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Digital and Media Literacy Approaches as a Cybersecurity Strategy

Policy Analysis Paper 1

According to the 2025 Verizon Data Breach Investigations Report, human involvement was a factor in 60% of cybersecurity breaches which were primarily through social engineering, misuse or error (Verizon, 2025). This shows a key issue: the weakest link in any system is the human user. Firewalls and encryption protect networks, but they cannot prevent individuals from being tricked or engineered into clicking malicious links, sharing passwords or even spreading disinformation. It's important to point out this issue regarding digital and media literacy as not only an educational concern but also as a cybersecurity strategy. Adding digital literacy into national education as a curriculum can prepare people to resist manipulation, whether its from cybercriminals, state-sponsored influence campaigns, or targeted algorithms centered on getting clicks. Finland's national curriculum, Estonia's digital citizenship model, and state policies in the U.S. such as Illinois' 2021 mandate and California's 2023 AB 873 show how governments are combining education and cybersecurity. (Hutton, 2023; Wineburg & McGrew, 2019; Csutak, 2022).

What the Policy Is

Digital and media literacy policies focus on giving students the ability to critically evaluate online content, recognize manipulative practices, and understand how digital platforms work behind the scenes. When viewing it from a cybersecurity lens, literacy acts as a human-layer defense against phishing, pretexting, deepfakes, and disinformation. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has a best practice recommendation for adding literacy into K-12 schools while being delivered through the education departments at the state level and meet the CISA best practices standards (CISA, 2021). Instead of just focusing on the tech side, this approach directly targets social engineering tactics that look to manipulate human behavior (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019).

Why the Policy Was Developed

These policies and why they were adopted look to be focused on the civic and strategic benefits they provide.

Finland: Finland's 2019 Cybersecurity Strategy emphasized that "national cyber security competence will be ensured by identifying requirements and strengthening education and research" (Lehto & Neittaanmaki, 2023). Finland's 2021 Development Programme requires basic education to make sure young people have the skills to recognize threats and protect themselves. Digital Literacy is spready throughout subjects and teach surveys indicate that cybersecurity and information security are addressed more often in primary school than secondary ones (Lehto & Neittaanmaki, 2023).

Estonia: After Russia conducted a massive cyberattack in 2007, Estonia responded by adding digital competence into its national curriculum. The ProgeTiger program gives kids exposure to coding, privacy awareness, and digital ethics as part of education (Kattel & Mergel, 2019). Estonia's broader digital society, which is built on secure ID cards, e-voting, and transparent e-services makes digital literacy a civic requirement just as much as a technical one.

United States: Although no federal framework exists, Illinois passed Public Act 102-0055 in 2021, requiring all high school students to complete a media literacy unit (State of Illinois, 2022). California followed with AB 873 (Bill Text - AB-873 Pupil Instruction: Media Literacy: Curriculum Frameworks., n.d.), directing media literacy to be integrated across multiple subjects. These laws have started showing up with the concerns over foreign election interferences, AI-generated disinformation, and the vulnerabilities of young users in digital economies. The efforts we are seeing at the state level are a part of a bigger push to mix media literacy into education

systems across the U.S., as reflected by the Media Literacy Now Coalition and NAMLE's 2024 report on the state of media literacy policies in the U.S. As of May of 2024, 19 states have some form of media literacy policies passed or are pending (Admin, 2024; Amanda, 2025).

Lateral Reading: Wineburg and McGrew (2019) show the importance of “lateral reading”, a skill that allows students to evaluate the trustworthiness of online sources by checking the credibility of the websites and publications behind the information. This technique, used a lot by expert fact-checkers, helps students learn to assess content in a way that can create a resilience to social engineering tactics. Lateral reading directly supports media literacy by teaching students to think critically about the information they encounter online (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019).

Broader National and International Fit

In Europe, the Media Literacy Index consistently ranks Finland and Estonia at the top of the most resilient societies to disinformation and manipulation (Jourova, 2023). The way they have added digital literacy into cybersecurity policies show a direct connection between educational strategy and national defense.

In the U.S., specifically within CISA, they have focused on increasing cybersecurity through the technical focus, even at the K-12 level. CISA's “Protecting our Future” initiative points towards K-12 schools as prime targets for cyberattacks and has best practices like Multi-factor authentication (MFA), patch management, incident response planning, and cybersecurity training programs (CISA, 2023). CISA mentions that “leaders must establish and reinforce a cybersecure culture. IT and Cybersecurity personnel cannot bear the burden alone” (CISA, 2023). This shows there is federal recognition that schools are critical points of vulnerability, the initiative does not prescribe curriculum-based literacy that is designed to build student resilience

against social engineering or misinformation. It is imperative that a more comprehensive national policy treats digital/media literacy as part of cybersecurity defense.

Conclusion

Media and digital literacy policies can operate at multiple levels: education and cybersecurity defense. By teaching students to recognize social engineering, being skeptical, and to adopt privacy-conscious behaviors, the policies could mitigate the human related vulnerabilities that drive many breaches. Finland and Estonia illustrate successful national models, while Illinois and California show the growing efforts within the U.S. Implementing digital/media literacy into cybersecurity strategy can ensure that protection extends beyond the high-tech code and firewalls to the people who have to be able to navigate a world that is becoming more and more digitally reliant.

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The Political Implications of Digital and Media Literacy Curriculum as a Cybersecurity Strategy

Policy Analysis Paper 2

When looking at legislation that would be focused on creating a national media literacy curriculum or supporting states that do so, the most recent attempt was H.R. 9584 in the 118th Congress, sponsored by Representative Elissa Slotkin. The bill has been discharged to committees and has not been reintroduced to the 119th Congress but the political implications are still relevant.

H.R. 9584 received bipartisan support, mostly driven by the recognition that media literacy is essential for safeguarding national security. The importance of combating misinformation, specifically with increased concerns about foreign influence and cyberattacks, was shown with the intentions of the bill to strengthen resilience against social engineering attacks, which often exploit gaps in public understanding of digital media.

The bill faced opposition with issues on about federal overreach in state and local education systems and that a mandate would create friction based on political bias in education. John D. Sailer points out that the rise of ‘critical media literacy’ (CML) can promote a political agenda, potentially leading to education being politicized (Sailer, 2023). It reflects broader skepticism about the role of federal government in shaping local educational policies.

Representative Slotkin’s support for a national mandate aligns with a broader Democratic viewpoint that looks add federal intervention in matters of national security stating, “An important part of safeguarding our country against foreign influence is making sure individual citizens have the tools to spot that disinformation. In this new age of digital information warfare, education is critical...” (Fordham, 2019). The rational is pretty clear that using education to equip future generations to critically assess digital content and media would increase national security by creating citizens who are more resilient to disinformation campaigns. Addressing one of the largest issues within cybersecurity which is human error.

While not focused on national security, State Senator Karina Villa of Illinois introduced a similar policy in her state, showing awareness to the growing digital divide. Villa said “The internet has become the primary public square where people consume, create, and share news, making media literacy a critical skill for students (Fordham, 2019). Villa’s perspective is centered around the awareness that media literacy is a necessary tool for navigating digital information. Senator Villa’s colleague Terri Bryant questioned how schools could objectively teach students to evaluate news without being biased asking, “What’s fake news and what is not fake news?”, which led back into the discussion about the risk of politicizing education. Bryant’s critique stems from an argument about how subjective policies can be interpreted and misused under the guise of a mandate.

Tying H.R. 9584 and other state media literacy mandates to cybersecurity means understanding how social engineering works. Bell et al. (2023) state that “the rise of disinformation has complicated the social engineering tactics by amplifying false narratives and creating a credible context for exploitation.” By teaching students to detect misinformation, they can become more resistant to manipulation tactics used in cyberattacks. Adams et al. (2023) note that misinformation has been weaponized by foreign and domestic actors, causing issues with the US’s democratic processes and creating instability. “Misinformation is a direct threat to democracy, and media literacy provides the tools needed to safeguard against it (Adams et al., 2023). There is evidence that supports how effective media literacy programs promote these frameworks. Pinkleton et al. (2013) found that adolescents who participated in a media literacy-based intervention increased their awareness of deceptive media portrayals and also showed improved decision-making regard sexual behavior, which show the impact is much broader than just media literacy and actually equips people with the tools needed to identify misleading

content and be less susceptible to manipulation personally and digitally. Joining media literacy and cybersecurity ties into the broader goals of building resilience against social engineering.

As of now, without any new pushes to advance H.R. 9584 on a federal level, it's up to states to enact their own policies. The consequences of not pushing a national curriculum forward are that it leaves room for interpretations across the states. The long-term 'states only' approach will only reinforce ideological divides if certain states promote content that is politically biased. This lack of consistency would give ammo to those opposed to media literacy mandates, as critics would have the opportunity to nitpick the politicization of each state's implementation. As Bulger and Davison (2018) point out that without a framework that is objective, media literacy programs risk becoming inconsistent, leaving room for partisan or subjective manipulation in what is being taught which would just become a self-fulfilling prophecy that would create a more partisan divide instead of teaching students about engaging digital content safely.

Including media literacy in the national curriculum is a crucial step at addressing both cybersecurity and the spread of disinformation. While the political debate surrounding H.R. 9584 shows there are concerns, its benefits for national security are clear. Creating a population that can evaluate how true information is will create a more resilient society that will be prepared to resist social engineering tactics and protect the integrity of democratic processes. By interweaving cybersecurity, media literacy, and social engineering it's an efficient opportunity to strengthen national security and be resistant to manipulation.

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Policy Analysis 3:

The Ethical Issues of Having a National Digital Literacy Curriculum

A national media literacy curriculum being used as a cybersecurity strategy has some ethical issues like balancing self-empowerment, privacy and the overall state authority. The main goal of the policy to strengthen public resilience against misinformation and social engineering can be successful if it establishes safeguards for personal freedoms while also making users more resilient as a collective.

Ethical Duty to Protect and Empowerment

Media literacy education acts as a form of ethical empowerment. It gives people the knowledge and means to defend against manipulation and exploitation online. Vraga, Tully, and Rojas (2009) found when people got media literacy training, their perception of bias decreased and their ability to analyze news content effectively improved, showing that education enhances autonomy and intellectual fairness. Geraee et al. (2015) also found that literacy based education improves behavioral intention and knowledge, more specifically that teaching empowers rather than restricts students. The focus to stop being reactive and have a more proactive approach to education is a great example of the ethical responsibility that can be met if protection is taught in a more equitable way instead of leaving people to “learn the hard way” through failure.

Ljajic (2020) argues from a moral governing view, stating “the role of a responsible society is to educate the young how to use media to their advantage and successfully differentiate ethical from unethical” (Ljajić & University of Niš, Serbia, 2020). This matches up with cybersecurity’s ethical mission: prevention through education instead of censorship or surveillance. A national curriculum establishes a commitment to digital rights by providing people with the skills needed to protect them from exploitation without limiting their freedoms.

Privacy, Bias, and State Authority

Defining “truth” within education is the biggest ethical issues. Spinde et al. (2022) shows that while bias awareness training helps see manipulation it can also make political topics more polarizing. The possibility of this risk really shows the need for transparency and inclusivity. Ljajic (2020) also warns that the internet has become the modern public sphere, where the state and civic interests can cause friction if the boundaries aren’t clearly established.

Dell (2019) focuses on teaching media literacy in law and policy settings must balance instruction with the freedom of intellectual thought. Indoctrination or the perceptions of it could change civic education into an ideological enforcement that could also be accused of being state sponsored.

Societal Benefits

International models back up the ethical and practical benefits of literacy based cybersecurity. Finland’s unified approach, framing media literacy as both civic and cybersecurity education, promotes equity and trust. (Benjamin, 2022). The OSIS (2023) Media Literacy Index places Finland first globally, crediting broad access and early instruction for reducing vulnerability to disinformation. These outcomes reflect the ethical consistency and that social fairness provides equal protection through equal education.

On the opposite end, the lack of a US national policy leaves uneven access, raising justice concerns. The Carnegie Endowment focuses on this, stating “managing synthetic and manipulated media ethically requires building resilience in the public without relying on censorship or surveillance” (Stanton et al., 2019). An educational approach meets this by creating informed consent and lowering intrusion, which helps make cybersecurity more autonomous instead of from the authority based compliance.

Final Assessment

A national curriculum protects more rights than it risks. It even enhances democratic participation (Benjamin, 2022) and social responsibility (Ljajic, 2020). Denying this education disproportionately harms the most susceptible to digital manipulation. It upholds the right to information, freedom of thought and digital self-defense as long as it remains politically neutral and transparent. While doing that, the policy not only adds to the ethical education, but also backs up the nation's long-term cybersecurity resilience by having a more informed and digitally aware society.

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Policy Analysis 4:

The Social Implications of a National Media Literacy Curriculum

As cybersecurity threats evolve past just the technical exploits and into the social engineering aspect, United States national security strategies need to adjust from just the technical compliance mindset that is currently being used. A national digital media literacy curriculum would be the social response to the changes needed to address the national security issues while maintaining the value of local education control that is both empowering and politically aware of the social consequences.

Social Factors Leading to the Policy

The demand for this policy stems from the data and realization that the human user remains the primary point of vulnerability in data breaches, which according to the 2025 Verizon Data Breach Investigations Report human involvement was a factor in 60% of cybersecurity breaches (Verizon, 2025). This makes the policy's importance as a human-layer defense strategy against manipulation (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). The most significant social factor that drives this policy is the threat that misinformation and disinformation campaigns pose to social cohesion. This vulnerability creates public confusion, radicalization and decreased institutional trust. Vraga et al. (2009) noted that media literacy interventions reduced perceptions of media bias and improved reflective thinking, backing up the need for a proactive educational approach while staying ethical. Ljajic (2021) argues, the policy represents an ethical duty to move beyond failures and to meet the states moral obligation to protect citizens from online manipulation. Finland's success, which is consistently at the top of the New Media Literacy Index, shows that educational resilience is achievable and leads to a lower societal vulnerability to disinformation. (Media Literacy Index, 2023; Lehto & Neittaanmaki, 2023).

Social Consequences of the Policy

The curriculum could foster a generation that is more resilient to propaganda, misinformation and extremist content. Media literacy training reduces perceptions of bias and improves the ability of individuals to analyze news content more effectively. (Vraga et al., 2009). Geraee et al. (2015) shows that literacy based education improves knowledge of behavioral intention among adolescents, which is important for applying critical thinking into a practical resistance to media exploitation.

An unintended social consequence would be the uneven social resilience caused by the lack of a federal standard. With the implementation left to the states (like Illinois' Public Act 102-0055), access to quality digital literacy training would be inconsistent and would add to an already large gap between digital and civic participation. The policy's goal to have an equitable, collective resilience would be severely undermined. Additionally, the definition of "truth" and "bias" would be at risk for polarization. If the standards are implemented through a partisan lens at the local level, this could deepen the existing issues already seen by framing media narratives as "biased." Bulger et al. (2018) point out that without an objective framework, media literacy programs risk becoming inconsistent, which would destroy trust in the educational system itself while also creating social friction the programs are designed to stop. (Bulger et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This policy successfully addresses the social need for defense against information warfare, while fulfilling the ethical mandate to empower citizens against exploitation. The challenges of maintaining objective ideologies and addressing the local divides do not outweigh the long term benefits and resilience the policy would establish, and its social success depends on its ability to navigate these tensions and prevent the curriculum from becoming inconsistent or adding to political division when its implemented locally.

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