

Researching media literacy: a guidance document for EPRA members (August 2019)

Introduction

Ofcom (UK) defines media literacy as

“The ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts”.

It is a deliberately broad definition that enables Ofcom to research this subject in a range of ways across a variety of media.

Ofcom has a statutory duty to promote media literacy, and it addresses this duty by regularly conducting and disseminating findings from research. The research approaches the subject of media literacy from numerous angles and aims to provide a macro as well as micro understanding of the subject.

This guidance document draws on our experience to offer an overview of different approaches to research, areas to consider when planning research, and the options available to EPRA members wishing to explore this area of work.

It is important to note that on commissioning research, you should seek guidance and advice from research professionals or engage with organisations that promote best practice such as ESOMAR¹ and that each country may have different laws and regulations regarding privacy, data and research amongst children for example. This guidance note, as such, does not take into account any legal, cultural or ethical differences that may exist across countries and is solely based on experience in the UK and we would advise non-researchers to engage with reputable market research professionals when considering how best to meet individual research objectives.

Why research media literacy?

Media literacy is not a skill to be obtained and consistently maintained, but rather is an ever-changing process that requires constant reflection and adaptations. As such, it is crucial that those interested in media literacy regularly conduct (or seek insight from) research into the subject.

This must be an ongoing process: it is difficult to ‘measure’ media literacy, especially when the definition and emphasis alters so much. There is no clear-cut determiner of what counts as ‘literate’ vs. ‘not literate’ behaviour, and this is ever more the case as people use media in

¹¹ <https://www.esomar.org>

ESOMAR is the global voice of the data, research and insights community. It is a not-for-profit organisation that promotes the value of market, opinion and social research and data analytics. It has been providing ethical and professional guidance and advocating on behalf of its global membership community for over 70 years.

increasingly personalised manners, engaging with a wide array of media and technology for their ever-changing needs.

Research on the subject not only provides engaged parties insight into current areas of interest or concern, but also highlights potential shifts in behaviours and attitudes as they happen. These can create large, often hard to predict ripple effects that may have a significant impact on policy making, education reforms and media guidelines.

Research processes

There are multiple ways in which to research the broad concept of media literacy, and it is beneficial to approach it from numerous angles, thus gaining a greater insight into the nuances of the topic. At Ofcom, we explore media literacy both qualitatively and quantitatively, through ongoing studies as well as ad-hoc projects, to gain a cohesive level of insight.

Quantitative research

At Ofcom, we tend to use survey data when conducting quantitative research. There are however, alternative approaches which may have value and be worth exploring depending on data availability, objectives and budget. These include the application of data science, behavioural economics, social media analytics, “big-data” collection and analysis, crowd-sourcing etc.

Quantitative survey research allows for broad patterns in behaviours and attitudes to be observed and measured. The larger the project (and budget), the more scalable the findings and the more opportunities there are to examine correlations, patterns and nuances in data. **Large quantitative survey projects** allow for comparison between different demographic groups, where variances between different socio-economic groups, ethnicities, genders etc. may be observed. This is particularly useful when examining media literacy, as it allows for developing problems to be noted.

By undertaking ongoing quantitative trackers (over a period of weeks, months or years), researchers can create multiple opportunities to compare and contrast results, to understand patterns over time and to strengthen the credibility of the findings. It allows for each consecutive study to respond to findings from previous rounds, where researchers can adjust questions and structure of surveys accordingly. **Ongoing tracking studies** are useful if researchers wish to build a comprehensive overview of behavioural patterns in a specific group or region or respond to societal occurrences on a regular basis.

The most common methodologies for quantitative survey research are:

- Face to face
- Telephone
- Online
- Postal (very rarely used – likely to have very low response rate).

At Ofcom we frequently use face to face surveys to measure media literacy as that allows us to not only speak to a wide range of people across the UK, but we also mitigate the risk of excluding those who are not accessing or not comfortable with using the internet or computers.

Deciding on the desired sample size will be a trade-off between cost and 'robustness'. Larger samples tend to cost more but can deliver results that we can be more confident in (with narrower error margins). You should consider likely sample sizes (and error margins) that will be achieved amongst sub-groups that you wish to report on. Note that there is not a linear relationship between sample size, costs and error margin – so simply doubling sample size will not halve error margins, though is unlikely to double cost.

When designing a quantitative survey, you will also have to bear in mind the length of the questionnaire, as this will have a bearing on cost; and may also determine quality of responses and response rates. At Ofcom, we work collaboratively with our research agencies to ensure high-quality questionnaire design to mitigate those risks. As discussed earlier, we would advise you to speak to local market research professionals when setting out your objectives.

Therefore, quantitative survey research techniques are useful in providing overviews of behaviour and attitudes which can be tracked over time and compared by audience group. However, to understand the "whys" behind media literacy, its complexities and nuances, at Ofcom, we supplement our media literacy quantitative surveys with qualitative research.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research allows participants to explore concerns, questions and opinions about media use and their own literacy, in the case of media literacy, in an open-ended nature, where both the researcher and participant can discuss and tease out the nuances of their views.

Via structured, semi structured, or completely unstructured interviews, researchers can gain an insight into some of the issues or concerns individuals are facing, drawing out opinions that interviewees may not have even realised they had, let alone been able to articulate. By connecting these small, individual points researchers can build a rich, detailed insight into their interviewees' experiences. This allows the behaviour identified in quantitative studies to be understood and explored in more depth.

Qualitative research isn't necessarily about conducting as many focus groups or interviews as possible, but about ensuring a range of people are given the opportunity to discuss their views and thoughts in-depth. It is possible for researchers to build an understanding of multiple aspects that feed into media literacy, without the participant needing to articulate their beliefs directly: something that is invaluable when discussing a subject as complex as media literacy.

There are several approaches researchers may take when examining media literacy qualitatively:

- **Focus groups** allow for a broader discussion with 6 – 10 people at one time, where researchers can pinpoint a group of interest (for example, young people aged 16-24) and join them in a dialogue where they are able to discuss concepts as a group. This allows individuals to be inspired by another's point of view, or contest viewpoints they may disagree with.
- **In depth interviews** allow for a more personal, 'private' discussion, where participants can air fears and opinions they may be too nervous to in a group. They also allow for discussion to be more tailored to the participant, where researchers can respond to their points as they come up. In-home interviews allow for an insight into participants' everyday lives and add depth to their discussion; telephone interviews save on research costs and allow for discussion with hard to reach participants.
- **The use of online qualitative** research is common in the UK, where participants can join online panels or forums for anything between 1 hour to a period of months or years. These can be beneficial as they tend to be **cost-effective, faster and offer larger scale studies, often conducted via online means** (such as online panels, online focus groups, research via mobile applications). While these do indeed help cut down costs (qualitative research can be expensive, with recruitment costs, incentives, travel and the use of facilities for research quickly adding up) they can also reduce the ability of the interviewer to establish rapport and a personal, intimate nature that tends to be important for qualitative research.
- It is sometimes beneficial to conduct **ethnographic-type research** – where a researcher embeds themselves within the participants' life and observes their behaviour and responses to situations, sometimes also combined with tracking tools which are installed on people's devices. This method allows for more in-the-moment or 'organic' attitudes and behaviours to be captured.

The type of approach taken depends on the time, budget and needs of the study. Ofcom's Media Lives Studies is conducted via in-depth interviews (usually face to face) and we have recently conducted an ethnographic study with children (see appendix).

At Ofcom, it has been beneficial to conduct ongoing, **longitudinal qualitative studies**, where researchers have been able to build rapport with participants over time. This is very useful when discussing media literacy, as the development of literacy skills is a process that involves numerous setbacks as well as advances. As such, it is extremely beneficial to build an understanding of changing use and attitudes over time, what motivates these different periods, what they mean, and how they can be addressed.

The anecdotes and themes that emerge from qualitative research add a **human, personal element to the statistics that emerge from quantitative research**. These details can also introduce researchers to patterns, narratives and behaviours they may not have been aware of in the quant. stage of the research. This could then feed into a potential next round of quantitative research or showcase the need for an ad-hoc study to be conducted based on an unexpected emerging theme.

Costs of carrying out research

The size of the budget required for research can vary greatly, depending on the type of research, who you wish to recruit, and the types of questions you may ask. In short: cost will

depend on the complexity, and it will be more expensive to gather data on large groups, difficult to reach audiences, people with little time etc. For instance, with a quantitative survey, the types of questions you ask (open ended vs. close ended, yes/ no vs. a selection of answers), the length of the questionnaire (5 minutes vs. 20 minutes) and the format (face to face vs. online) will all impact on costs.

The research project process

As noted above, there is no clear-cut practice or 'best' methodology to implement when researching media literacy. It can be helpful to think of the research process as a continuous cycle, whereby a trend, behaviour or pattern is observed, research is needed to learn more about this trend, and during this research further behaviour or attitudes are uncovered. Thus, qualitative, quantitative and ad-hoc research often feed into and motivate each other, where one stage of research provides the impetus for a next stage.

When considering research that is commissioned by a client organisation and conducted by an external research agency, there are some standard stages to the process, set out below.

- Initial need for research is identified. This could be determined through a variety of sources such as through findings (and questions) from another research project, a publicised event or news story, or a stakeholder call for insight, as well as eliciting feedback and ideas from other stakeholders.
- A research brief is created, where the research questions/ objectives, general sense of type of research, and broad budget requirements are agreed (depending on the organisation, the size of the budget may or may not be shared externally – at Ofcom, we do not indicate budgets to agencies).
- Agencies are sent the research brief and invited to tender.
- Agencies send their proposal back to the client organisation.
- Agency is commissioned, based on their experience, proposed methodology, costs, etc. They may be invited to pitch meetings to discuss their proposals. At Ofcom, proposals are evaluated against a set of criteria by a panel, independently.
- The agency and the client have a set-up meeting to discuss the parameters of the project, along with any policy teams that are involved in the research scope. The agency develops the discussion guide/survey, with varying amounts of input from the client organisation depending on a range of factors.
- The agency begins the recruitment process, where participants for research are obtained. This can vary in terms of difficulty and cost, depending on the sample required and how accessible they are.
- Agency conducts the fieldwork. This stage can also vary greatly in terms of time and costs, depending on the form and scale of methodology chosen. Some projects require a fast turnaround where only a few focus groups/ a small-scale survey can be run; others require a multi-stage methodology, where research could be in field for several months before it is completed.
- Findings are analysed, collaborated and condensed within the agency. Increasingly, early-stage findings and discussions are held with the client organisation, to ensure that final deliverables are consistent with project aims.

- Research findings are presented to the client organisation. These can be in a range of formats depending on the output required, such as Word reports, PowerPoint presentations, edited video footage, infographics, etc.
- A research report is published, and findings continue to be circulated internally and/ or externally to interested parties. The research often raises questions and stimulates interest on certain specific aspects, which in turn may drive the impetus for another round of research.

Note that this is the research process that we follow at Ofcom. Other models can be successfully employed. For instance, some organisations may have greater capacity in-house to conduct their own research, some may take a do-it-yourself approach whilst others may outsource research expertise entirely.

Following the completion of each study, Ofcom disseminates the insight garnered to an array of stakeholders, to ensure maximum impact and will embed findings into policymaking by holding regular discussions with both internal and external stakeholders, research events, round-table sessions and external visits.

Ofcom has relationships with many key stakeholders which means that our research can reach a range of audiences from across numerous sectors, shaping their outlooks and priorities regarding media literacy. As such, it is once again evident that research into media literacy is a continuous, ever-developing process, where each study may shape future studies.

Other sources of research

It is important to note that there are other means through which to gain understanding of media literacy, beyond partnering with a research agency. These include:

Desk research

Desk research analyses third party research outputs. They can provide a broader sense of existing research methodologies and findings, allowing for an exploration of current discussions and insight without having to conduct primary research. Desk research in this manner can be very cost effective (especially if utilising publicly-available material). It requires time and commitment from the researcher, as they may have to gather a wide range of different research from different sources before they can confidently decide they have a clear understanding of the subject. Desk research can often generate useful subsequent questions and provides an effective means of identifying research gaps in the field.

Collaboration with academia

There are several benefits to collaborating with academia via relationships with subject experts and sharing data and experiences.

- Academics are invested in **adding to and developing existing schools of thought**, therefore often have a strong knowledge of current studies and discussions (thus are able to/ already have conducted much of the desk research mentioned above).
- They often build a **research portfolio** on a specific subject, thus are always developing their knowledge in their specialist field. As such, regulators can utilise academics' expertise and develop project collaborations.
- Academics/ departments may have dedicated **budget** for new research projects, from successful applications to grant-awarding bodies. If this is the case, academics can focus in on particular research areas and **conduct depth analysis**. They must adhere to strict and frequently- updated **ethical expectations** and need to commit to high standards of methodological rigour and analysis

It is therefore useful for regulators to be able to contact local (or global) academics and discuss their existing research and knowledge, build a relationship with them, and from there develop future research collaboration opportunities.

Considerations when thinking about Media Literacy research:

- a. Be clear about terminology – what do you mean by Media Literacy
- b. Have clear and tightly defined objectives
- c. Think about the best methodology for you, how the research will be used, who will use the research and ensure it can be flexible
- d. Remember that all methodologies have pros & cons – be creative in your thinking – could you combine both quant and qual?
- e. Budget & sample will always be a consideration
- f. Think about other sources of research
- g. The research process is a long one and it will always take longer than you think

Ofcom is happy to offer advice and support for EPRA members considering embarking on new research programmes, subject to our own resourcing capacity.

The link <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research> contains our main research publications relating to the area of media literacy.

Overleaf are a series of links to some relevant pieces of research.

Adults Media Use and Attitudes report

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0021/149124/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report.pdf

This report examines adults' media literacy. It provides evidence on media use, attitudes and understanding among UK adults aged 16 and over. It focuses on the current wave of research which was conducted in autumn 2018 and looks at any changes over time. This report also draws on our qualitative Adults' Media Lives research and quantitative Technology Tracker.

The report is a reference for industry, stakeholders and consumers. It also provides context to the work Ofcom undertakes in furthering the interests of consumers and citizens in the markets we regulate.

Children and Parents Media Use and Attitudes report

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0027/134892/Children-and-Parents-Media-Use-and-Attitudes-Annex-1.pdf

This report examines children's media literacy. It provides detailed evidence on media use, attitudes and understanding among children and young people aged 5-15, as well as about the media access and use of young children aged 3-4.

The report also includes findings relating to parents' views about their children's media use, and the ways that parents seek – or decide not – to monitor or limit use of different types of media.

The report is a reference for industry, stakeholders and consumers. It also provides context to the work Ofcom undertakes in furthering the interests of consumers and citizens in the markets we regulate.

Adults' Media Lives

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0022/149251/adults-media-lives-report.pdf

Ofcom's Adults' Media Lives study was set up in 2005 to provide a small-scale, rich and detailed qualitative complement to Ofcom's quantitative surveys of media literacy. The project follows the same 19 individuals over time and interviews them on camera each year about their media habits and attitudes.

The interviews provide evidence about the motivations and the context of media use, and how media services and devices are part of daily life and domestic circumstances. The project also provides us with rich detail of how media habits and attitudes change over time, linked to life-stage.

Children's' Media Lives

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0029/134795/Childrens-media-lives-Wave-5.pdf

A qualitative research project which follows 18 children, aged 8-15 at the beginning of the study, over consecutive years, interviewing them on camera each year about their media habits and attitudes.

The study provides evidence about the motivations and the context of media use, and how media are part of daily life and domestic circumstances. It also provides rich detail on how media habits and attitudes change over time, particularly in relation to children's emotional and cognitive development.

Internet users' experience of harm online

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0028/149068/online-harms-chart-pack.pdf

This research quantifies concerns about, reported experiences of and potential sources of online harm. It was commissioned by Ofcom with advice on the research design provided by the Information Commissioner's Office.

Life on the small screen: What children are watching and why

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0021/134832/Ofcom-childrens-content-review-Publish.pdf

Ofcom commissioned this qualitative research to explore what video content children are watching, how they reach it and why they choose it.

It is always difficult for people – even adults – to articulate why they like what they like. For children, it can be even harder, so research that relies on asking them this question won't reveal the full picture.

Instead, this research has gathered an objective dataset of what children watched across all platforms, before exploring with them the context, journey and decision-making process that led them to specific examples.

Online Nation report

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0024/149253/online-nation-summary.pdf

Online Nation is a new annual report that looks at what people are doing online, how they are served by online content providers and platforms, and their attitudes to and experiences of using the internet.