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Chapter 20

On the Difficulties of Promoting Media Literacy

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Introduction

All spheres of modern life—work, education, civic participation, commerce, social relations, family, and leisure—rely increasingly on an infrastructure of media, communication, and information technologies and services. This infrastructure is complex and opaque, embedding everyday interpersonal interaction within public and private sector provision on local, national, and global levels. People have little choice about whether to use these media, taking their existence for granted. While they are generally enthusiastic about the benefits, today's media environment is not one of their own making, having been largely shaped by commercial and state interests of which users may be unaware and in relation to possibly-misguided assumptions about those users' skills, desires, and understanding.

How effectively is the public engaging with the media and, through the media, with the wider world? Do people know what they need to know, and what are the costs of ignorance? Convergence and diversification in media and communications technologies and services simultaneously opens up new opportunities for individuals and groups, yet also exposes people to new risks of exclusion, misuse, and abuse. The pace of socio-technical change exacerbates the challenges they face: Print literacy learned at school is relevant for a lifetime, but media education even if obtained at school is outdated within a few years, leaving many adults unprepared and without institutional support for gaining necessary media and digital literacies. We can no more send today's adults back to school than we can teach their children what they will need to know for the media environment of tomorrow.

Knowing that other chapters in this volume will address the important issue of children's media literacy, this chapter focuses on adults' media literacy, which we regard as posing a particularly thorny problem. This is, first, because there is little agreement over what adults should know about the media; second, because there is little agreement about the detriment associated with any lack of knowledge (should this centre on consumer detriment, or is there also citizen detriment at stake?); and third, because reaching the entire population in an inclusive, scalable, sustainable, and effective manner is a major policy challenge.

To explore this problem, we offer a cautionary tale from the United Kingdom. There was much optimism when the 2003 Communications Act gave the communications regulator, Ofcom (the Office of Communications), a duty to promote media literacy not just for children (usually the responsibility of education ministries and schools) but for the entire population. But reaching adults with media literacy programmes is a difficult and expensive task. In 2005 only 22% of adults had received formal lessons about digital technology and this proportion dropped to 19% in 2010 (Ofcom, 2006, 2011). To be sure, formal lessons may not be the best or only way, and many of Ofcom's initiatives took a different approach, including working with the media industry to develop mainstream programming and online resources, and working with the Government's Citizens Online centres and other bodies working locally. Yet a 2012 BBC Media Literacy report (BBC, 2012) still showed that 16% of adult Internet users (aged 15 ・) did not know where to start despite wanting to learn more about the Internet, and 21% felt that their Internet use was restricted due to lack of skills. More significantly, after a decade of diverse media literacy initiatives, a hard look at Ofcom's own evidence reveals only a modest benefit to the adult population.

What Happened in the United Kingdom?

In recognition of the rapidly changing media and information environment, and also as part of a wider turn to literacy policies (including political literacy, financial literacy and health literacy), Section 11 of the UK Communications Act 2003 accorded Ofcom an unprecedented duty in the history of media regulation to 'promote media literacy' among the general public (Livingstone, 2008). At the time, the United Kingdom was positioning its media and creative industries centre-stage in its plans for economic prosperity and growth, and pushing forward the national roll out of broadband so as to transfer of local and paper-based government services to become online only. Media literacy policy was incorporated into the then-New Labour government's *Digital Britain* agenda, along with the appointment of a Minister for Digital Inclusion, the development of schools' media education curriculum, and a National Plan for Digital Participation (BIS, 2010).

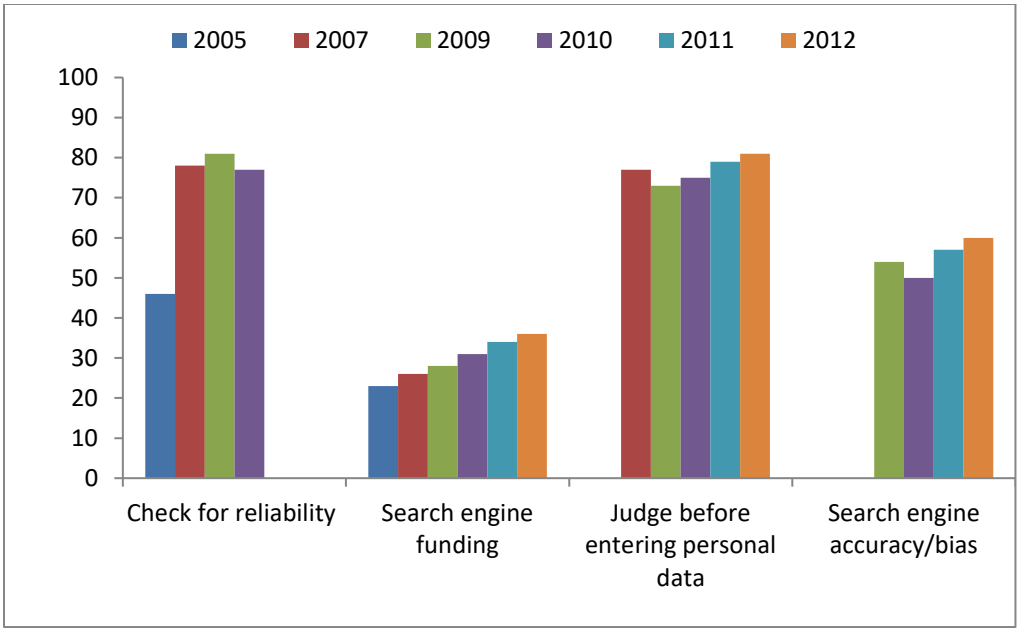
Initially, the requirement placed on Ofcom to promote media literacy was unclear, as the Act did not define media literacy. Adapting the widely-endorsed definition proposed by the U.S.'s 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy (that media literacy is the ability "to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms" [Aufderheide, 1997]), Ofcom embarked on a decade of media literacy initiatives across the country, mobilising public and private sector (especially, media industries) as well as educators and civil society (Ofcom, n.d.). In parallel, the government sought to tackle the digital divide, later reframed as digital in/exclusion, by targeting resources (hardware, software, skills training and social support) on socially disadvantaged groups (cf Go On Campaign,[1] Citizens Online[2]).

But despite the Act's ambitious goals, the result was a rather less ambitious approach that concentrated on fostering access to technology, functional skills, basic awareness-raising, and the provision of safety tools. Media literacy, it appeared, was valued for its potential in avoiding consumer detriment; this protectionist agenda obscured the idea of media literacy as empowering citizens seeking democratic engagement or social change for the public good. Moreover, Ofcom's evidence-based approach, generally a positive feature of its work, resulted in a highly

pragmatic set of proxy measures being used to operationalize media literacy according to standards of rigour and representativeness supposedly required by the government and media industry. Little attention was paid to the claim advanced by civil society and the academy that media literacy is and should be far more than the sum of these simple measures.

Whether, ironically, Ofcom's reliance on simple measures meant that they underestimated improvement in the population's media literacy over the past decade, we cannot know. What is clear is that they found little evidence for improvement, despite a decade of concerted, if considerably underfunded effort. We illustrate this conclusion with selected findings from our recent report for the LSE Media Policy Project, where we reviewed Ofcom's successive annual media literacy reports (Ofcom, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013), each based on nationally representative surveys of 1,800–3,300 interviews conducted at home with adults aged 16 • (Livingstone & Wang, 2013). Findings regarding access to new platforms, unsurprisingly, reveal increases in access to and use of digital technologies and platforms across the population, although social inequalities continue to mark out digital inequalities in predictable ways. More interesting are findings for the more demanding dimensions of media literacy, too easily neglected by policy initiatives—namely, understanding and creating media.

Figure 20.1: Understanding the internet



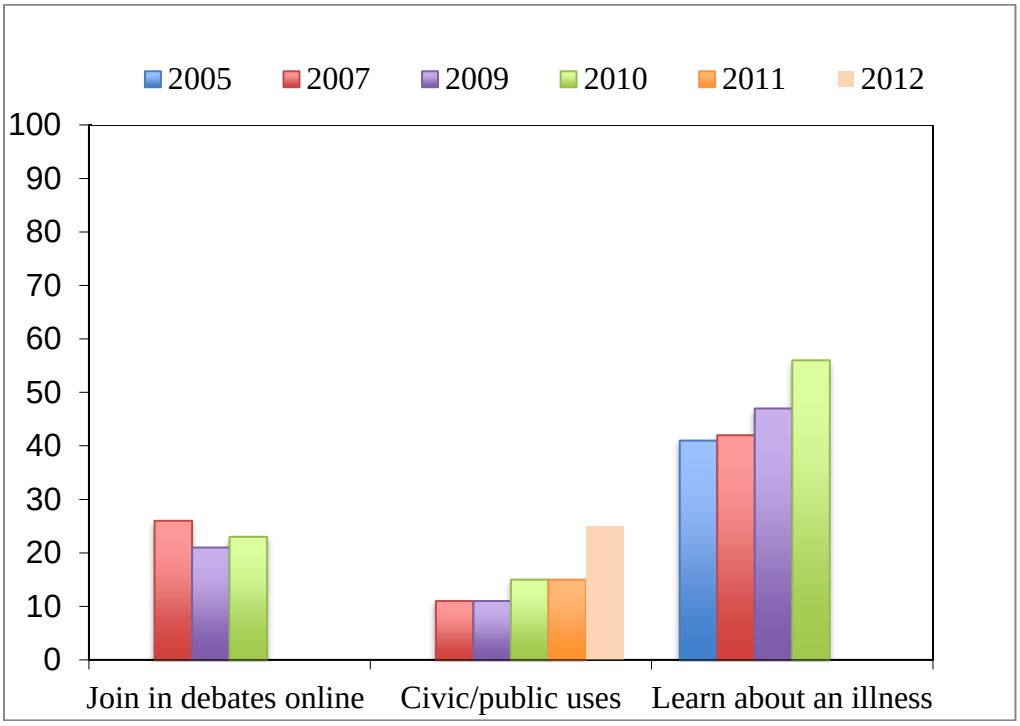
People use the Internet for a variety of purposes and activities, and being able to evaluate whether a new website is reliable is an important ability that leads to being a critical user. Failure to do so may involve the risk of confusion, misinformation, or exploitation. Adults in the United Kingdom are learning, whether from direct use experience or from being guided, to perform some kind of check, such as looking for the padlock sign, to ensure the reliability of new websites. As Figure 21.1 shows, such checks rose sharply between 2005 and 2007, from 46% to 78% of adult users who reported doing so, but the rates of checking have not improved since 2007. By 2010 there were still one fifth of adults who did not perform any check when visiting a

new website—particularly older people, and those from lower socioeconomic status (SES) groups.[3]

Similarly, awareness of how media are funded aids the critical evaluation of content. People generally know how broadcast media are financed—in 2012, three quarters of adults knew that programmes on BBC Television were funded mainly by license fee, and that programmes on commercial television were funded by advertising. But despite mass usage of the Internet for information and news, knowledge of its funding has risen only slowly, from 23% in 2005 to 31% in 2010. By 2012, still only 36% of adults knew that search engines were funded by advertising, and the young, the elderly, and women particularly lacked such knowledge.

More positive is the finding that many U.K. adult users have learned to make some form of judgment about a website before entering personal information, although the rise is slow (from 77% in 2007 to 81% in 2012). However, those from lower SES groups, as well as the oldest (aged 55 • years) and youngest adults (aged 16–24 years) are least likely to make any judgment, and there is some evidence that these knowledge gaps have increased over the years.[4] Similarly, even by 2012, only 60% of adult users realised that not all search results are accurate or unbiased. Again, there are notable differences by socioeconomic status, and since 2009, only the highest group has shown a steady improvement in knowledge.

Figure 20.2: Using the internet



In addition to knowledge about the Internet, we also examined how people are using the Internet in ways that are beneficial as these measures, also, may signal the need for promotion of media literacy so as to encourage such uses. As shown in Figure 21.2, using digital skills to participate in online debate remains low overall. Even by 2010, only 23% of Internet users (more middle than working class) reported being interested *and* confident in their ability to join in debates

online or state their opinions on social or political issues, this having declined from the 26% who said this in 2007.

Another measure of participation is the weekly take-up of public or civic activities (such as finding information online about public services provided by local or national government, signing an online petition, or contacting a local councillor or MP online): of all the activities people report doing online, these are consistently at the bottom of the list, although a recent rise is visible from 11% of users in 2007 to 15% in 2010 and then 25% by 2012; again, these are more common among middle- than working-class adults.

Thirdly, the Internet is an increasingly useful resource for information about health-related issues. Ofcom's evidence shows a small increase in the proportion of Internet users who have *ever* taken advantage of the Internet to look for such information, rising from 64% in 2009 to 68% in 2010. More promisingly, there was a steady rise in Internet-using adults who have sourced specific information about an illness online as and when needed. High SES adults (ABC1) are leading—rising from 44% of users in 2005 to 60% in 2010—but lower SES groups (C2DE) are catching up, rising from 36% in 2005 to 51% in 2010.

The evidence from the United Kingdom shows little improvement in media literacy among the British public, especially in relation to critical understanding and participation. And there is persistent evidence of problematically low media literacy among disadvantaged groups. It seems that early wins in raising media literacy have tailed off, either because it is the initial gains that are easiest to achieve, or because the struggle to sustain and expand media literacy initiatives has left improvements faltering. If this is the case, then considering the lack of progress in relation to critical and participatory literacy, the cuts to media literacy initiatives under the Coalition government are particularly unfortunate.

For media literacy advocates, our U.K. case has an alarming next chapter and an uncertain future. Since the formation of a Coalition government (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) in May 2010, there have been few statements in support of media literacy from Government, Ofcom, or the industry (with the exception of the BBC). Ofcom's budget for media literacy for all activities except research was cut, and the National Plan for Digital Participation is no more, although the focus on digital inclusion (i.e. on access and basic use) continues through the Go On Campaign (Go On UK, n.d.). At the time of writing, the United Kingdom is gearing up to revise the Communication Act; the fate of media literacy, especially as regards the promotion of citizens' critical understanding and creative participation with and through digital media, hangs in the balance.

Is Europe Taking the Lead?

In Europe, support for media and digital literacy appears to be growing across the various directorates of the European Commission and associated initiatives. Complementing the predominant focus by media educators on children's media literacy, the European Union's policy statements are strongly focused on adults, recognising that media literacy is 'an important factor for active citizenship' (European Commission, n.d.) and that "it is no longer an advantage to be media literate; rather, it is a debilitating disadvantage not to be" (EAVI, 2010, 10).[5] Significantly, in 2009 the EC recommended that Member States "promote systematic research through studies and projects on the different aspects and dimensions of media literacy in the digital environment and monitor and measure the progress of media literacy levels"

(Commission of the European Communities, 2009, 5), building on the requirement in the *Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS) Directive 2007/65/EC* for a three-yearly reporting obligation regarding the level of media literacy in all member states (European Parliament and the Council, 2007). More recently, June 2011 saw the European Commission's Digital Agenda call for e-skills (European Commission, 2010).

Looking more internationally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifies, through the Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) Project, a range of competencies organized along three categories (PISA, 2005, 10–15), each of which is relevant to media literacy: "using tools interactively" (including language, symbol, text, knowledge, information, and technology); "interacting in heterogeneous groups" (including the ability to "relate well to others," to "co-operate, work in teams," and to "manage and resolve conflicts"); and "acting autonomously" (the ability to "act within the big picture," to "form and conduct life plans and personal projects," and to "defend and assert rights, interests, limits and needs").

In parallel, UNESCO has spearheaded a range of media literacy initiatives (Frau-Meigs, 2007), recognizing that the "information society" is essential for building the "knowledge society," which encompasses the principles of "equal access to quality education for all; universal access to information; cultural and linguistic diversity; and freedom of expression" (Moeller, Joseph, Lau, & Carbo, 2011, 8). To be a literate and critical individual in the information society requires both media literacy and information literacy—"access to information and the evaluation and use of such information" (11), which UNESCO has converged as Media Information Literacy (see also Livingstone et al., 2008).

Rather than the simple measures adopted by Ofcom, both UNESCO and the European Commission have embarked on a complex measurement framework to benchmark and track the effectiveness of national media and information literacy policies on a cross-national basis. Each argues for two levels of analysis. The European Association for Viewers' Interests (EAVI) was commissioned by the European Commission DG Information Society to assess the levels of media literacy in Europe 27 Member States, distinguishes (and seeks to measure) "individual competences" (namely use, as "an individual technical skill"; critical understanding, involving "fluency in comprehension and interpretation"; and the communicative ability to "establish relationships through the media" [Celot, 2011, 21]) and "environmental factors" (including "media education, media policy, media availability, roles of the Media Industry and Civil society" [22]). UNESCO, similarly, proposes to measure media information literacy first at the national and institutional level and, second, at the level of individual competencies as developed within the system of formal education (Moeller et al., 2011).

But as Moeller et al. (2011) acknowledge, these efforts at sophisticated, multilevel measurement face considerable challenges—in relation to quality criteria such as relevance, timeliness, accuracy, validity, etc., and in the process of application (differences in learning environments, consistency, cross-context applicability, cost, etc.). EAVI, similarly, has noted that the challenge of reducing changing and dynamic media-related activities to a "conclusive, universal interpretation proved unworkable" (Celot, 2011, 21). The European Commission therefore hopes not for scientific measurement but rather for reliable "indicators" and "assessment criteria" (Ding, 2011, 6). The outcome of such a revised framework is still uncertain (Bulger, 2013).

What's at Stake for Citizens and Consumers?

From the prosaic but vital tasks of locating train timetables, doing the weekly shop, or completing tax returns to more elevated, if ordinary, civic activities of finding trustworthy information or following the news, to the increasingly necessary task of updating skills ready for a fast-changing, "flexible" labour market, to familiar social pleasures of entertainment, chatting with friends, forming relationships or staying in touch with far-flung relatives to, finally, the grandest aims of speaking out and being heard in a democratic culture—all of these were once managed interpersonally or through interaction with public institutions. Now, each is increasingly mediated by commercial businesses, demanding an enhanced level of media and critical literacy from adults in their roles as consumers and citizens. Not only has research documented the benefits of having such literacy, it also documents the costs of lacking it, and these costs make themselves felt at both individual and societal levels.

It is important to recognize that mere access will not eliminate inequalities over time. Quite the contrary: gaps in media use exacerbate gaps in knowledge and participation, as the socially-advantaged keep up better with the relentless pace of socio-technical change. Indeed, if efforts are not made to close the "information and strategic skill divide," it will continue to widen, with skilled people able to take advantage of the Internet to achieve their personal goals, while the less skilled continue their struggle to locate correct information (Van Deursen, 2009). At present in the United Kingdom, the Go On UK campaign finds that 16 million people aged 15 • (around one-third of the adult population) still lack such basic online skills as being able to find information, manage personal disclosure, or evaluate what is trustworthy or valuable online (Go On UK, n.d.; see also Helsper, 2011; Grant, 2011).

Clearly, the demands on users are constantly rising—just using the Internet is no longer sufficient, adults must now gain "digital fluency" (Bartlett & Miller, 2011). This is in part because the nature of these skills depends on the complex and often opaque or even illegible information infrastructure with which people must engage (Livingstone, Papaioannou, Pérez, & Wijnen, 2013). Media design and media literacy can be considered as reverse sides of the same coin. The more complex and, especially, the more "illegible" the media environment becomes, the greater the task of media literacy. Conversely, the clearer, the easier to use, and the better designed the media environment, the less daunting the task of learning how to use it effectively. Ideally, technological innovation would embed in its very design and regulation the knowledge-based needs and practices of its users.

The costs of low media literacy include missing out on good information and instead gaining misinformation. Research evidence is growing for consumer detriment of various kinds. For example, Brown, Keller, and Stern (2009) showed that teenagers with low health and media literacy tend to use slang terms to search for sexual health information online, leading them too often to unreliable websites. The Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (2010) showed that, while low-income, new immigrant, or female-led families strive to take advantage of the Internet to access health and product safety information, the effectiveness of such use is hindered by difficulties in comprehending, evaluating, and making good use of the complex information online. A pan-European survey found that 3 in 10 of those who disclose personal data to make purchases online feel that they have no ability to control their data online (especially compared with offline), and although people perceive personal data control to be their

own responsibility, this does not always result in sufficient self-protective activities (Lusoli et al., 2012).

As the Internet becomes a more valued platform for civic engagement, digital inequalities translate into a citizen deficit also. For instance, the Hansard Society (2011) showed that although 40% of the lowest (DE) class would like to learn more about Parliament but were the least likely to use the Internet/email to source information about national political or parliamentary issues. Similarly, as Lusoli, Ward, and Gibson (2006) found that simply adding new online channels is insufficient to increase political engagement among those who do not already participate in politics via traditional methods (see also Williamson, 2010). Meanwhile, low political efficacy and low trust account for low participation—people must believe their contribution will be responded to (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006), although if political participation online is incorporated into media literacy education for young people, they are more likely to take part online (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2010).

A standard mode of address to all is no longer considered sufficient by media literacy educators, for it is this that exacerbates knowledge gaps by providing information that permits the "rich to get richer." The teenagers, vulnerable families, less educated users, and other groups currently missing out each need a different approach that recognises cultural and local factors (Mackert, Whitten, & Garcia, 2008; Sourbati, 2009). But one-size-fits-all solutions are cheaper and easier to roll out than intensively customised approaches, especially given existing difficulties of delivering even the present offer of often-enthusiastic and creative initiatives on a sustainable basis that can encompass an entire population and be updated as often as the socio-technical infrastructure moves on. It may be these difficulties in the implementation of media literacy initiatives that account for the lack of evidence (from Ofcom and others) that media literacy initiatives are effective. As we have seen, it is also these difficulties that impede the efforts of those seeking a complex and non-reductionist approach to measuring the effectiveness of media literacy improvements.

Conclusions

Media literacy provided by schools could reach children if the political will existed, but this will still be insufficient for adults to meet the continuing demands of the fast-changing media landscape. Media literacy could be promoted to most adults through the channels of the mass media, if the commercial will existed (which it does not), but a one-size-fits-all approach risks exacerbating rather than ameliorating inequalities insofar as such resources would be disproportionately taken up by the already-knowledgeable. Commercial providers of all kinds could surely work harder to reduce the burden of media literacy, particularly in regards to complex functional, technical, contractual, and legal forms of knowledge, by improving the design and management of digital interfaces, contents, and services. New intermediaries also have a role to play—consumer organisations, most notably, can combine the necessary legal and technical expertise with a vigorous defence of ordinary people's interests, and when resources permit, they may offer a trusted source for media literacy or lead a campaign for digital environments that are sufficiently interpretable, navigable, transparent, and fair.

We have argued that, to meet the media literacy demands of the entire adult population, then, a tailored and context-appropriate approach is needed that is engaging, relevant, sustainable, and scalable. Moreover, this should encompass not merely functional skills but the

full range of competences needed by consumers and citizens in a thoroughly mediated society that relies increasingly on a digital infrastructure of all of its activities. Since this is a resource intensive demand, it is likely that state action would be required to ensure that the means of delivery match up to society's aims for media literacy—to ensure sufficient provision of, first, usable, comprehensive media and information services (to minimise unnecessary media literacy burdens); second, up to date media literacy initiatives tailored to the segments of the public that most need them; and third, compensatory strategies for those who are at risk of losing out of social inclusion and civic participation in a digital age.

The media, and therefore media literacy, are no longer to be relegated to the domain of leisure and entertainment. Rather, they have become infrastructural, underpinning our work as well as family, public as well as private life, and civic as well as personal domains. Go into any household in Europe and one may find a confusion of kit and cables, incomprehensible or suboptimal contracts, confusion about what plugs into what, how things work and how to complain or get help from. Society would not accept this for the provision of water or electricity or transport. For today's complex digital media infrastructure, the same now applies, and we can no longer leave it to individuals to figure out how to cope by themselves or to bear alone the cost of getting it wrong. Yet at present, levels of media literacy do not appear to be rising—for even as people learn more, so too, there is even more to learn. Hence intervention of diverse kinds and on a substantial scale is now surely required.

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6. http://www.go-on.co.uk

7. http://www.citizensonline.org.uk

8. In the United Kingdom, social research organisations often classify the population according to "social grade"—an occupation-based classification system developed by the National Readership Survey. A refers to "higher managerial, administrative and professional," B refers to "intermediate managerial, administrative and professional," C1 refers to "supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional," C2 refers to "skilled manual workers," D refers to "semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers," and D refers to "state pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only" (National Readership Society, n.d.)

9. For example, in 2007 the difference between the highest and lowest SES groups was 17% (84% for ABs vs. 65% for DEs, but by 2011 this had widened to 25% (86% for ABs vs. 61% for DEs).

10. In its 2006 European Recommendation of Key Competences, the European Union included "digital competence" as a key competence for lifelong learning (European Parliament and the Council, 2006; Ferrari, 2012). Then media literacy has been considered by the EU Commission to be 'an essential factor [in] active citizenship, democratic participation and social cohesion' in the Information Society (Ding, 2011, 8).