Photo Credit: New Sun Road

Digital Literacy
DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GOVERNANCE (DRG)

Digital Literacy and Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance[1]

Digital literacy enables the use of digital tools and technologies that improve the provision of public sector services such as revenue collection; enhance the transparency and accountability of governments; and engage key stakeholders such as citizens, civil society organizations (CSOs), media, youth groups, or political parties in participatory, representative, and inclusive political processes. In this way, digital tools can strengthen democracy, improve good governance, and encourage civic participation—all core goals of USAID's Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Center. However, in the current climate of profound geopolitical upheaval, digital harms like online mis- and disinformation, digital authoritarianism, and cyber attacks on civil society targets are threatening the core tenets of democracy. As governments, civil society, and the media move into the digital age, cultivating digital literacy among DRG stakeholders will help promote responsible digital citizenship and 21st century democratic values while minimizing digital harms that threaten these values globally.

Digital literacy and USAID's Advancing Digital Democracy initiative

Announced in 2022, USAID's Advancing Digital Democracy (ADD) initiative "will foster open, secure, and inclusive digital ecosystems that advance—rather than undermine—democratic values and respect for human rights."[2] ADD activities promote rights-respecting technologies within the technology sector and across civil society and the broader public. The success of this initiative requires digital democracy stakeholders at all levels to possess strong digital literacy skills, including in data and information literacy.

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1   Unless otherwise cited, all information in this sectoral brief comes from USAID's Digital Literacy Primer. Full citation: "Digital Literacy Primer: How to Build Digital Literacy into USAID Programming" (USAID, 2022), https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/USAID_Digital_Literacy_Primer.pdf.

2   "Administrator Samantha Power Calls For Reinventing The Playbook To Strengthen Democracy Around The World." United States Agency for International Development. Accessed June 16, 2023. https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/jun-7-2022-administrator-power-calls-reinventing-playbook-strengthen#:~:text=Advancing%20Digital%20Democracy%20(ADD)%20initiative,democratic%20values%20and%20human%20rights.

USAID's Digital Literacy Framework

Definition of Digital Literacy

USAID—building on UNESCO's definition of the term—defines digital literacy as:

> " *The ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies for participation in economic, social, and political life.*

To effectively and equitably achieve access, USAID's approach to digital programming must extend beyond infrastructure and devices to ensure that users possess a nuanced set of skills to meaningfully, responsibly, and safely participate in their digital ecosystem. Two pillars underpin USAID's definition of digital literacy: capacity and safety.

DIGITAL LITERACY
The ability to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies.

CAPACITY
The technical knowledge and skills required to use a variety of digital devices and services.

SAFETY
The skills and awareness required to use digital tools carefully while navigating potential harms and cyber threats successfully.

» **Capacity** refers to the technical knowledge and skills required to use a variety of digital devices and services such as mobile phones, tablets, and computers; the internet and social media services such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook; and audio and visual tools.

» **Safety** refers to the skills and awareness required to use digital tools carefully while navigating potential harms and cyber threats successfully. This pillar includes, but is not limited to, strategies for strengthening cyber hygiene[33] and countering mis- and disinformation.
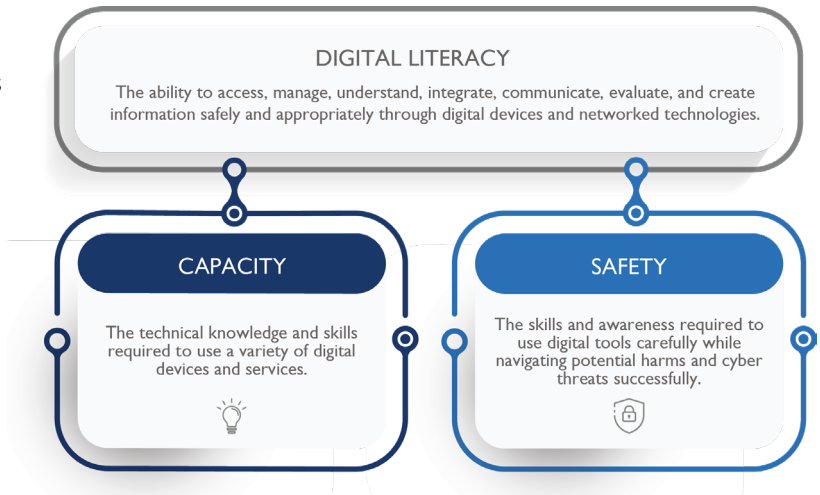
As explained in the Digital Literacy Primer, USAID takes two primary approaches to incorporating digital literacy into program design:

FOUNDATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Foundational digital literacy activities build digital literacy skills applicable to all aspects of users' economic, social, and personal lives—a goal in and of itself.

TACTICAL ACTIVITIES

Tactical digital literacy activities prepare target populations to use digital tools in particular sectors to ensure that a specific digital intervention is effective (though digital literacy may not be the singular goal of the activity).

Critical digital literacy skill sets for DRG practitioners

DRG practitioners operate within fast-moving digital ecosystems, complex political environments, and a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape—all at the same time. This requires mastery of multiple digital literacy skills, as outlined in the DigComp Framework:

• **Information and data literacy:** Specifically, evaluating and managing data, information, and digital content to better respond to existing mis- and disinformation and fake news.

• **Communication and collaboration:** Specifically, observing "netiquette" when interacting in digital spaces, sharing

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3   Cyber Hygiene definition: The practices and steps that users of computers and other devices take to maintain system health and improve online security. These practices are often part of a routine to ensure the safety of identity and other details that could be stolen or corrupted.

information and content and engaging in citizenship and civic actions online, and collaborating through digital technologies to build up the digital and analog skills of local communities, local governments, and involved stakeholders.

- **Safety:** Specifically, protecting digital devices and data to ensure individual, community, and national-level protection against cyber attacks or data misuse.

- **Problem solving:** specifically identifying needs and technological responses, creatively using digital technologies, and identifying digital competence gaps to enhance local and national governments' capacity in delivering services to their citizens, including marginalized populations.

Digital Literacy in USAID's DRG Portfolio

USAID's DRG Center improves digital literacy as a way to expand digital citizenship and digital engagement across its portfolio. In a time of democratic erosion and authoritarian capture, its digitally-enabled interventions train and empower CSOs, media, youth groups, political parties, organizers, legislatures, government ministries, and electoral commissions to promote rights-respecting technologies, increase transparency, strengthen advocacy, and protect human rights in the digital space. At the same time, it focuses on countering digital risks that greatly affect the DRG sector, like digital authoritarianism, mis- and disinformation, digital surveillance abuses, and cyber threats against vulnerable groups.

Linkages between digital literacy, data literacy, and information literacy

Digital literacy is a broad term outlining the capacity to safely and meaningfully use digital tools in digital development programming. Data literacy and information literacy are two specific and important capabilities that enable comprehensive digital literacy:

- **Data literacy** refers to "the ability to read, work with, analyze, and communicate with data. It is a skill that engages all levels of workers to pose the correct inquiries of data and machines, build knowledge, make decisions, and convey significance to others" in the digital space.[4]

- **Information literacy** is "the set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge necessary to know when information is needed to help solve a problem or make a decision, how to articulate that information need in searchable terms and language, then search efficiently for the information, retrieve it, determine its relevance, communicate it to others, if necessary, then utilize it to accomplish bottomline purposes."[5]

USAID deploys cutting-edge digital literacy programming across its integrated digital democracy portfolio in a myriad of ways:

» **To counter digital authoritarianism:** In an era of democratic backsliding and closing civic space, USAID is building the digital literacy capacity of its key stakeholders to minimize disruptive tactics like online surveillance and internet shutdowns and to promote multi-stakeholder internet governance around the globe. For example, USAID's Promoting American Approaches to ICT Policy and Regulation (ProICT) buy-in works directly with partner country governments to promote open, interoperable, reliable, and secure internet and communications networks by building the capacity of relevant ministry and/or ICT regulatory authority staff in countries ranging from Peru, the Philippines, and Liberia.

» **To enhance information integrity and counter mis- and disinformation:** In the context of an increasingly fragmented traditional and social media landscape manipulated by malign actors, USAID is increasingly embedding programming that cultivates information literacy skills among program stakeholders. For example, the Learn To Discern: Youth Leaders Facing Misinformation training under the Proyecto Acción Transformadora activity introduced over 110 Guatemalan youth to the

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4   "Media For Democracy Assessment Tool." (USAID, 2021), https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00Z2PT.pdf.

5   Ibid.

concept of media literacy, with analytical sessions focused on examples of misinformation from Guatemala's recent elections and related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

» **To reduce technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV):** Digital literacy is especially critical for politically active women and girls, who are frequent targets of online harassment and TFGBV. In response to TFGBV against female protest leaders, journalists, and other activists during Nicaragua's 2018 protests, USAID's Information Safety & Capacity (ISC) Project led workshops in the country with activists and NGOs—with additional input from TFGBV survivors—on topics like how to secure social media accounts, safe sexting practices, and what to do in case of non-consensual intimate image sharing.

Photo Credit: Bluetown

» **To safeguard elections:** USAID builds the capacity of citizens and election officials to safely engage with digital tools leading up to and during elections, including their ability to understand and mitigate the potential digital harms of these technologies. To this end, the Improved Election Management Program in Sri Lanka provided advice to the national Electoral Commission about the benefits and drawbacks of electronic voting and briefed them on international standards for voting technologies like biometric identification and voter registration systems.

» **To bolster cybersecurity protections for civil society:** By providing data security training to media organizations and human rights defenders—including recommendations on how to manage and mitigate threats while proactively protecting digital assets—USAID takes a tactical digital literacy approach to its digital-focused work with these groups. It also provides journalists and human rights defenders with concrete skills and tactics to mitigate online surveillance. For example, the Information Safety & Capacity Project, over a nine-year period, trained nearly 10,000 journalists and activists in 36 countries to understand and identify how cyber threats like digital surveillance and data breaches affect their work.

» **To strengthen responsible digital government:** USAID guides its partner nations to increase their capabilities for effective and responsible digital government, particularly regarding the use of digital technologies as an integrated part of government strategies. As human capacity across government staff, the private sector, and individuals is a core component and enabler of digital government, USAID works to ensure that governments have the digital literacy at all levels of the workforce to manage internal systems and processes, deliver government services, and engage with stakeholders. For example, the Fiscal and Accounting System of Tunisia (FAST) Project supported Tunisia's National Business Registry to train 80 people from its regional agencies on how to use a new online business registration portal prior to its launch.

Key Considerations for Digital Literacy in USAID's Democracy, Humans Rights,and Governance Portfolio

Considerations vary based on the maturity level of local digital ecosystems.

☑ Before the design of a digital literacy intervention:

– Assess the current digital literacy gaps of the target audience by interviewing or surveying the target audience about which devices, platforms, and digital tools—and which of their functionalities—they use.

– If the target audience's digital literacy levels are highly variable, segment digital literacy interventions into different difficulty levels.

– Focus digital literacy activities on digital services and platforms that are already embedded in users' lives, rather than introducing new platforms or conducting foundational digital literacy activities with no avenue for trainees to use their new skills.

☑ During the design of a digital literacy intervention:

  – Build on existing digital hygiene, citizenship, and media literacy curricula already available online, instead of developing completely new curricula.

  – Involve role models and community champions in the design and delivery of digital literacy activities to influence the adoption of positive behaviors. They can also help ensure that the training materials appropriately reflect the local context and reflect the true digital literacy needs on the ground.

  – Tailor the digital literacy intervention to the needs of the target audience. For example, for Combating Trafficking In Persons activists and labor rights organizers post information about how to identify potential trafficking victims online and prioritize the spread of this information to highly marginalized populations.

  – To ensure that DRG beneficiaries can effectively protect themselves when using digital tools, integrate information about cybersecurity and digital hygiene into broader digital literacy training.

  – Consider the unique risks faced by girls and women when they engage in online spaces, especially those with a political bent:

    ▪ To build women and girls' familiarity with and confidence in technology use, identify popular role models that can help design and deliver tailored digital literacy training.

    ▪ When developing digital literacy activities, reference best practices for safeguarding against common digital harms. (See below for relevant resources.)

Other Resources:

» **About journalists and human rights defenders:** SaferJourno and Holistic Security for human rights defenders (HRD)

» **About safeguarding women and girls:** Girl Effect's Girl Safeguarding Policy: Digital Privacy, Security, Safety Principles and Guidelines and Safe Sisters' A Common Sense Guide for Digital Safety for Women and Girls in Sub-Saharan Africa

» **About the relationship between civil society and social media:** USAID's Social Networking: A Guide to Strengthening Civil Society through Social Media

» **About mis- and disinformation and information/media literacy:** IRI's Combating Information Manipulation: A Playbook for Elections and Beyond, Disinformation Toolkit 2.0: How Civil Society and Non-governmental Organizations; USAID's Civic IDEA: Youth Media Literacy Toolkit; USAID's Media for Democracy Assessment Tool; Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance's Disinformation Primer

» **About USAID's approach to digital government:** USAID's Digital Government Model

» **For further resources on disinformation, data protection, social media and the gender digital divide:** civicspace. tech

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the digital literacy and DRG nexus in USAID programming, please reach out to digitaldevelopment@usaid.gov.