

Advocating for digital media literacy: A comprehensive approach

By Anita Brooks Kirkland

Snapshot

Our regular Canadian correspondent, Anita Brooks Kirkland, considers the importance of digital media literacy and the role school libraries have in engaging communities. Brooks Kirkland outlines the ten principles created to guide the development of a national digital media strategy in Canada and puts forward a range of starting points that will support our profession in embracing a role in digital media literacy education in a post pandemic world.

Does Canada need a national strategy for digital media literacy? The highly-respected non-profit organization MediaSmarts certainly thinks so, and has been advocating for just such a strategy for many years. MediaSmarts' vision is that children, youth and trusted adults have the critical thinking skills to engage with media as active and informed digital citizens. Instructional programs and resources created by MediaSmarts are widely used in schools across the country.

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MediaSmarts also conducts important research, including a comprehensive longitudinal study on young people's attitudes and behaviours regarding the internet. [Young Canadians in a Wireless World](#) (YCWW) has informed educational approaches on a range of digital media literacy issues.



Most recently, MediaSmarts released a report, [From Access to Engagement: Building a Media Literacy Strategy for Canada](#), which calls for a national strategy for digital media literacy. The report summarizes a comprehensive environmental scan, including analysis of existing strategic resources from Canada and other international jurisdictions, interviews with key informants, and an analysis of the input from a stakeholder symposium held in February 2022. The symposium brought together representatives from various groups, organizations, and institutions from across Canada, with the task of identifying themes that should inform policy development. I was honoured to attend the symposium, representing our national organization [Canadian School Libraries](#).

An urgent need across communities

While the report's authors emphasized that some of the world's leading thinkers on digital media literacy are from Canada, we do not have an accurate baseline measurement of digital media literacy skills, such as the [Australian Digital Inclusion Index](#). The report also cites the Australian Government Department of Education's [Digital Literacy Skills Framework](#) as an example of a unified approach, and a model for Canada to emulate. (From Access to Engagement, p. 7).

The need is urgent, as dramatically revealed by the pandemic. Only 30 percent of Canada's First Nations communities have access to reliable internet connections to participate in online school, to work from home, or to access health care information and services.

'In fact, internet access during the pandemic is emerging as a social determinant of health that has long unequally impacted historically under-resourced communities and specific demographic groups like women, newcomers and seniors.' (Brisson-Boivin & McAleese 2021).

The From Access to Engagement report (p. 7) calls for a national policy approach to addressing these urgent concerns.

Digital media literacy is essential to an informed and engaged populace and electorate, but a lack of a national strategy is a barrier to developing such literacy in Canada. We are especially in need of a strategy that moves beyond only access and skills-based understandings of digital media literacy towards critical, inclusive, ethical, social and reflexive practices essential to fostering digital well-being, active engagement, and digital citizenship.

The MediaSmarts report identifies ten principles and commitments to guide the development of a national digital media strategy in Canada.

A national digital media literacy strategy in Canada must:

- Ensure representation from communities and stakeholders across Canada.
- Support equitable access to community-based programs.
- Embrace lifelong learning.
- Promote digital citizenship and close the digital divide.
- Prioritize safety and digital well-being.
- Increase inclusion, accessibility and active participation of priority groups.
- Foster better connections between different jurisdictions (regional, provincial, national and international)
- Clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of the tech industry.
- Include ongoing evaluation and adaptation to ensure transparency and accountability.
- Have adequate and sustainable funding.

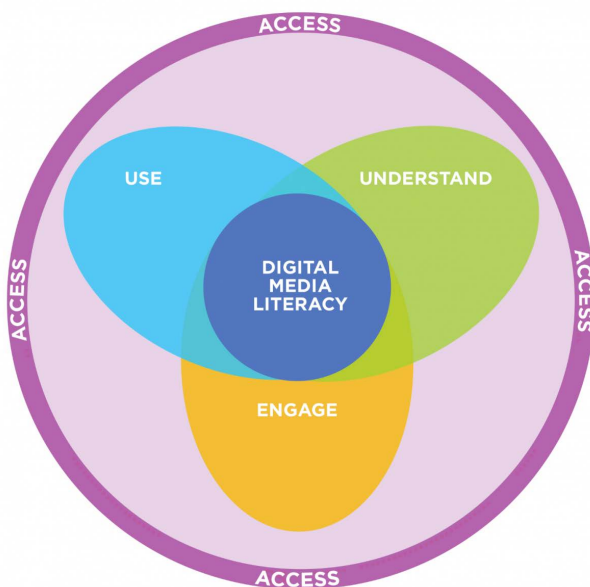
What should school library programs and teacher-librarians contribute?

Participants in the stakeholder symposium emphasized the importance of supporting community-based programs for all ages and audiences, but we were also reminded that students' right to education means they also have a right to digital media literacy instruction in school. At the same time, data from MediaSmarts' YCWW studies indicate that students feel they do not receive this instruction consistently. When asked about this during an interview with CSL Journal (2021), MediaSmarts' director of education, Matthew Johnson, emphasized the role that teacher-librarians play.

Librarians, and teacher-librarians in particular, have been key partners for MediaSmarts from the beginning and play a key role in bringing digital and media literacy to the classroom. As I mentioned earlier, teachers generally recognize the importance of teaching students about these issues, but often don't feel confident in addressing them, don't know where they fit in curriculum, or are concerned about the risks of bringing digital technology or pop culture into the classroom. Just as teacher-librarians have a long history of supporting teachers in addressing research skills – a topic that's more important than ever – they can be champions for media and digital literacy skills in their schools.

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MediaSmarts' model for Digital Media Core Competencies and its wealth of instructional resources can help us in that leadership, coaching, and co-teaching role.



Digital Media Literacy Core Competencies: Access is a precondition of digital media literacy: the associated technical and ethical skills form an underpinning for fluent and effective Use; Understanding to contextualize and critically evaluate to make informed decisions; and Engagement to make use media tools for personal expression and community involvement. (<https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/general-information/digital-media-literacy-fundamentals/digital-media-literacy-core-competencies>)

The pandemic shone a harsh spotlight on digital inequities...

The pandemic shone a harsh spotlight on digital inequities that made the pivot to online learning such a challenge for educators, students, and their families. At the same time, we have observed that through all the restrictions and shut downs, school library professionals have been amazingly resilient and creative in increasing the development of the virtual library learning commons, with its inherent opportunities for infusing digital literacy in a participatory online learning environment. Canadian School Libraries has been tracking the trends as it collects current exemplars for *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada* (Sykes & Armstrong, 2021). Other significant trends include continued growth of diversity awareness, particularly as it relates to collection development, attention to wellness for both staff and students, expanding the engagement of students in making and doing, and outreach to the school community to inspire reading and learning. Indicators for infusing digital media literacy into learning that we have collected tend to be at the policy level, as opposed to examples of concrete, practical actions. Nevertheless, all of these trends are interconnected.

Moving forward post-pandemic

Moving forward post-pandemic, I would suggest that we as teacher-librarians put renewed emphasis on leading learning for digital media literacy. As a longtime advocate for this important role, and as a contributor to MediaSmarts' stakeholder symposium, I humbly suggest a few starting points for renewing our approach.

Challenge our own assumptions. Start by re-examining our own assumptions about how kids use the Internet. MediaSmarts' *Young Canadians in a Wireless World* study is a very good place to start. This comprehensive longitudinal study provides great insight into what students are actually doing with technology as opposed to what many adults think or even fear they are doing.

Be a constant learner. Things change so rapidly in the digital media environment that many educators despair of ever "keeping up". Our expertise as teacher-librarians is to model inquisitiveness, and being in constant inquiry mode. If we do not attempt to understand the impact of algorithms on how we receive information, for example, how can we teach information literacy?

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So I kept thinking one of the ways to think about the difference between algorithm literacy and information literacy is to think about the difference between verbs and nouns. Information literacy is about products, documents, sites, things that we encounter, they're nouns that we're involved with. Algorithmic literacy is really about processes, decisions, recommendations, and actions. They're verbs so there's an action orientation to algorithmic literacy that makes it more fluid and perhaps more dynamic than information literacy. (Ridley, 2022).

Update our approach to validating information when teaching research skills. Checklists are dead. Internet technology has changed radically since the days when we relied on the CRAAP method (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose) for example, to check sources.

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Sophisticated tools for creating and disseminating misleading and spurious content and for disguising the source and purpose render checklists irrelevant. Couros and Hildebrandt (2018) advocate that we use a more investigative approach when checking the accuracy and authority of sources – using fact-checking sites and tools, reading like a fact-checker, and understanding and identifying biases. Our teaching needs to focus above all on nurturing a critical disposition.

Essentially, one of the key challenges of the current age is the need to retrain ourselves to look at the world with an attitude that demands that we question everything, not so that we are paralyzed by uncertainty but so that we are liberated, freed from a world of mistruths and able to assess “reality” in order to create a more accurate picture of the world than the one that is being presented. (Couros & Hildebrandt, 2018)

Provide opportunities for student creativity in the use of digital media. Literacy is about reading and writing, and so too is digital media literacy. In its YCWW studies, MediaSmarts found that students generally do create on a basic level in digital environments – sharing photos on social media sites, for example – but almost exclusively for social purposes. The physical and virtual maker spaces of the library learning commons provide wonderful opportunities for students to create more sophisticated digital products for curriculum-related or independent learning.

Understand digital media literacy as an equity issue.

Understand that digital media literacy is an essential part of the mission of the school library, and that it is critically interconnected with issues of equity, inclusion, diversity, and anti-racism. MediaSmarts’ lead researcher Kara Brisson-Boivin emphasized the relationship between digital divides and social contexts in an interview with CSL Journal (2021). ‘Digital divides are embedded in social, economic, and cultural contexts, and intersect with categories of race, class, gender, and age.’

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Seek out community connections to support digital media literacy. *From Access to Engagement* describes digital media literacy as a lifelong learning process, and emphasizes the importance of access to programs outside of the traditional school environment (p. 12). Many of these programs are offered by public libraries, and we can help by promoting them within the broader school community, or even partnering with the public library or other community organizations in program delivery.

Advocate for informed policy in educational institutions for supporting digital media literacy. This would start at the most essential level, drawing all of the concerns discussed in this article to the attention of decision-makers and educational colleagues. It should also extend to advocating for the needs and concerns expressed by students about access to technology, privacy, and dispelling the surveillance culture so prevalent in schools when it comes to the use of technology. (Canadian School Libraries Journal, 2021).

Digital media literacy in the post-pandemic library learning commons



Canadian School Libraries is hosting the seventh biennial Treasure Mountain Canada research symposium (**TMC7**) in late October, 2022, in partnership with the British Columbia Teacher Librarians' Association. The theme of TMC7 is *Post-Pandemic Library Learning Commons: From Crisis to Invention*. The symposium will focus on issues in school library learning commons practice that speak to future possibilities for the library learning commons, post-pandemic. MediaSmarts' director of education, Matthew Johnson, will be one of the spotlight speakers, presenting the report highlighted in this article.

The purpose of TMC is to collaboratively explore ideas, building collective knowledge of the learning commons approach as sustainable school improvement. We look forward to finding out where TMC7 will take us, especially as we work together on exploring opportunities to support digital media literacy. Without a doubt, I will take the opportunity to share the outcomes of TMC7 with you in the future. One thing is certain, supporting digital media literacy will be a part of the plan.

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