Introduction

It was in 1974 that Paul Zurkowski first explicitly suggested the concept of information literacy (Zurkowski, 1974). He framed this simply as the abilities to use information tools to mould information solutions that address the problems of individuals. Although this view was set out in the pre-internet age, 45 years on, the inference remains valid: information literacy is a means of helping people to address their information needs, which are as varied as the life experiences and aspirations of individuals. This variety reflects many if not all aspects of people’s lives: in education, in work, in leisure, in creativity, in well-being, in addressing financial and material needs. And one further, crucial part of this variety is the relationship with an important aspect of human endeavour: people’s ability to function and take part in society, to contribute to shaping its rules and conventions, to take advantage of the opportunities for participation that democracy entails and, just as significantly, to create new opportunities for engagement and participation.

[...]

Moving on from Zurkowski, more recent definitions of information literacy frame the concept as a human right that helps to promote social inclusion (UNESCO/NFIL/IFLA, 2005) and as a means of empowering citizens to develop informed views and to engage fully with society (CILIP, 2018).

In a world saturated with readily available information – online especially, but also in print and oral – an ability to make sense of it is vital in order to make sense more broadly about the world. Moreover, given that the quality, the reliability and the veracity of information varies hugely, information literacy is also about developing the capacity and confidence to make judgements about information, to adopt healthily critical approaches towards it, to understand its purpose, its provenance and the way that it is mediated. And on that basis, to challenge it and offer alternative narratives – on the understanding that these too are founded on rational, well-informed discourse. Encouraging and nurturing such a discerning approach to information has become particularly important, and urgent too, in the light of the dangers represented by online misinformation, disinformation, ‘fake news’, ‘post-truth’ and information behaviours that fall prey to political and commercial manipulation

[...]

However, in spite of its power as a concept, information literacy isn’t widely recognised as a term outside the realms of the information professions and of information science. It is unusual for it to feature explicitly in public discourse – Barack Obama’s Proclamation on information literacy, at the time when he was US President, is a relatively rare exception (White House, 2009). More often, it is the closely related concepts of digital literacy (sometimes also presented as digital skills) and media literacy that attract attention and are better recognised by policymakers, politicians and civil society. In reality, however they are termed, these different literacies overlap considerably and to some extent are used indis-