



# CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

A DEEP DIVE INTO A BRIDGE (KEY THEME) FROM THE  
2025 DRIVING K-12 INNOVATION REPORT

Driving K-12 Innovation Bridges are important themes that span Top Topics for education innovation, connecting today's education challenges with tomorrow's opportunity. The 2025 Bridges are Ethical Innovation, Personalization, the Future of Work, and Critical Media Literacy. This resource focuses on the Critical Media Literacy.

# CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

## DEFINITION

Critical Media Literacy stresses that students must develop the ability to critically analyze, evaluate, and discern the authenticity and credibility of information across various media platforms, giving them the skills needed to distinguish between primary sources, manipulated media, and fabricated information. By honing these abilities, individuals become more adept at evaluating information and understanding their responsibilities as informed consumers and creators of media. This literacy is essential for navigating the complexities of the digital world, promoting responsible use of information, and fostering ethical engagement with technology in the age of AI.

## SUMMARY

Critical Media Literacy (CML) equips learners to question, evaluate, and understand media in today's evolving digital world. Educators play a key role, but families and communities must also be involved.

As AI-generated content becomes more prevalent, CML must evolve alongside it. By teaching rhetorical analysis, source evaluation, and digital citizenship across subjects, EdTech leaders can prepare learners to navigate complex media environments with discernment and confidence, ensuring they become informed citizens and ethical participants in today's media landscape.

Critical Media Literacy is about more than evaluating sources. It's about building resilience against manipulation and empowering learners and communities to actively navigate the media landscape with agency and awareness.

At its foundation, Critical Media Literacy means:

- recognizing who created the content,
- understanding why it was created,
- and deciding what to trust.

In an age of deepfakes, algorithmic bias, and misinformation, these skills are not only educational priorities but societal imperatives, too.

As CoSN's recent EdTech Innovation Committee meeting revealed, Critical Media Literacy must evolve to meet the complexity of today's information ecosystem. Without CML skills, students, educators, and parents become vulnerable to misinformation.

For example, Stanford University's Graduate School of Education [did a study](#) that found more than 80% of middle school students in the study did not recognize a "sponsored content" advertisement as an ad and instead thought it was a news story.

But Critical Media Literacy fuels **learner agency**\* when students are empowered to explore, question, and critique media on their terms. "We need to engage students in defining what their concept of [Critical Media Literacy] is," said John Heffernan (CEF Professional Development, Ireland).

How? EdTech Innovation Committee Member Erica Shumaker (EdTech Leaders Alliance, Ohio) described how rhetorical analysis — examining sources, who said them and why, context, and persuasion — is already foundational in English courses, especially at the high school level. This critical thinking should be leveraged

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\* Top Topics from the Driving K-12 Innovation 2025 report are marked with bold, blue font

across disciplines. Shumaker encourages students to apply these skills to whatever media resonates with them, like TikTok, books, songs to build both relevance and learner agency.

But getting students to engage and have interest in learning about the importance of CML can be part of the challenge. “How do we get people to take an active role,” asked former Committee Co-Chair Emily Marshall (Pima Community College, Arizona). “How do you get kids to care?”

Yet the responsibility for media literacy extends beyond schools. Committee Member Kris Hagel (Peninsula School District, Washington) pointed out that many adults didn’t grow up with these tools and may now struggle to distinguish fact from fiction on social platforms. “We have to figure out how we do this with parents and other groups in the community,” said Hagel. “It’s not just a K-12 education problem.”

The committee also navigated the intersection of Critical Media Literacy and **Generative AI**. As AI tools generate content more quickly and convincingly, students need to be equipped to identify what is AI-generated, analyze its credibility, and understand the potential biases embedded in those systems. As Heffernan noted, “The problem is, we don’t have a source of truth; there’s no Bible for Critical Media Literacy and, because it’s hard to define, everyone has a different interpretation of it,” said Heffernan.

Ultimately, teaching Critical Media Literacy means integrating it across curricula, preparing educators to model it, and involving parents and communities in the effort. It means letting students challenge, deconstruct, and define their media experiences. And in doing so, they become resilient, informed, and engaged citizens in a fast-moving digital world.

## TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE EDTECH INNOVATION COMMITTEE

### EMPOWER STUDENTS TO OWN MEDIA LITERACY

When students engage with content that reflects their lives and interests, they’re more likely to develop lasting media literacy skills and apply them independently. “Make it personal, hands-on, and empowering—so they don’t just learn media literacy, they own it.”

### TEACH CRITICAL THINKING ALONGSIDE TECHNOLOGY USE

It’s not enough to teach students how to navigate tools; they must also be able to evaluate and question the content they interact with. “As EdTech tools become more integrated into learning environments, students must learn not only how to use technology but also how to think critically about the content they consume and create.”

### PROTECT STUDENTS BY BUILDING MEDIA RESILIENCE

Media literacy is a safeguard against the harmful effects of deceptive or biased content that can shape beliefs and behaviors. “Without these skills, students are more vulnerable to misinformation, algorithmic bias, deepfakes, and manipulative media — all of which can impact their learning, civic engagement, and mental health.”

### ALIGN CURRICULUM WITH TODAY’S MEDIA HABITS

To stay relevant and impactful, education must mirror how students consume content and help them critically engage with new media formats. “Our curricula need to adapt to the changing way our society consumes information. Short videos with supported articles, AI with source materials, etc.”

# RESOURCES

- [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#)
- [Common Sense Media](#)
- EdTech Leaders Alliance: [Screen Time Continuum](#)
- EdTech Leaders Alliance: [Social Skills in 2025: Bridging The Physical and Digital Worlds \[Infographic\]](#)
- National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE): [Snapshot 2024: State of Media Literacy](#)
- [Nearpod](#)
- New Mexico Media Literacy Project: [Deconstructing Media Messages](#)
- [NewsGuard](#)
- Stacy Hawthorne, EdD, CoSN Board Chair: [Empowering Digital Citizens: Digital Literacy for All \[Presentation\]](#)

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