



Information Research - Vol. 31 No. iConf (2026)

# Inclusive media and information literacy (IMIL): Building a framework for an age of preparedness and responsibilisation

Hanna Carlsson, Lisa Engström, and Lisa Olsson Dahlquist

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47989/ir31iConf64178>

## Abstract

**Introduction.** In policy and political debate, media and information literacy (MIL) is increasingly framed as a civic responsibility and a strategic response to the contemporary ‘*information crisis*’, marked by disinformation and digital insecurity. This positions MIL as essential to democratic resilience and national security but risks excluding individuals who lack the resources or capacities to meet these demands.

**Method.** This paper develops a conceptual framework for critically and constructively analysing the consequences of placing the responsibility of correct information handling on individuals in times of crises and securitisation. Four theoretical building blocks – critical media and information literacy; critical pedagogy; disability studies, and theories of resilience – are used to construct the framework *inclusive media and information literacy*.

**Results.** The framework presented will allow for an expansion of current MIL research on digital inequalities by bringing together and explicitly highlighting power relations, institutional framings, and the situated agency of vulnerable groups in times of information crisis and heightened preparedness.

**Conclusion(s).** The paper emphasizes the practical relevance of the framework for popular education and public libraries, which increasingly support MIL and democratic resilience as part of the civil defence.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, media and information literacy (MIL) has been increasingly positioned as a central policy response to the so-called ‘*information crisis*’, marked by the rise of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and other forms of malign information (cf. Carlsson, 2019; Haider & Sundin, 2022). Disinformation can be enforced by algorithmic curation as well as AI, and weaponized in both national and international conflicts. This development is apparent in relation to actual instances of hybrid attacks and ongoing wars, not least Russia’s full-scale war on the Ukraine (cf. Pamment & Tsurtssumia, 2025). Consequently, the individual’s ability to critically assess information, resist disinformation and counter malign information activities has by policy makers, politicians, and at times in public debate, come to be framed as essential to safeguarding democratic values and maintaining social cohesion (cf. UNESCO, 2026). As a result, MIL is no longer presented merely as a set of competencies necessary for navigating the digital information landscape, but as a civic duty, integral to fostering democratic resilience and national security (cf. PDA, 2026). This individualisation of responsibility for addressing the ‘*information crisis*,’ combined with the securitisation of MIL, particularly disadvantages those who lack the resources, skills, or capacities to meet these normative expectations.

At this point in time, when democracy is challenged by disinformation, AI-generated deepfakes and conspiracy theories, the ability of everyone to access and evaluate information is vital. However, older adults and people with disabilities are at risk of being left behind, excluded from necessary resources and without sufficient skills. Such individuals are today even more at risk of encountering barriers to civic engagement and to accessing and navigating today’s complex information landscape (cf. Dobson et al., 2024). Yet, there is a notable lack of research-based and empirical knowledge regarding how vulnerable individuals—those at risk of exclusion from the information infrastructure—are affected by the individualisation and securitisation of MIL.

Additionally, at a more fundamental level, there is need for a theoretical framework to critically and constructively analyse the consequences of placing the responsibility of correct information handling on individuals in times of crises and securitisation. This includes being able to conceptualize and discuss the impact on those expected to independently navigate complex digital information environments and the implications for those that are excluded from essential information infrastructures that underpin active citizenship. To address this gap, we propose a new conceptual framework tailored to this specific situation, drawing on theories of critical MIL, critical pedagogy, disability studies and the concept of resilience. Thus, the aim of this short paper is to develop a conceptual framework that can be used to analytically and critically address the responsabilisation of media and information literacy in times of heightened preparedness, with particular attention to vulnerable groups in society.

Developing conceptual tools to address this gap is not only valuable for scholarly research but also holds practical significance for informing the work of formal and popular education, including public libraries. In the context of crises, public libraries are shown to play a central role in promoting MIL, particularly among vulnerable groups (Casselden, 2023; Johnston et al., 2024). Consequently, these institutions increasingly assume roles in fostering democratic resilience and information security, functions that are considered integral to the civil defence (Carlsson & Engström, 2025).

### **Inclusive preparedness: an example**

One illustrative example showing the need for a critical conceptual framework is illuminated by our ongoing research project ‘*Crisis preparedness for all?*’. In this project, we investigate how persons with an intellectual disability both are affected by and experience expectations of individual preparedness. The research shows that agency always is situated, and the participants access to information depends on factors such as whether an easy-to-read format is available and how it is distributed. At the same time, the participants also interpret the information they receive

in relation to their specific experiences, for example, if they live in a group facility. We will make use of the conceptual framework we outline below to analyse how persons with an intellectual disability are expected to handle information, and we will use it to explore the participants' experiences of interpreting and managing information in a situation of preparedness.

## Building blocks for a new framework

The new framework builds on a mix of theories and concepts which in various degrees have prior been used to analyse how individuals with different abilities are expected to manage today's information landscape. In this section, we present the included theoretical building blocks: *Critical media and information literacy*; *Critical pedagogy*; *Disability studies*, and *Theories of resilience*, and elaborate on the role of each component.

### Critical media and information literacy

Media and information literacy refers to new, evolving skills and practices required to navigate digital information environments and the broader digital society (Bawden, 2008). While policy and some strands of research (e.g., Martens & Hobbs, 2015; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013; Goldstein, 2020), position MIL as a solution to present democratic challenges, our conceptualisation builds on a growing body of critical scholarship that interrogates the complexities and limitations of MIL within the context of the contemporary 'information crisis' (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Carlsson, 2019; Haider & Sundin, 2022). Emerging technologies – including social media, search engines, and AI – together with the socio-political context, have made information increasingly fragmented, individualized and algorithmically shaped. The implications of this ongoing transformation for trust, social cohesion and democratic participation have prompted calls for a broader understanding of MIL (cf. Lupien & Rourke, 2021), while also acknowledging its limitations considering structures of power and the complexities of information flows (Haider & Sundin, 2019).

The novel framework builds upon such a broader understanding and draws on the long-standing scholarly critique of positioning MIL as primarily an individual rather than a social responsibility (e.g., Elmborg, 2006), which neglects issues of power, equity, and justice (Mihailidis et al., 2021). This means opposing a perspective of MIL as skills-based individual competencies for finding and evaluating information (cf. Drabinski & Tewell, 2019), and instead approach MIL as entangled with the information infrastructure, including its social, technological, and discursive aspects. In this way, the framework provides conceptual tools to address potential barriers to equitable digital inclusion (e.g., Dobson, 2024; Johansson et al., 2021), such as lack of digital equipment and other resources, as well as necessary competencies and social conditions (Tsatsou, 2022; McCosker et al., 2023; Smit et al., 2024). Hence, it can be used to address how individuals with various abilities and needs experience increasing individualisation and responsabilisation of MIL. Individual experience is here understood as shaped by discourse, power relations, norms, and collective meaning. It is therefore never purely individual but always connected to identity and broader social structures.

### Critical pedagogy

MIL is in our framework closely connected to concepts such as democratic literacy, civic literacy and *bildung*, which share with MIL a normative role in what is sometimes referred to as 'the making of the good citizen' (Forsman, 2019). The proposed framework builds on the Freirean research tradition of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2005; 1998; Giroux, 2011). This means situating the mentioned literacies within an inherent tension between emancipatory processes of knowledge seeking and the normative imperatives of the state, which often aim to produce compliant citizens aligned with predefined societal goals (cf. Biesta, 2011; Gustavsson, 2017; Olsson Dahlquist, 2019). Taking this position, the framework will recognize how MIL, and the pedagogy used for promoting this literacy, is never neutral but is embedded in ideological struggles over the shaping of democratic agency (Biesta, 2011). Studies illustrate how this tension manifests in the context of

neoliberal ideals (e.g., Bylund, 2022) and contemporary digital society, where digital participation is framed either as an individual responsibility or as an opportunity afforded to the citizen (e.g., Engström & Olsson Dahlquist, 2020). Hence, by combining the approach of critical pedagogy, and insights from critical MIL, the proposed framework can be used to highlight how this inherent tension plays out in the context of MIL promotion in times of heightened national security awareness.

### **Disability studies**

Similarly, to research on MIL and civic literacy, there is a vital strand of research within disability studies critiquing an individual (and medical) approach, which depict disabilities as a deficit and instead favours a perspective which focuses on *'the social processes and policies which cause disablement'* (Harpur, 2017, p. 35). By integrating concepts from disability studies (Egard & Hansson, 2021; Goodley, 2017; Hicks, 2022) and an intersectional perspective (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989), the framework allows for an analysis of how factors such as age, class, gender, and disability shape access to, and engagement with, MIL-initiatives and promotion. This acknowledges *'the multidimensionality'* of the experiences of individuals who often are perceived as vulnerable (Tsatsou, 2021, p. 1476) and recognize that vulnerable groups are internally diverse and that categories are not mutually exclusive. Although the term *'vulnerable groups'* is often vaguely defined in the literature (e.g., Katz et al., 2020; van den Hoonaard, 2020), it can be useful for examining MIL in the context of the *'information crisis'*, since it brings attention to varying access to necessary resources, including cognitive abilities, technological skills, and digital competencies (Molenaar & Van Praag, 2022).

### **Theories of resilience**

Resilience research firmly situates questions of responsibility, participation, and empowerment of vulnerable groups, within the context of the *'information crisis'* and heightened national security awareness. The concept of resilience has been used in different academic disciplines (Grove, 2018) to analyse a wide array of questions, concerning the ability of systems, institutions, or individuals to recover from crises, to adapt and reorganize (e.g., Norris et al., 2008; Randalls & Simons, 2017). Much like MIL, resilience research has been subject to scholarly critique for its tendency to individualise responsibility and emphasise self-help capacities for coping with hardship, thereby overlooking broader socio-political factors that contribute to vulnerability (Grove, 2018; King et al., 2021; Winogrodzka et al., 2023). Our framework contributes to developing this critique and acknowledge the information needs of vulnerable groups in the context of crisis (e.g., Casselden, 2023; Chadwick et al., 2022; Gao et al., 2022; Stjernholm, 2024).

### **From building blocks to framework: introducing inclusive MIL**

In what follows, we identify three central conceptual starting points that constitute the foundational basis of Inclusive MIL (IMIL). To reflect the inherent plurality of the issues addressed by the framework, these starting points are understood not as static positions but as ongoing acts of shifting perspective. Accordingly, we conceptualize them as actions rather than entities.

### **Situating agency**

IMIL can be employed to challenge preconceptions of the media- and information-literate subject as a homogeneous character with uniform needs, experiences, and aspirations. Applying conceptual tools from disability studies and theories of intersectionality in research on MIL allows for the deconstruction of such notions and opens space for a plurality of experiences. From this perspective, it makes more sense to talk about media and information literate subject positions, which may or may not be possible to assume given a multitude of factors, such as relations of power, access, aspirations, and abilities.

## Contextualizing competence and responsibility

Building on insights from critical media and information literacy studies, we recognize that a framework for conceptualizing and studying inclusive MIL must acknowledge the situated nature of the competencies that IMIL encompasses. Decontextualised skill sets are ill-suited to the volatility of contemporary information (cf. Haider & Sundin, 2022), the complexity and opacity of today's information infrastructures, and the diverse experiences and abilities of heterogeneous populations. This volatility also raises questions about the limits of MIL, particularly the problem of individualising responsibility for addressing the 'information crisis.' Paradoxically, individualising responsibility means that responsibility is also generalized, both in terms of distribution and content, which obscures the situated nature of agency and the unequal power structures of platformised information infrastructures. The IMIL framework's contextualization of responsibility can be used to challenge this generalization while at the same time avoiding a reduction to individualization.

## Navigating tensions between empowerment and control

The IMIL framework intertwine central notions from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2005) and resilience theory to provide a lens for interrogating the pedagogical dimensions of MIL initiatives for vulnerable groups in times of crises, emphasising the potential for both individual empowerment and social control in such efforts. In this way the framework foregrounds the emancipatory potential of MIL for developing critical thinking, civic engagement, and resistance to disinformation. A critical understanding of resilience adds an emphasis on the transformative capacity of not only bouncing back, but instead 'bouncing forward' (Winogrodzka et al., 2023) in challenging times. Consequently, the importance is underlined of not only being able to face future challenges, but also for rethinking social structures that hinder inclusive democratic resilience (cf. Grove, 2018, p. 269; Winogrodzka et al., 2023).

At the same time, these critical perspectives scrutinise how MIL may reproduce normative assumptions and reinforce social inequalities. Drawing on Freire's critique of education under oppressive regimes, the framework addresses that MIL in times of crisis and heightened national security awareness may serve as a tool of resistance and for fostering resilience and democratic agency—but also as a mechanism of control, conformity, and ideological domination. This dual potential underscore the need for a nuanced, context-sensitive approach to MIL, particularly in relation to vulnerable groups. The suggested framework meets these demands by offering tools for critically interrogating how power, inequality, and agency are negotiated in efforts to foster MIL and democratic resilience for all. Hence, the framework can be used to add insights to existing resilience research pointing to the vulnerability of certain individuals and groups to the challenges of crises (see O'Grady & Shaw, 2023).

## Conclusions

In this paper, we propose the IMIL-framework as conceptual starting point for fostering a more critical and interdisciplinary understanding of the challenges, paradoxes, and prospects of promoting democratic capacities among vulnerable groups through media and information literacy, situated within the context of complex information flows and securitisation. As mentioned, we have already started to apply IMIL in our ongoing research. The next phase involves further testing and refining the framework through its application in a new research project: *INFOCLUDE: Inclusive information literacy in times of crises*. The aim of this project is to investigate how vulnerable individuals experience requirements of being media and information literate in contemporary times of 'information crisis' and securitisation, and correspondingly the experiences of popular educators who promote MIL among vulnerable groups. The IMIL-framework has guided the project's design and will be employed as the principal analytical lens in the examination of empirical materials. Our long-term objective is to gain new insights into the socio-political

dynamics of fostering democratic resilience for all, against the backdrop of the challenges posed by the ‘*information crisis*’.

## About the author(s)

**Hanna Carlsson** is Associate Professor in library and information science at Linnaeus University, Sweden. She received her PhD from Lund University, Sweden, and her research interests are in critical studies of information literacy, digital transformation, democracy, and libraries. She can be contacted at [hanna.carlsson@lnu.se](mailto:hanna.carlsson@lnu.se)

**Lisa Engström** is Associate Professor in library and information science at Lund University, Sweden. Her research interests include the securitization of society and how it effects institutions, such as libraries, as well as marginalized groups. She can be contacted at [lisa.engstrom@kultur.lu.se](mailto:lisa.engstrom@kultur.lu.se)

**Lisa Olsson Dahlquist**, is working as a research strategist at the Swedish Agency for Accessible media. She received her PhD from Lund University, Sweden, and her research interests include critical studies of information literacy and accessible reading. She can be contacted at [lisa.olsson-dahlquist@mtm.se](mailto:lisa.olsson-dahlquist@mtm.se)

## References

- Bawden, D. (2008). ‘Origins and concepts of digital literacy’. In C. Lankshear & M. Knobel (Eds.), *Digital Literacies: Concepts, Policies and Practices*, 17–32.
- Biesta, G. (2011). *Learning Democracy in School and Society: Education, Lifelong Learning, and the Politics of Citizenship*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Bylund, C. (2022). *Anakrona livsvillkor: en studie av funktionalitet, möjligheter och begär i den föränderliga svenska välfärdsstaten*. Institutionen för kultur- och medievvetenskaper, Umeå universitet.
- Carlsson, H. & Engström, L. (2025). Navigating exceptionalism. The role of public libraries in times of crisis and war rhetoric. *Information Research*, 30(Colis2025), 1–14.
- Carlsson, U. (ed.) (2019). *Understanding media and information literacy (MIL) in the digital age: a question of democracy*. Göteborg: Department of Journalism, Media and Communication (JMG), University of Gothenburg, UNESCO.
- Casselden, B. (2023). Not like riding a bike: How public libraries facilitate older people’s digital inclusion during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 55(3), 704–718.
- Chadwick, D. et al. (2022). Digital inclusion and participation of people with intellectual disabilities during COVID-19: A rapid review and international bricolage. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, 19(3), 242–256.
- Dobson, S. et al. (2024). *Learning Inclusion in a Digital Age: Belonging and Finding a Voice with the Disadvantaged*. Springer Nature Singapore.
- Drabinski, E., & Tewell, E. (2019). Critical information literacy. In R. Hobbs & P. Mihailidis (Eds.), *The international encyclopaedia of media literacy*. John Wiley & Sons.

- Elmborg, J. (2006). Critical information literacy: implications for instructional practice. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 32(2), 192-199.
- Engström, L., & Olsson Dahlquist, L. (2020). The will to activate library users and the making of citizens: How different rationalities influence the notion of participation in a library context. *Library Quarterly*, 90(3), 314-331.
- Egard, H., & Hansson, K. (2021). The digital society comes sneaking in. An emerging field and its disabling barriers. *Disability & Society*, 38(5), 761-775.
- Forsman, M. (2019). 'Rebalancing MIL. The revised Swedish curriculum and the emerging media citizen in a new media ecology'. In Carlsson, U. (ed.). *Understanding media and information literacy (MIL) in the digital age: a question of democracy*. Göteborg: Department of Journalism, Media and Communication (JMG), University of Gothenburg, UNESCO, 149-156.
- Freire, P. (1970/2005). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum. Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Giroux, H. A. (2011). *On Critical Pedagogy*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Goodly, D. (2017) *Disability studies: An interdisciplinary introduction*. (2nd ed.) Los Angeles, CA: Sage. Goldstein, S. (ed.) (2020). *Informed societies: why information literacy matters for citizenship, participation, and democracy*. London: Facet Publishing.
- Grove, K. (2018). *Resilience*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Haider, J. & Sundin, O. (2022). *Paradoxes of media and information literacy: the crisis of information*. London: Routledge.
- Haider, J & Sundin, O. (2019). 'How Do You Trust? On infrastructural meaning-making and the need for self-reflection'. In Carlsson, U. (ed.) *Understanding media and information literacy (MIL) in the digital age: a question of democracy*. Göteborg: Department of Journalism, Media and Communication (JMG), University of Gothenburg, UNESCO, 107-112.
- Harpur, P.D. (2017). *Discrimination, copyright, and equality: Opening the E-book for the print-disabled*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Hicks, A. (2022). A difference that matters: Disability activism, scholarship, and community. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 16(1), 1-3.
- Johansson, S., Gulliksen, J., & Gustavsson, C. (2021). Disability digital divide: the use of the internet, smartphones, computers, and tablets among people with disabilities in Sweden. *Universal Access in the Information Society*, 20, 105-120.
- Johnston, J., Mierzecka, A., Tóth, M., Paul, M., Kisilowska-Szurmińska, M., Khosrowjerdi, M., Vårheim, A., Rydbeck, K., Jochumsen, H., Hvenegaard Rasmussen, C., Pálsdóttir, Á., Olson, A., Skare, R., & Mathiasson, M. H. (2024). Public libraries' role in supporting Ukrainian refugees: A focus on Hungary and Poland. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 0(0).
- Katz, A. S. et al. (2020). Vagueness, power, and public health: use of 'vulnerable' in public health literature. *Critical Public Health*, 30(5), 601-611.
- King, H., Crossley, S., & Smith, R. (2021). Responsibility, resilience, and symbolic power. *Sociological Review*, 69(5), 920-936.

- Lupien, P., & Rourke, L. (2021). (Mis)information, information literacy, and democracy: Paths for pedagogy to foster informed citizenship. *Journal of Information Literacy*, 15(3), 56-.
- Martens, H., & Hobbs, R. (2015). How Media Literacy Supports Civic Engagement in a Digital Age. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 23(2), 120–137.
- McCosker, A. et al. (2023). Accounting for diversity in older adults' digital inclusion and literacy: the impact of a national intervention. *Ageing and Society*, 43(11), 2629–2649.
- Mihailidis, P. et al. (2021). Do media literacies approach equity and justice? *The Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 13(2), 1–14.
- Mihailidis, P., & Viotty, S. (2017). Spreadable Spectacle in Digital Culture: Civic Expression, Fake News, and the Role of Media Literacies in 'Post-Fact' Society. *The American Behavioral Scientist* (Beverly Hills), 61(4), 441–454.
- Mihailidis, P., & Thevenin, B. (2013). Media Literacy as a Core Competency for Engaged Citizenship in Participatory Democracy. *The American Behavioral Scientist* (Beverly Hills), 57(11), 1611–1622.
- Molenaar, J., & Van Praag, L. (2022). Migrants as 'vulnerable groups' in the COVID-19 pandemic: A critical discourse analysis of a taken-for-granted label in academic literature. *SSM - Qualitative Research in Health*, 2.
- Norris, F. H. et al. (2008). Community Resilience as a Metaphor, Theory, Set of Capacities, and Strategy for Disaster Readiness. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(1–2), 127–150.
- Olsson Dahlquist, L. (2019). *Folkbildning för delaktighet: en studie om bibliotekets demokratiska uppdrag i en digital samtid*. Lund: Lunds universitet.
- O'Grady, N., & Shaw, D. (2023). Resilience, responsibility, and state abandon: The changing role of the government in emergencies. *Political Geography*, 100.
- Pamment, J. & Tsurtsunia, D. (2025). *Beyond Operation Doppelgänger: A Capability Assessment of the Social Design Agency*. Psychological Defence Agency/Lund University: MPF REPORT SERIES 8/2025.
- Randalls, S., & Simon, S. (2017). Making resilience strange. In *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience*. Routledge.
- Smit, A., Swart, J., & Broersma, M. (2024). Bypassing digital literacy: Marginalized citizens' tactics for participation and inclusion in digital societies. *New Media & Society* 0(0).
- Stjernholm, L. (2024). *Inclusive preparedness: Intellectual disability and disaster risk reduction*. Lund: Lunds universitet/Lunds Tekniska Högskola.
- Tsatsou, P. (2022). Vulnerable people's digital inclusion: intersectionality patterns and associated lessons. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(10), 1475–1494.
- UNESCO (2026). *Media and information literacy*. Available [02-01-2026]: <https://www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy?hub=750>
- van den Hoonaard, W.C. (2020). 'Vulnerability' as a Concept Captive in Its Own Prison. In: Iphofen, R. (eds) *Handbook of Research Ethics and Scientific Integrity*. Springer, Cham.

Winogrodzka, D., Trąbka, A., & Pietrusińska, M. J. (2024). 'It's about mindset'. How do young migrants in Poland build their resilience? *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies*, 50(12), 2858–2878.

© [CC-BY-NC 4.0](#) The Author(s). For more information, see our [Open Access Policy](#).