for a **crucial component of democratic life and participation inside the whole European community**.

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

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



SOURCE: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/01/14/equipping-people-to-stay-ahead-of-technological-change>

take their intelligibility for granted, especially when we consider the fast pace that characterizes their evolution in the last years. The EU has defined media literacy as the “[..] capacity to access, have a critical understanding of, and interact with different media (broadcast, radio, press) and distribution channels (traditional, internet, social media)”, addressing the needs of all ages. (Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/media-literacy>).

Nowadays, the process of digital transformation has heavily affected also the world of media, to the point that they are now gathered under the new category of “digital media”. The main steps of the transition from analogical to digital supports of media outlets embraced the whole last century, with a notable acceleration of technological development occurred in the second half of this period.

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

So, learning through the entire life implies a constant engagement and the willingness to take up always new challenges for the work and for our own personal and social role. But the act of learning includes also the necessity to keep yourself informed and up-to-date on the latest news and facts. And, of course, the ability to access, read and understand the information reported.

This is where media literacy finds a strong link with lifelong education. Media can be defined in a few words as **means of communication for a large (or massive) audience**, and we should not

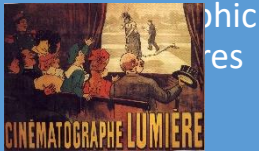


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1895 The Lumière brothers unveils the first projected



1901 Guglielmo Marconi raises the first radio



1950s Television sets begin to be spread in



1965 Two computers communicate with each other - the foundation of Internet



1998 The Google search engine was born



2004 Facebook goes online, launching the social media era



This capital change comes with a great deal of **new opportunities**, sure, but also with many **related responsibilities**. A bad or shallow use of this digital instrument can lead to negative or even harmful consequences in real life. Fake news, disinformation and misinformation can instantly reach every corner of the globe travelling across the net, with a steadily growing impact.

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

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

## TIPS FOR TRAINERS

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

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

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

What can you notice if you compare all the different definitions and their evolution?  
What might “digital media literacy” mean in the future?

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

### **Sources of pictures for the flowchart:**

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

### 3. CHECK IT OUT

1. What is literacy?

- a. Knowing the alphabet
- b. Ability to read and write
- c. Knowledge of a particular subject, or a particular type of knowledge

2. What does being literate mean?

- a. Having read more than 100 books
- b. Having a good education
- c. Able to read and write

3. On the other hand, what does the term 'illiterate' mean?

- a. Unable to understand written words
- b. Unable to read and write
- c. Unable to understand and use numbers

4. What is the difference between digital literacy and media literacy?

- a. Media literacy refers to all means of communication, while digital literacy refers only to the digital means of communication
- b. They are synonyms
- c. Media literacy refers to reading newspapers, while digital literacy refers to online safety

5. Media literacy and digital literacy imply the acquirement of which of the following skills:

- a. Technical skills or practical & functional skills
- b. Critical thinking & evaluation
- c. Collaboration and good communication
- d. Cultural and social understanding
- e. Creativity
- f. Communication ethics
- g. Safety & security
- h. All of the above



6. Lifelong learning represents all purposeful learning activity undertaken on an ongoing basis to improve knowledge, skills, and competence.

*Is it true or false?*

**Correct answer: True**

7. Media can be defined in a few words as a means of communication for large (or massive) audience.

*Is it true or false?*

**Correct answer: True**

8. Lifelong education is effective if the learner:

- a. is only focused on his/her interests;
- b. is only focused on training and courses for professional purposes;
- c. shows high motivation and commitment to learning**
- d. always enrolls on compulsory training courses

9. Non-formal and informal education:

- a. Are less valuable forms of education;
- b. Are never recognized and not trustworthy;
- c. Mean courses of lower quality than formal education;
- d. Occur away from conventional school or academic settings and are key to lifelong learning**



## 4. DO IT YOURSELF

Consider the following steps to set up a practical activity with your students:

1. Have your learners divided into groups.
2. Take two boxes and label them as “Audience” and “Topics”.
3. On paper cards, write down different types for each category. For example, the audience can be teenagers, elderly, parents, right/left-wing voters, etc. Topics can be the environment, politics, economics, sport, science, etc.
4. Have each group randomly draw one card from each box.



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5. Ask each group to prepare a presentation showing what they think would be the best way to communicate the topic they got to the type of audience assigned. Each group will need to select up to two media (between television, radio, digital, etc) and motivate their choice, showing also what their piece of news will look like, including the tone, the language, and the point of view adopted.
6. Presentations can include every type of content (text, pictures, audio, video).
7. After each presentation, leave the floor open for questions and observations from the other groups. Do they agree with the strategy adopted? Would they change something?
8. Stir the discussion on the different characteristics of each medium and why it might be suitable or not for the given target audience.
9. Food for thought: how is the communication affected by each medium and target audience? Would the same message be different if you'd change any of the two factors?

## 5. SOURCES

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/literacy>

<http://uis.unesco.org/node/334638>

<https://rm.coe.int/1680783500>

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/4117>

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Ac11047>

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/prosumer>

## 6. FURTHER READINGS

Case Studies of Conditions and Success Criteria in Media Literacy Education,  
<http://ecml.pc.unicatt.it/english/documents/guidelinesCaseStudies.htm#teaching1>

Media Literacy – Literacy for the 21st Century, by Gerhard Bisovsky  
<https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/blog/media-literacy-literacy-21st-century>

Study on Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy Levels, EAVI  
[https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/studies/literacy-criteria-report\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/studies/literacy-criteria-report_en.pdf)

Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, EU  
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C .2018.189.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2018:189:TOC>

Watch the video series [“Has Technology Changed Us?”](#), narrated by Gillian Anderson, on the impact of technology on society and individuals. Scripted by Nigel Warburton. From the BBC Radio 4 series about life's big questions - A History of Ideas. This project is from the BBC in partnership with The Open University, the animations were created by Cognitive.

[Rewiring the Brain](#)

[The Medium is the Message](#)

[The Fourth Revolution](#)

[The Antikythera Mechanism](#)