



**DCU Institute for Future Media, Democracy, and Society (DCU FuJo)  
and the European Digital Media Observatory Ireland Hub (EDMO Ireland)**

**submission to the**

**National Cyber Security Strategy 2019-2024 Mid-Term Review Consultation**

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**Dublin City University Institute for Future Media, Democracy, and Society (DCU FuJo)** is a multidisciplinary research centre focused on the digital transformation of media, democracy, and society. DCU FuJo researchers investigate how to counter digital problems including disinformation and digital hate; how to enhance public participation through democratic innovations; and how to secure the future of high-quality media and information.

**EDMO Ireland** is the Irish hub of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), which aims to counter disinformation by bringing together fact-checkers, media literacy experts, technologists, and academic researchers. EDMO Ireland comprises DCU FuJo (coordinator), TheJournal, NewsWhip, and University of Sheffield. It is co-financed by the European Union's Connecting Europe Facility.

## Introduction

DCU FuJo and EDMO Ireland welcome the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the National Cyber Security Strategy 2019-2024 Mid-Term Review. Given our areas of expertise in digital media literacy and countering online harms (with a specific focus on disinformation), we present our key recommendations below in relation to Measure 20 on Citizens.

More generally, regarding the scope of the strategy and its vision, we suggest there is an opportunity to recognise the threats posed by digital media manipulation and disinformation including coordinated influence campaigns<sup>1</sup>. Those who propagate disinformation are strikingly diverse - encompassing states, corporations, social movements, and individuals - and their motivations span a spectrum of political, ideological, and financial interests. They also vary considerably in terms of the audiences they target and the levels of coordination involved. Moreover, the infrastructure of online platforms facilitates disinformation and manipulation in many ways. Recent years have shown that disinformation threats can emerge unexpectedly as bad actors exploit external events such as the pandemic. Recent years have also shown that manipulation tactics evolve continuously in tandem with efforts to suppress or prevent deception. Consequently, we suggest it is necessary to think about ways to build awareness and resilience among the public by focusing on the broad issues.

At the national level, this requires overcoming the fragmentation that exists between different remits (internet safety, digital skills, digital literacy, media literacy) and area of practice (formal education, the NGO sector, the general public).

## **Citizens**

*Measure 20 from the 2019 strategy states that "government will develop a national cyber security information campaign which will use information provided by the NCSC and the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau and be delivered by entities which are directly engaged in information provision". Reported progress includes the piloting of a cyber security education project in the junior cycle that promotes awareness of cyber risks among pupils in how they engage online with educational resources, social media, and gaming platforms.*

**Topic scope:** In terms of topics covered, we suggest a broader focus on aspects of media literacy, including disinformation, would complement current and planned engagement on cyber security. The term "media literacy" refers to the lifelong process of acquiring the knowledge, skills and practices that are necessary to be a consumer and producer of media content in a critical, creative, and responsible manner.

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<sup>1</sup> Culloty E and Suiter J (2021) Disinformation and Manipulation in Digital Media: Information Pathologies. Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Disinformation-and-Manipulation-in-Digital-Media-Information-Pathologies/Culloty-Suiter/p/book/9780367515270>

Fundamentally, media literacy is about empowering citizens to make well-informed decisions about the content and information they consume. In this sense, media literacy underpins fundamental values including democracy, equity, justice, and tolerance. This understanding of media literacy is, we suggest, closely related in practice to the work of Webwise on internet safety<sup>2</sup>.

**Formal education:** In terms of formal education, we note that the National Strategy for Literacy, Numeracy, and Digital Literacy<sup>3</sup> recognises the importance of offering “multiple opportunities for the development of digital skills and digital literacy” across the curriculum from primary to senior cycle. In Ireland, some elements of digital media literacy are spread across the national curriculum. There are opportunities to explore media literacy in Transition Year programmes and a short course on Digital Media Literacy is available to Junior Cycle teachers across the country. There are also ad hoc provisions on internet safety and cyber security. We recommend the expansion of these provisions in a way that consolidates relevant topics into a coherent whole. However, we note that any expansion of these provisions requires opportunities for teachers to engage in continuous professional learning as they often lack training in these areas.

DCU FuJo and EDMO Ireland has some expertise in this area. We have delivered workshops on various topics around media literacy for both children and adults in public libraries. We have also designed and delivered webinars on disinformation to secondary teachers in partnership with Arts in Junior Cycle, an educational programme that offers training and support for secondary teachers, including the ones teaching the Digital Media Literacy short course. We were involved in the development of classes on topics related to media literacy for students of the Professional Masters of Education (PME) in Trinity College Dublin, a compulsory pre-service education programme for secondary teachers in the country. In 2022, we delivered the first class on critical media literacy for PME students in Ireland. In 2023, we began an international research project involving five countries that will complement the work carried out by EDMO Ireland. The project will investigate current teacher training initiatives across the continent, assess the opportunities available, and provide solutions in the form of digital resources and professional networks.

**General public and key groups:** In terms of reaching citizen groups, we note that many individuals beyond the school setting need awareness and support regarding disinformation, phishing scams, and related topics. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic DCU FuJo developed the guide 'How to avoid false information' for Age

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.webwise.ie/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/14180-literacy-numeracy-and-digital-literacy-strategy-consultation/>

Action<sup>4</sup>. The guide was distributed across the country as part of Age Action's Getting Started pack that supports older people to use digital technologies. This action was facilitated by Media Literacy Ireland (MLI)<sup>5</sup>, a national association of members facilitated by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland.

MLI's 250+ members represent a broad range of sectors - education, libraries, civil society, media, technology platforms - and collaborate to develop new partnerships and sustainable media literacy projects. Launched in 2019, the national Be Media Smart campaign established a campaign infrastructure drawing on the expertise and resources of members. The concept and resources were freely shared with European partners resulting in the replication of the campaign in four regions (North Macedonia, the Czech Republic, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Norway). EDMO Ireland was responsible for organising a new section on the new MLI website launched in December 2022 called "Training and Development", which provides the public with resources and training courses on different topics related to media literacy, such as disinformation, online safety, news media and data privacy.

**Pre-bunking campaigns:** Regarding disinformation and foreign influence campaigns specifically, we suggest that campaigns grounded in pre-bunking or inoculation theory may be a beneficial way to build resilience among citizens. Pre-emptive approaches to tackling misinformation are commonly referred to as pre-emptive debunking or pre-bunking. Rather than attempt to counter disinformation after it has spread, pre-bunking aims to make audiences resilient to disinformation before they encounter it. Research indicates that pre-bunking is generally effective at increasing attitudinal resistance against manipulation; although more research is needed to better understand the dynamics.

Writing in the *European Psychologist* journal, Jon Roozenbeek (University of Cambridge), Eileen Culloty and Jane Suiter (DCU FuJo) explained pre-bunking as follows: Although several approaches to pre-bunking exist, the most common framework is inoculation theory. Medical inoculations are (usually) weakened and harmless pathogens that, upon introduction, prompt the body to create antibodies. Inoculation theory posits that the same can be achieved with unwanted attempts at persuasion. People can build attitudinal resistance against future persuasion attempts by pre-emptively exposing them to a "weakened" dose of the unwanted persuasive argument. In 2022, DCU FuJo and EDMO Ireland partnered with the Department of Foreign Affairs and the University of Cambridge to produce a series of pre-bunking videos to counter common disinformation claims about the Russian war on Ukraine. These animated videos are examples of passive, technique-based inoculation as they provide viewers with a counter-argument to resist common manipulation strategies:

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dcu.ie/news/news/2020/05/fujo-develops-age-action-resource-on-covid-19-disinformation>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.medialiteracyireland.ie/>

specifically, the straw man fallacy, whataboutism, and the shifting the goalposts strategy. Once produced in English, the animated videos will be presented to the network of EDMO hubs and translated into multiple languages for international distribution. We suggest there is considerable scope for further work in this area.

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