Building a National Digital Media Literacy Strategy in Canada

A Coordinated Framework for Democratic Resilience

Digital Public Square
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DIGITAL PUBLIC SQUARE

About Digital Public Square

Digital Public Square (DPS) is a Canadian not-for-profit that designs digital experiences to support democratic participation. We invite greater diversity of opinion into the public square – expanding engagement, elevating underrepresented voices, and creating opportunities for people to encounter perspectives they might not otherwise hear. We are part research lab, part creative workshop, turning insight into action through interactive digital design. From countering misinformation in North America to championing digital rights in Asia to strengthening election integrity in Africa, DPS has reached tens of millions of people worldwide with content that informs, empowers, and protects democratic participation.

Website: digitalpublicsquare.org

About MediaSmarts

MediaSmarts is Canada's not-for-profit charitable centre for digital media literacy. Our vision is to empower people to engage with all forms of media confidently and critically. MediaSmarts has been developing digital media literacy programs and resources for Canadian homes, schools, and communities since 1996. MediaSmarts also conducts and disseminates original research that contributes to the development of our programs and resources and informs public policy on issues related to digital media literacy. We work in partnership with organizations to advance digital media literacy in Canada and globally.

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The recommendations in this report are drawn and developed by the authors based on the expertise shared by participants who recognized the critical need for a coordinated national framework for digital media literacy in Canada.

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Introduction

Canadians are navigating a digital world that shapes nearly every aspect of our lives, yet Canada has no national strategy to ensure people can participate safely, confidently, and democratically online.

The stakes could not be higher. Misinformation, online hate, and artificial intelligence are shaping what Canadians see, trust, and talk about at a time when democratic institutions are already under strain. In an online world where political polarization and disinformation do not stop at borders, the need for digital resilience is urgent.

That urgency was reinforced in the federal government's AI consultation report, which highlighted the importance of teaching critical thinking and digital media literacy alongside technical AI expertise.

Other countries, including Finland, the United Kingdom, Australia and Brazil, have adopted coordinated national approaches that treat media literacy as a lifelong skill, embedded across education systems, public institutions, and community learning. Canada, by contrast, remains without a plan.

This public policy gap shows up in everyday life. Many adults now find themselves part of a digital "sandwich generation," setting parental controls on a child's Roblox account while helping a parent recognize online scams, all while navigating increasingly complex digital systems themselves.

Digital media literacy equips people to recognize manipulation, assess the credibility of sources, understand how algorithms shape content, and participate thoughtfully in civic life. It strengthens democracy not by telling people what to think, but by giving them the tools to think critically.

Regulation is important, but without an educated public even the strongest laws will fall short. Many Canadians struggle to assess the credibility of online information. Few understand how automated systems rank résumés, target advertising, or shape the news they see. To thrive in a digital society, we need to understand how information is produced, amplified, and manipulated, and how digital systems influence our choices. Yet access to digital media literacy (DML)

education in Canada remains fragmented and uneven. Successfully building people's DML skills will help Canadians navigate a rapidly evolving information environment safely and responsibly, while making Canada's democracy and social cohesion more resilient to misinformation-driven threats.

Systematic Approaches to Improving Digital Media Literacy in Canada, a roundtable event on developing a DML strategy, convened researchers, educators, policymakers, and civil society leaders from across Canada to explore what a DML strategy should include, and how it could strengthen ongoing efforts to promote critical, inclusive, and lifelong digital media literacy learning and skill development.

Breakout sessions—facilitated by MediaSmarts and Digital Public Square—engaged participants in structured conversations around:

- How DML connects to their work.
- How the absence of a national strategy affects that work.
- What key priorities, principles, and actions should guide a national strategy.

Across groups, participants expressed urgency for a coordinated national framework that can align research, policy, and practice; reduce duplication; and ensure sustained, equitable access to digital media literacy education for all Canadians. Participants emphasized that there is likely growing support for DML efforts among the Canadian public, citing research showing rising concern about social media and artificial intelligence.

This report summarizes discussions and recommendations that emerged from the event, as well as next steps for advancing a national DML strategy in Canada.

Current Landscape and Challenges

Roundtable participants assessed the current DML education landscape in Canada and the challenges they face in advancing DML initiatives across the country.

Fragmentation and Duplication

Participants described a patchwork of initiatives across education, community, and policy sectors, often competing for limited funding. Without coordination, valuable research and resources remain siloed or inaccessible. Many noted "doing the same work in isolation" and called for mechanisms to share findings and avoid duplication.

Unequal Access and Capacity Gaps

Teachers, community workers, and smaller nonprofits often lack the resources, training, and/or time to deliver DML effectively. Indigenous, Francophone, newcomer, and rural communities face particular inequities in access to relevant, culturally grounded programming and infrastructure.

Education System Limitations

DML is inconsistently embedded in provincial curricula. In Quebec, for example, participants explained it is "everyone's responsibility and therefore no one's responsibility." Educators struggle to integrate it without clear mandates, training, or approved resources. Library professionals and teacher-librarians play a crucial but undervalued role.

Funding and Sustainability

Short-term, innovation-focused funding makes it difficult to sustain successful programs or scale proven models. Participants saw a long-term funding framework as essential for impact and equity.

Policy Environment

Participants agreed that education alone cannot counter systemic digital harms. The absence of accountability mechanisms for technology platforms and clear national coordination leaves governments and communities "trying to DML our way out of structural issues."

Why a National Strategy Is Needed

Next, roundtable participants discussed why Canada needs a national DML strategy and what gaps such a strategy could address.

Coordination and Legitimacy

A national strategy could connect diverse sectors—education, community, research, and policy—under shared principles and outcomes. Federal leadership was seen as crucial to lend legitimacy, avoid redundancy, and align efforts across provinces, territories, and ministries.

Whole-of-Society Approach

Participants stressed that digital media literacy is not just for students or educators but for all Canadians—across ages, abilities, and sectors. It should address civic participation, health, employment, and community life.

Evidence-to-Practice Pipeline

Stakeholders called for a clear path from research to policy to implementation, ensuring that publicly funded research translates into accessible, practical tools.

Future-Proofing

A national strategy must be durable beyond political cycles and adaptable to technological change—anticipating emerging issues like AI, synthetic media, and globalized disinformation ecosystems.

Priorities and Recommendations for a National Digital Media Literacy Strategy

Finally, roundtable participants shared their views on what principles should be prioritized in a national DML strategy and made structural recommendations for implementing a strategy in Canada

Foundational Commitments and Principles

Participants emphasized that the strategy should:

- **Prioritize well-being** — including mental health, social connection, and belonging—not only digital skills.
- **Be inclusive and intersectional** — addressing distinct needs of communities often marginalized in online spaces (Indigenous, racialized, newcomer, 2SLGBTQ+, older adults).
- **Promote lifelong learning** — extending beyond schools to workplaces, libraries, and community hubs.
- **Be equity-driven** — closing gaps in access, training, and infrastructure.
- **Ensure accountability and policy coherence** — complement, not duplicate, online harms and digital safety legislation.

Structural Recommendations

Participants recommended that policy-leaders in Canada:

- **Establish a Centre of Excellence, Commissioner, or national coordinating hub** to align government departments, research networks, and civil society initiatives. Examples of known models provided include the Making Sense of Media program within Ofcom (the independent regulatory and competition authority for the UK's communications industries), eSafety Commissioner (Australia), and Financial Literacy Centre of Excellence (Canada).
- **Create a central, bilingual repository** of vetted DML resources and training materials.
- **Develop sustained funding mechanisms** to support collaboration, evaluation, and long-term community programming.
- **Support a "train-the-trainer" approach** that empowers educators, community leaders, and youth as DML champions.
- **Mandate DML in K–12 curricula** through provincial/territorial collaboration, supported by educator training, core curricular objectives, and accessible classroom resources.

Framing and Communication Recommendations

Participants recommended that a national DML strategy should:

- Use **plain language** and relatable framing to reach the public; make "facts cool again."

- Focus on **connection and civic resilience** rather than fear or crisis.
- Encourage **cultural nuance and critical empathy**—teaching people to hold multiple truths and engage across differences.

Key Takeaways and Reflections

Participants broadly agreed that a national strategy must move beyond defining digital media literacy to operationalizing it—embedding it across systems, communities, and generations in ways that build trust, inclusion, and digital resilience.

> *"We can't DML our way out of this without policy accountability."*
>
> *"Duplication wastes energy. Collaboration multiplies impact."*
>
> *"A strategy should be both high-level and nuts-and-bolts—visionary but practical."*
>
> *"Digital media literacy should go beyond workforce readiness by equipping us with the digital skills needed for everyday civic participation."*

Towards a National Digital Media Literacy Strategy

In January 2026, MediaSmarts published an open letter calling on the Government of Canada to develop and adopt a national digital media literacy strategy. The letter, which was signed by Digital Public Square and 43 other individuals and organizations, is a call to action to put a national digital media literacy strategy, built around three priorities, into practice.

First, leadership. Canada needs a clear mandate and stable funding assigned to a federal body responsible for setting a shared vision, convening expertise and ensuring accountability. Important work is already happening through initiatives such as Canadian Heritage's Digital Citizen Initiative, but efforts remain

fragmented. Without coordination, even a new AI strategy risks deepening that fragmentation.

Second, sustained funding. Short-term project grants cannot address long-term societal challenges. A national strategy must invest consistently in research, education and community-based delivery across the lifespan.

Third, cohesion. While public education falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction, national frameworks already exist in areas such as public health and environmental learning that are similarly under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. Digital media literacy deserves the same collaborative approach.

Online harms are not disappearing. Foreign information manipulations and interference (FIMI) are growing and impacting democratic processes. Artificial intelligence will only accelerate the pace and complexity of change. The question is whether Canada will continue to respond reactively, one crisis at a time — or invest in the skills people need to thrive in a digital society and protect democratic participation.

In a time of deepening polarization, growing distrust in democratic institutions, and disruptive technological change, Canada cannot afford to fall behind. A national digital media literacy strategy would provide a coordinated, evidence-based approach to strengthen citizens' resilience to misinformation and online harms.

To move a national digital media literacy strategy from vision to reality, Canada must shift from a patchwork of isolated efforts to a coordinated, whole-of-society framework. We need to engage Canadians across the country and align federal leadership with provincial, territorial, and community-level efforts to ensure every citizen has the tools to navigate our evolving information environment safely and responsibly.

By treating digital literacy as a fundamental pillar of how we engage with technologies and participate in our democracy, Canada can foster a more informed, cohesive, and resilient democracy.