

# Assessing Media Literacy Projects: Methodological Perspectives and Solutions

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**Abstract.** Every year, new projects aimed at fostering media literacy are developed, often replicating elements of one another. Funders are interested in achieving the greatest possible impact. However, is the quantitative number of participants the only critical criterion for success? How can the effectiveness and sustainability of media literacy projects be measured? This article explores methodological difficulties in evaluating such projects and offers practical solutions for meaningful and sustainable assessment.

**Keywords:** media literacy, project evaluation, impact assessment, sustainability, Latvia

## Introduction

There is a range of studies measuring media literacy levels within specific social groups or broader society, offering criteria for its assessment. Researchers and organizations have conducted these studies on behalf of national and European institutions.<sup>1</sup> However, resources on evaluating media literacy projects' sustainability,

<sup>1</sup> For example, Celot, P. (2009). Study on Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy Levels; A Comprehensive View of the Concept of Media Literacy and an Understanding of How Media Literacy Levels in Europe should be Assessed. Retrieved from: [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/studies/literacy-criteria-report\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/library/studies/literacy-criteria-report_en.pdf); Pereira, S., Moura, P. (2019). Assessing Media Literacy Competences: A Study with Portuguese Young People. *European Journal of Communication*, 34(1), 20–37. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118784821>; Celebi, M. C., Copur, K. D. (2019). The Relationship Between Media Literacy Levels and Problem Solving Skills of Secondary School Teachers – The Vase of Nigde Province. *Educational Policy Analysis and Strategic Research*, 14(4), 237–255. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29329/epasr.2019.220.14>; For Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (2021). Online Safety – Media Literacy Strategy. Mapping Exercise and Literature Review – Phase 2 Report. April. Retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/611293b2d3bf7f044143209f/2021-02-25\\_DCMS\\_Media\\_Literacy\\_Phase\\_2\\_Final\\_Report\\_ACCESSIBLE\\_v2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/611293b2d3bf7f044143209f/2021-02-25_DCMS_Media_Literacy_Phase_2_Final_Report_ACCESSIBLE_v2.pdf); Xiao, X., Su, Y., Lee, D. K. L. (2021). Who Consumes New Media Content More Wisely? Examining Personality Factors, SNS Use, and New Media Literacy in the Era of Misinformation. *Social Media + Society*, 7(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121990635>;

impact, and effectiveness remain scarce. Funders and creators of such projects aim for tangible results, often measured solely by quantitative indicators, such as participant numbers, or through basic participant surveys (Ločmele, Buholcs 2024).

This article examines the difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of media literacy projects, focusing on both individual project analysis and comparative studies, such as projects within a single country or those funded by similar sources (e.g., national budgets). During the latter half of 2023 and early 2024, on behalf of the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, conducted by me in collaboration with Professor Jānis Buholcs, a quantitative evaluation of the sustainability and impact of 27 media literacy projects implemented in Latvia from July 2020 to June 2023 was conducted (Ločmele, Buholcs, 2024). This evaluation also included a survey (mainly open-ended questions) of project developers and interviews with representatives of potential target audiences as equally significant methods. While the interviews provided insights into the channels through which various groups prefer to receive educational content on media literacy, they were less effective for assessing the impact of the developed projects, – a topic explored in greater detail in the article.

As the first publicly accessible study of its kind in Latvia, the methodology for quantitative analysis of project sustainability and impact was developed specifically for the Latvian context, adapting ideas from international scholars and media regulators' studies of media literacy activities.<sup>2</sup>

Relying on practical experience from researching media literacy projects, this article provides a comprehensive overview of existing difficulties. Several solutions are offered, related explicitly to evaluating such projects. The conclusion includes recommendations for future research directions on this topic. This work aims to contribute to the academic discourse on the subject and assist funders and implementers of media literacy projects in improving both the projects and their evaluation methods. The article explores two key research questions grounded in the context of Latvia: (1) Can the effectiveness and sustainability of media literacy projects be measured, and if so, how? (2) How can methodological challenges in this evaluation process be addressed based on the Latvian experience?

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Greene, K., Yanovitzky, I., Carpenter, A., Banerjee, S. C., Magsamen-Conrad, K., Hecht, M. L., Elek, E. (2015). A Theory-Grounded Measure of Adolescents' Response to Media Literacy Interventions. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 7(2), 35–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23860/jmle-7-2-4>

<sup>2</sup> See the section of Sonja Livingstone's article "Optimising for Impact" at <https://edmo.eu/2022/07/05/the-vital-role-of-measuring-impact-in-media-literacy-initiatives/>; McDougall, J. (project lead) [Without date]. Evaluating Media Literacy with a Theory of Change: A Guide to Using a Theory of Change to Design and Evaluate Media Literacy Projects and Activities at <https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/ToC-Guide-updated.pdf>; OFCOM. (2023). A toolkit for evaluating media literacy interventions – OFCOM, November 10.

It is essential to clarify that in this article (and in the aforementioned Baltic Centre for Media Excellence study), the term “media literacy project” refers to a variety of initiatives, not all of which are explicitly named “projects”. These initiatives align with the theme of media literacy, have identifiable implementers, and are publicly accessible. Examples include campaigns, videos, conferences, books, seminar series, and other activities to strengthen media literacy.

### Evaluating media literacy projects: effectiveness and unique features

Evaluating media literacy project effectiveness is critical for several reasons, including funding allocation, assessment of outcomes, and considerations of quality and impact at a broader (e.g., national) level. While these reasons overlap with evaluating other (e.g., business) projects, media literacy projects require a different approach due to their unique objectives. Most are non-commercial projects prioritizing public benefit over financial gain, making it challenging to determine their impact, particularly for short-term interventions.

Nonetheless, similar to business projects, media literacy projects can also have defined criteria (or groups of criteria) for evaluation. For instance, project success and project management success (or project management efficiency) can be assessed as separate categories, evaluating aspects such as project costs, timeline, scope, and quality. One model for measuring project success and effectiveness is described as “a model of 27 items representing six key performance indicators (KPIs) comprising a performance evaluation framework focusing on time, cost, quality, safety, site disputes, and environmental impact” (Rode *et al.* 2022, 419).

Another approach emphasizes systematic data analysis, using a method similar to journalism, to address key questions: what, who, when, and how, which can help improve projects.

The “what” aspect focuses on the key elements and outcomes of a project, such as its interventions, deliverables, and overall value. The “who” aspect pertains to the individuals and groups associated with the project, including project managers, sponsors, and users who participate in its implementation and evaluation. The “when” dimension addresses the timing of the evaluation process, which can occur before the project begins (*ex-ante*), during its execution (interim), or after its completion (*ex-post*). Finally, the “how” aspect considers the approach to evaluation, where absolute evaluation assesses a single project in isolation, while relative evaluation compares multiple projects against each other (Rode *et al.* 2022, 419–420). However, some of these questions can only be answered internally within the organization. Evaluating projects “from the outside” requires a partially different approach.

Methodological difficulties in evaluating media literacy projects

Several methodological and practical challenges arise when measuring project effectiveness and sustainability, as summarized in Table 1.

For single (one-off) projects, difficulties include limited impact measurement or overly detailed evaluation, such as comprehensive surveys following a 90-minute seminar. Measuring the impact of such short interventions is difficult, as they typically provide only short-term knowledge gains. A common problem encountered in more extended activities, such as courses, is the limited number of valid questionnaires. Typically, there are more pre-event responses than post-event ones, but only paired responses – those completed by the same individual (e.g., identified by an anonymized code) – are suitable for comparison. Anonymity complicates tracking respondents who completed both surveys.

In smaller media literacy projects, impact assessments (if conducted) are usually performed by project creators, who often lack a transparent methodology. This typically involves simple quantitative indicators, such as participant numbers or game players.

On a broader scale, such as nationwide studies, challenges arise in comparing projects of varying nature, scale, funding, and duration. In Latvia, short-term (one-off) events are common, making evaluating their impact difficult due to the limited scope and duration of such activities. Furthermore, not all project information is publicly available, and creators may be reluctant to disclose specific details. Some sustainability and effectiveness criteria only become evident over time, such as whether newly created materials continue to be used, remain accessible online after a certain period, or whether the project demonstrates continuity, for instance, by inspiring subsequent initiatives.

Table 1. Methodological difficulties in evaluating the effectiveness and sustainability of media literacy projects

Research on effectiveness and sustainability of a single project	Research on sustainability and effectiveness of multiple projects (for example, nationwide comparison)
Difficult to measure the impact of short-term events (e.g., a 90-minute seminar)	Challenges comparing projects of different nature, scale, funding, and duration
No impact measurement or overly detailed evaluation, even for small interventions	A large number of short-term (one-time) events with impacts that are difficult to determine
Disparity between pre- and post-event survey responses	Limited publicly accessible information on projects
Evaluations often lack a clear methodology	Sustainability criteria often emerge over time, like the continued use and online availability of created materials

Some assessment criteria are easily quantifiable. However, there is significant reliance on the researcher's contextual knowledge and in-depth understanding of the field in many cases. This highlights the importance of carefully considering who is entrusted with conducting such research, as representatives of research agencies may lack sufficient contextual knowledge of the sector. For instance, identifying the funders of media literacy projects is relatively straightforward based on publicly available information, such as whether the funding comes from international partners or a national institution. Similarly, by examining the content and communication activities, it is possible to determine the target audience of a project (e.g., seniors, children, or teachers). Additionally, basic research can provide insights into the regularity of activities (e.g., whether it is a one-off event such as a conference or seminar or training conducted with a certain regularity) and the project's final outputs, such as training programs developed materials, or videos produced at the project's conclusion.

However, some aspects of evaluating media literacy projects require researchers to understand the field and its development deeply. For instance, assessing the novelty of projects demands extensive contextual knowledge of media literacy. This includes comparing projects based on the methods, themes, and target audiences they engage with to determine excellence in specific aspects of innovation. For example, it is important to identify whether a project addresses its target audience and thematic focus in a new and original way or follows pre-existing patterns, such as targeting students in schools with commonly explored themes like evaluating misinformation or identifying trustworthy media content. The novelty might also be reflected in focusing on less-discussed topics in Latvia or offering an interesting and less-explored combination of themes. Similarly, in terms of methods, it is crucial to evaluate whether projects employ widely used techniques or introduce innovative methods, either internationally or within Latvia. Thereby, a deep specialization in the field is required to conduct such an evaluation, which can introduce another risk – the researcher's potential overfamiliarity with the field.

For instance, in the evaluation of media literacy projects carried out within the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence initiative, the analysis of nine projects in which I participated as an author, co-author, or in another capacity was conducted by another expert (Ločmele & Buholcs, 2024). In a small country like Latvia, finding an expert with sufficient knowledge of this specialized field who has not been involved in any media literacy promotion projects over the past three years is highly challenging.

## Practices of media literacy project developers

Media literacy project developers face diverse challenges when designing and implementing initiatives. Limited resources often dictate creative collaborations

with schools, libraries, and other community institutions. In Latvia, many projects have successfully partnered with educational institutions to integrate media literacy activities into school/university curricula. Libraries have also played a pivotal role in providing accessible venues and digital infrastructure, significantly broadening the reach of these initiatives.

The following article explores the perspectives and experiences of media literacy project developers in measuring the effectiveness of activities they have organized and/or funded, based on the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence study and supplemented with commentary from the researcher's perspective.

A survey of project implementers revealed that some organizations and media literacy projects do not measure effectiveness at all. In contrast, others rely primarily on quantitative indicators, such as event attendance, game participation, or basic questionnaire responses. These simplified self-assessments – such as participants rating whether they gained new knowledge and skills – or metrics like seminar attendance numbers are often intended to meet funder requirements for reporting results. However, they do not provide meaningful insights into whether the intervention has genuinely improved media literacy skills, influenced behaviour, or whether the knowledge is applied in practice. Measuring such outcomes is highly complex and often cannot be achieved through a few simple survey questions, which remain the most common approach to effectiveness evaluation (Ločmele, Buholcs 2024).

Only a few projects, particularly those with a longer duration, have implemented specially designed methodologies for measuring effectiveness, highlighting a gap in robust evaluation practices across the field.

It should be noted that just as the practices of project representatives vary, so too assesses the sustainability of media literacy projects implemented in Latvia, as perceived by the project developers themselves. In response to an open survey question, their descriptions ranged widely, representing opposite ends of an imagined evaluation scale – from views that the projects are sustainable or even highly sustainable to judgments that there is not a single project that could be considered sustainable based on the longevity of its activities. This brings us to one of the fundamental questions: what is meant by the terms “effective” or “sustainable” in the context of media literacy projects, and what is being measured in each case to determine this? The aforementioned Baltic Centre for Media Excellence study reveals that while some criteria for a sustainable and effective project align in the views of project developers, others differ (Ločmele, Buholcs 2024).

First, specific criteria are essential during the project development stage, such as having a strategic vision or allocating funding for public communication of the project's outcomes. Second, even more criteria are mentioned as those that must be fulfilled after the project's implementation and often over several years.

For instance, has the project contributed to the growth of other projects, served as a steppingstone for other initiatives or ideas, and so on? However, such impacts can only be determined retrospectively through sectoral research conducted over a longer timeframe, such as a five-year period (Ločmele, Buholcs 2024).

Since the criteria for a sustainable and effective media literacy project and their measurement vary among industry representatives, organizing a seminar or training on project sustainability and effectiveness would be highly beneficial. Such an initiative could unify perspectives on long-term activities and sustainability criteria. Government authorities or international partners could lead this effort, inviting foreign experts to showcase the best practices. At the same time, the academic community could foster discussions on evaluation methodologies and practical research in this area.

From a policymaking perspective, presenting international examples of sustainable media literacy projects and their evaluations and actionable insights on adapting these practices to Latvia could drive progress in the sector. Otherwise, without efforts to enhance the knowledge of media literacy stakeholders regarding project effectiveness and sustainability, there is a risk of stagnation in project quality, effectiveness, and sustainability. For instance, scientific literature often discusses the definition of project efficiency, effectiveness, and efficacy in evaluating projects, which could be translated into Latvian as *efektivitāte*, *iedarbīgums*, and *lietderība* (Zidane, Olsson 2017, 621–641). These aspects could be studied separately to provide deeper insights into project evaluation.

### How about the audience's perspective?

An often-overlooked aspect of media literacy project evaluation is the audience perspective. While projects typically aim to address their target groups' specific needs and challenges, evaluations rarely delve into whether participants perceive these efforts as effective or relevant.

One method for capturing audience perspectives is through post-event surveys and interviews. For instance, participants can provide insights into which parts of a project were most engaging or applicable to their daily lives. However, this approach has limitations, mainly when feedback mechanisms are generic or fail to account for diverse audience backgrounds. Moreover, audience diversity poses another layer of complexity. Media literacy projects often target broad demographic groups, ranging from school-aged children to senior citizens. Each group brings unique expectations, preferences, and prior knowledge. For example, younger audiences may appreciate gamified learning methods, but older participants prefer structured lectures or printed materials. Recognizing and addressing these differences is crucial for project success.



Surveying the target audience some time after a media literacy project has concluded – mainly when conducted by independent researchers rather than by those hired by the organizers – provides limited value. Identifying participants, especially for one-day events, is often challenging due to data protection regulations prohibiting sharing e-mail addresses. Broader surveys of the target audience rely heavily on locating individuals familiar with the project, with most respondents either aware of other initiatives by the organization or having no prior knowledge.

Generalizing the experiences of a few individuals, such as teachers, to the entire target group is problematic, and downloading counts of materials may not reflect actual use, as they could be downloaded once and used for years or never accessed.

Qualitative approaches may be more valuable for assessing the sustainability of media literacy projects beyond short-term effectiveness. These allow for a deeper exploration of motivation and practices around project outcomes while accounting for the diversity of typical media literacy audiences (e.g., youth, librarians, teachers, seniors) and their varying reasons for engaging with project results.

### **Advancing research on media literacy project effectiveness and sustainability**

Future research directions in evaluating the effectiveness of media literacy projects could encompass several aspects to deepen understanding and enhance the impact of such initiatives. Potential research developments may involve closer collaboration with project implementers to access their audiences and investigate how the knowledge, skills, and competencies gained through media literacy projects are applied daily and whether or for how long they persist after project completion.

Evaluating the contribution of individual projects might prove challenging, particularly since media literacy project audiences often overlap (e.g., teachers or youth involved in multiple initiatives, making it difficult to isolate the impact of a single intervention). However, over a more extended period, it would be possible to explore the sustainability of acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies, including tracking changes in participants' self-assessments of their abilities and their actual capacity to critically evaluate information and similar skills over at least five years. Another potential area of research could examine behavioural changes – whether and how participants alter their information source selection habits after the project, whether media literacy recommendations are applied, and whether this knowledge is used to educate peers or family members.



Discussions are also needed to determine the optimal timeframe for evaluating the long-term impact of media literacy projects. For instance, is one year, two to three years, or more appropriate? Alternatively, should the evaluation period vary based on the scale and duration of the project, such as differing benchmarks for one-day events versus year-long programmes?

In exploring the sustainability of media literacy projects, it would be valuable to identify and propose a set of indicators that signal long-term effectiveness. For example, could reducing digital fraud cases be considered a measurable outcome? Could an increase in citizens' self-assessment of their ability to critically evaluate information over time indicate long-term project success, or might this metric have an illusory nature?

Cultural and contextual factors that influence the long-term effectiveness of projects should also be identified. For instance, is there a difference, and if so, what kind, when media literacy education for minority groups is conducted in their native language? Does the native language also influence their prior knowledge of media literacy topics? How do factors such as beliefs about key sociopolitical issues (e.g., democratic governance, Latvia's membership in the European Union and NATO, or trust in institutions) correlate with project outcomes? Understanding whether such correlations exist – and how they impact the durability of media literacy project results – would be an essential avenue for further study.

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