



# **MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION IN LIBRARIES FOR ADULT AUDIENCES**

**Strategic Report** June 2020

## Project Overview

*Media Literacy Education in Libraries for Adult Audiences* is a project of the American Library Association (ALA) designed to support libraries in their efforts to improve the media literacy skills of adults in their communities.

By tapping the expertise of a diverse group of thought leaders, the project will result in a suite of free media literacy resources, including a practitioners' guide and six webinars, that will be distributed free of charge to libraries to help them reach adult learners.



*Media Literacy Education in Libraries for Adult Audiences* commenced in November 2019, when 30 [project advisors](#) from the library and media literacy sectors convened in Chicago with the following goals:

- Consider the scope of current media literacy efforts and research;
- Develop strategies to address gaps in current adult services and staff training in libraries; and
- Identify areas for collaboration between librarians, journalists, researchers and adult educators.

Although this project began before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, its purpose has never been more relevant. In our new reality, media literacy skills are key to remaining informed and healthy. As community anchor institutions, libraries have the opportunity to be a voice of reason in this difficult time.

## Project Rationale

According to the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), “media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act using all forms of communication. In its simplest terms, media literacy builds upon the foundation of traditional literacy and offers new forms of reading and writing. Media literacy empowers people to be critical thinkers and makers, effective communicators and active citizens.”

For the purposes of our project, **a media-literate adult should be able to access, share and create media across multiple formats and platforms while utilizing critical thinking skills to evaluate the purpose and potential impact of the material.**

U.S. adults are in critical need of media literacy education, specifically access to materials, tools and opportunities to learn how to evaluate the validity of online information. For the first time since the Pew Research Center began monitoring how adults get their news, social media has outpaced newspapers as a news source in the U.S.; as of the 2018 report, 43% of adults stated that they get news “often” from news websites or social media.<sup>1</sup> This is concerning in light of Pew’s 2016 Digital Readiness Gap study, which found that just one in six adults (17%) are confident in their ability find online information that they trust.<sup>2</sup>



1. Elisa Shearer, “Social media outpaces print newspapers in the U.S. as a news source,” Pew Research Center, Dec. 10, 2018, [pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/10/social-media-outpaces-print-newspapers-in-the-u-s-as-a-news-source/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/10/social-media-outpaces-print-newspapers-in-the-u-s-as-a-news-source/).

2. John B. Horrigan, “Digital Readiness Gaps,” Pew Research Center, Sept. 20, 2016, [pewresearch.org/internet/2016/09/20/digital-readiness-gaps/](https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/09/20/digital-readiness-gaps/).

This significant gap in adult media literacy has implications for a wide spectrum of life—everything from health and safety to citizenship. Media literacy empowers people to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens within our complex, ever-changing digital environment. In a 2017 study, Joseph Kahne of the University of California, Riverside and Benjamin Bowyer of Santa Clara University found that media literacy education is “an essential support for judgment in a highly partisan digital age” and that “(i)ndividuals who reported high levels of media literacy learning opportunities were considerably more likely to rate evidence-based posts as accurate than to rate posts containing misinformation as accurate—even when both posts aligned with their prior policy perspectives. Those who reported no exposure to media literacy education, in contrast, were not more likely to rate posts with evidence-based arguments as more accurate than posts that contained misinformation.”<sup>3</sup>

## Critical Topics to Address Needs of Adult Learners

Media literacy is a broad and ever-evolving subject that responds to the complex digital and physical communication environment. As such, the *Media Literacy Education in Libraries for Adult Audiences* advisors saw a need to narrow this project’s scope in order to best serve the needs of libraries and their communities. They developed the following five critical topics for both library worker professional development and patron-facing programs and services. The advisors viewed the following topics as equally critical to a full media literacy response for adult learners.



- **Architecture of the internet** reveals how the digital environment functions and its impact on users. This includes how differentiated, personalized media experiences and algorithms influence our access to content, lead to polarization and groupthink, and commodify personal information; and how media business models (e.g., free content, paywalls) affect consumers’ understanding and interpretation of information. Understanding the internet’s architecture is the first step toward informed decision-making about operating within the digital space.
- **Civics** relates to citizenship and the actions—and inactions—of people in our democracy. To be well-informed and active citizens, U.S. adults need to understand how media affects our understanding of, and participation in, our political system.
- **Media landscape** refers to the historical, current and potential future landscape of traditional and social media. To understand how the media affects us as individuals, we must understand the U.S. media landscape and the motivations of the individuals and entities that built it and profit from it.
- Modern **media engagement and creation** includes developing and disseminating media through digital or print methods, including everything from zines to podcasts. Possessing the skills to create and share media enables people to speak up about their beliefs and offers an avenue for empowerment. At the same time, the democratization of media creation and the ability of the layperson to inexpensively create high-quality materials can lead to more “noise” in the media space and a greater distrust of information. Empowering adults to responsibly create media could open pathways to career advancement, hobbies and civic involvement.

3. Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer, “Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age: Confronting the Challenges of Motivated Reasoning and Misinformation,” *American Education Research Journal*, Feb. 1, 2017, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/0002831216679817>.

- **Misinformation** is the creation and spreading of false or inaccurate information without malicious intent. **Disinformation** is the creation and spreading of false information with the intent to deceive. Combined, mis/disinformation can have an alarming impact on public opinion, our trust of the media and our understanding of democracy. Understanding what misinformation and disinformation are, how they differ and how to identify them, helps adults be more savvy news users/consumers.

## Ideas for Future Research



While the advisors identified these five topics as the highest priorities, a considerable array of related areas deserve further exploration.

How do different media modalities (e.g., video, audio, social media) affect the adult brain?

What is the impact of the digital divide on the development of media literate adults? What are the effects of information overload and its impact on the spread of mis/disinformation? What are the long-term effects of media literacy education on adults' consumption and creation of media? These are all valuable questions that warrant further explanation but are outside the scope of this initial project.

## Next Steps

- In summer 2020 ALA will publish a practitioners' guide that provides resources and tips to help library workers create media literacy programming and services for adults.
- Following publication of the practitioners' guide, a series of six webinars will be released in fall 2020. The webinars will provide more details about the critical topics detailed in the practitioners' guide to further support libraries in implementing adult media literacy education programs and services.
- [Sign up for ALA's Programming Librarian newsletter](#) to be notified when the guide and webinars become available.



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