MLA4MedLit 2026

CONFERENCE REPORT

Whose Literacy? Whose Rights?

Interrogating Digital and Media Literacy for Everyone

Friday 23 October 2026 • 13:00–17:15 CEST • online



Media & Learning

Co-funded by the European Union

Summary

MLA4MedLit 2026 was designed to kick off UNESCO's Global MIL Week (24–31 October 2026), whose theme was "Media and Information Literacy for Everyone: We all play a part." Over one afternoon, four sessions asked who "everyone" really is, who plays a part, and who is included in the conversation and in the design of media literacy.

The conference brought together 13 speakers and 5 moderators, with 203 registrations and 115 people connected.

Context and theme

MLA4MedLit is the Media & Learning Association's annual conference on emerging priorities in digital and media literacy. Earlier editions looked at teacher education, good practice and shared standards, and in 2025 at democracy and civic participation. This year's edition turned a critical eye on the field itself.

Digital inclusion, accessibility and the question of who mainstream media literacy is really designed for are an ongoing concern among practitioners. They point to a need to reach, involve and engage the whole citizenry, far beyond formal education. In a world of disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), this matters even more.

We started from the Global MIL Week theme and asked: what does "for everyone" really mean? Who is everyone? Who actually plays a part, and who is included?

Programme at a glance

Time (CEST)	Session	Format
13:10–14:00	**Who decides what it means to be media literate?**	Keynote discussion
14:00–15:30	**Whose literacy, for whom?**	Case studies
15:45–16:45	**Whose rights? The participation gap**	Case studies
16:45–17:15	**How do we do better together?**	Closing reflection

Participation in numbers

Measure	Number
Speakers	**13**
Moderators	**5**
Registrations	**203**
Connected participants	**115**
Average connection time	**148 minutes, about 62% of the 4-hour programme**

Who decides what it means to be media literate?

Moderator: David Mekkaoui (All Digital). Speakers: Susanna Laurin (Funka Foundation) and Alexander Smit (University of Groningen).

Across research, education and policy, people are routinely described as media literate or not, vulnerable or resilient, yet the field has no shared understanding of what media literacy looks like or how to measure it. The session began with live polls:

- **Self-assessment.** Out of 43 answers, 86% of participants rated their own media literacy at 7 out of 10 or higher, and only 7% at 5 or lower.
- **Measurement.** The most common answer (31%) was that their organisation does not measure media literacy at all, and 29% rely on self-assessment, so 60% either do not measure it or use self-assessment. 19% use observation by trainers or teachers, and only 20% use a structured tool (10% tests or quizzes, 10% a framework such as DigComp or UNESCO MIL).
- **Influence.** Asked who has the most influence on what counts as "media literate", 55% chose "a mix of all of the above" (educational institutions, researchers and academics, platforms and technology companies, practitioners and civil society, governments and policy-makers, and the people being taught). 16% named educational institutions and 13% researchers and academics.

Alexander Smit argued for a shift in perception: looking at digital inclusion and media literacy from the perspective of disadvantaged citizens. He set out three dimensions of digital inclusion: access (physical, material, motivational and social), usage (skills, frequency of use and the range of devices) and participation, understood as tangible outcomes. He then asked whether we are moving from digital inclusion to digital assimilation: whose digital norms and preferences are people expected to adopt? He showed that access and use are shaped by structural factors (socio-cultural, political, economic and digital), personal ones (limited language proficiency or digital literacies) and affective ones (trust, fear, doubt and self-image), as well as by people's prior experiences.

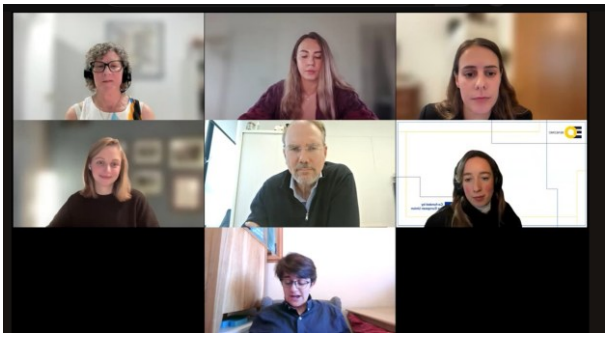
Susanna Laurin questioned two common framings, media literacy as a skill and "vulnerable groups", and asked whether media literacy is truly "for all". She set out what has to be in place: preconditions (accessibility, assistive technology and reasonable accommodation), representation (hero or victim, average or extreme, who tells the story, and "nothing about us without us") and protection (the "racism of low expectations", the right to fail, as we all do, and questioning our own assumptions). On AI, she pointed to fantastic opportunities and to risks, with the aim of agency, not dependency.

Together, the speakers discussed how labels such as "literate" or "at risk" shape who is included, and whose digital norms people are asked to meet. They also asked what it means to be an agent, and reminded us that we are all subjects. Everyday examples, such as paying for items saved in a cart within a timed session, showed how design can exclude as much as skills can.

> *Framing media literacy as a skill implies that people with disabilities have fewer skills than others, and that is problematic. The same goes for the term 'vulnerable groups'. It is time to stop patronising people with disabilities, as if we didn't know what we are doing and needed to be taken care of.*
>
> **Susanna Laurin, Funka Foundation, Sweden**

Whose literacy, for whom?

Moderator: Amy Hassett (Disabled Women Ireland).



Four case studies looked at communities that media literacy is often not designed for:

- Sonokids: blind and low-vision learners (Phia Damsma, Sonokids, joining from Australia late at night)
- MediaCare: caregivers of children with neurodevelopmental conditions (Eva Bei, University of Florence)
- Nieuws in beeld and Digitale Praat: adults with low literacy (Zara Mommerency, Mediawijs)
- Dig@ble: neurodivergent youth (Carlo Schuengel, Iuliia Chaplinska and Sophie Mary, Viveon, VU Amsterdam)

Amy opened the discussion by asking how the people the speakers work with shaped what they built, and whether there was a moment when they changed the speakers' assumptions about what "literacy" means for them. She also asked whether the line between media literacy and digital literacy ever blurred, and whether making something accessible changed how people could question or evaluate what they found.

What the four initiatives have in common

- **Start by listening to the people concerned.** Mediawijs began with round tables with more than 40 professionals and visits to people with low literacy in the places they already go. Sonokids designed with educators, parents and young people who are blind or have low vision, and Dig@ble recommends involving young people in tailoring interventions to their own context.
- **Start from everyday life and real stakes.** The most useful content starts with what people actually face: scams and phishing for adults with low literacy, the passwords, "I am not a robot" tests and missing visual cues that make staying safe harder for blind learners, and the diet, medication or school choices that caregivers have to make about their children.
- **Availability is not accessibility.** Many resources assume language skills, digital confidence or visual information. Mediawijs named this as the key gap, Sonokids showed that many safety cues are visual, and Dig@ble pointed out that only 5 of the 131 interventions it reviewed had been tested on neurodivergent youth. A lack of testing does not mean the interventions don't work, but it means we don't know.
- **Support the people around the learner.** Caregivers, parents, teachers and professionals are trusted intermediaries, and they often need support too. Mediawijs recommends equipping professionals with practical tools, Dig@ble recommends

building adults' media skills and confidence, and Sonokids asks for resources that parents and children can use together.

- **Don't leave it to individuals.** Participants and speakers pointed to the responsibility of platforms, policy and institutions, for example in how safety tests are designed, or in naming caregivers in media literacy policy, as MediaCare proposed.

Participants' feedback was striking: for many, these target groups were new, or had never been taken into consideration in their own work, and for most it was the first time they had heard of such initiatives.

Whose rights? The participation gap

Moderator: Denise Mensonides (University of Groningen).

This session asked who is consulted when frameworks on children's digital rights are written, and what genuine participation requires, compared with token consultation. Denise opened with a short reflection on participation. Kim Sylwander (Digital Futures for Children centre, LSE) and Dominik Eberle and Stefanie Huhndorf, who presented Vienna's Digital Rights Charter for Children and Young People, brought research and practice together.

Kim Sylwander argued that most social media ban policies have not met children's right to be heard (Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). In a survey of more than 29,000 children aged 9 to 16, 45% said age restrictions would not make them feel safer.

Dominik Eberle and Stefanie Huhndorf showed how Vienna involved young people at every step of the Charter, from a survey of nearly 100 students and school workshops to an online process with more than 200 young people. The City Council passed it in January 2026. They were open about the difficulties, including finding participants, reaching younger children and the lack of extra funding.

Again, the theme was agency: children need to be represented, heard, taken seriously and acknowledged as people with a say in the decisions that affect them. The discussion also turned to what the EU Kids Act will mean in practice, and how soon we will see what works and what does not.



How do we do better together?

Moderator: Belinha De Abreu (International Council for Media Literacy). Speakers: Francesca Gottschalk (OECD) and Saara Salomaa (Finnish Arts and Culture Agency, KUVI).

The closing reflection asked what it would actually take to do better, looking at child participation, digital equity, teachers' skills and national policy.

Highlights from the discussion

- **Children as stakeholders.** Children are rights holders, not only people to protect, and should be included across the whole policy cycle, not consulted once.
- **Words matter.** "Digital native" hides persistent inequalities and weakens support, and the Finnish policy chooses its terms carefully to avoid sounding too technical or academic.
- **Equity.** Digital skills vary with background and location, and PISA results show that learning to assess AI-generated information helps, but advantaged students get these opportunities more often. Parents' digital skills shape how they support their children.
- **Teachers need support.** Teachers consistently ask for professional development on digital tools, and media literacy is often overlooked in teacher education. Finland, for example, no longer has master's degrees in media literacy.
- **Funding and wider ownership.** Adequate funding is missing almost everywhere. A wider group of stakeholders now contributes actions to Finland's new policy, and grants give extra points to projects serving under-represented groups.

> *We have the vision, we have the stakeholders, we have the will, but the funding is definitely lacking behind.*
> **Saara Salomaa, KUVI, Finland**

The wrap-up message was clear: the people we call "at risk", including children and young people, must first be represented and included, not just talked about. This takes time, appropriate funding and design, and a collective effort from governments and educators, with responsibility shared by platforms and industry.



Cross-cutting messages

1. **“Everyone” is not a given.** Several target groups were new to many participants, which shows how narrow mainstream design can be.
2. **Labels matter.** Words like “literate” and “at risk” shape expectations about who can take part, and who is included.
3. **We lack shared measures.** Most organisations do not measure media literacy, or rely on self-assessment, and there is no agreed definition.
4. **Agency and participation are central.** People, including children, are subjects with a say, not recipients, which means involving them in the decisions, the design and the conversation from the start.
5. **Doing better is collective.** It needs time, appropriate funding and design, and shared responsibility between governments, educators, platforms and industry.

Participants’ feedback

50 participants answered the post-event survey and rated the relevance of the content to their work or field at 4.38 out of 5. Some takeaways from participants’ feedback:

> *I found the talks very informative and inspiring, particularly those about how young people need to be included in the conversation about the possibility of imposing social media bans, and those about how minority groups, such as people living with disabilities or neurodivergent people, are being left out of conversations about how access to information affects them.*
>
> *I liked the dynamic pace of the roundtables, the engagement of the speakers, and the diversity of key issues addressed around accessibility and inclusion.*

Next steps

The recordings are available on our YouTube channel, and the presentations on the conference page. The conversation continues in our Special Interest Groups and in our ongoing activities and projects. Follow us, subscribe to our monthly newsletter and stay tuned for the next edition of our MLA4MedLit online conference!

Watch the recordings on YouTube

Acknowledgements

Thank you to our moderators, David Mekkaoui from All Digital, Amy Hassett from Disabled Women Ireland, Denise Mensonides from the European Communication Research and Education Association and Belinha De Abreu from the International Council for Media Literacy; to all our speakers; and to everyone who joined us.

Media & Learning IVZW
Kapeldreef 62, 3001 Leuven, Belgium
info@media-and-learning.eu
https://media-and-learning.eu/

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