



Media literacy – challenges ahead

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Thank you very much for inviting me to speak today. I think that, since it is first thing in the morning and we've lots of different arguments coming this morning, I'd like to really pose some questions that I hope are going to be provocative and useful, and to do so, I want to draw on academic research in the field of media literacy.

- **Long history of 'literacy' – hotly contested, especially in relation to critical literacy – 'knowledge is power'**
- **Short history of 'media literacy' – erratically supported, mainly via media education for children**
- **Gains new importance in today's complex, converging, ubiquitous environment of modern media, information and communications**

“... we have a rather poor record in this country, and elsewhere, of ensuring literacy for all ...”

Figure 1: Literacy – A Concept With A History

I just want to point out very briefly that, in academic research literacy, at least, media literacy is a concept with a very long and hotly-contested history, and a lot of the contestation which has been around really since the early days of print literacy, focusing on the notion of critical literacy. One of the themes of my presentation is the relation between media literacy and critical literacy, and how we want to see those tied together. I've put up the obvious slogan: knowledge is power. If literacy is a kind of knowledge, it gets us somewhere, it gets us something and it gets people something in their everyday lives. And the history of the study of literacy is that we have a rather poor record in this country, and elsewhere, of ensuring literacy for all, ensuring quality of literacy, and that's something that I would like to stress.



“Literacy is clearly a concept whose time has come ...”



Also, in the research literature, there is a relatively short history of media literacy, and there again I just want to point out that this is not, as it were, a new debate invented since the passing of the Communications Act; we do have quite a solid history in many ways of attempts to implement media literacy, particularly through media education, most of them for children, less often for adults, and again I hope that we can look back to that history and learn some of the lessons from it.

But today we’re told that media literacy has new importance in a new complex, converging environment of media and communications, which are ubiquitous, which affect everybody, which generate, therefore, a set of skills and knowledge which everybody needs. And indeed we’re told everyone individually is responsible for becoming a media-literate citizen in today’s society. The question, I think, that we must all have in our minds is, what exactly do we mean when we say media literacy? And how much of it does everybody need to have? This is a question that I’d like to pose for those charged with the responsibility of implementing it.

Multiple literacies abound
e.g. Health literacy: “the capacity of an individual to obtain, interpret and understand basic health information and services in ways that are health-enhancing” (NCC for DoH)
Also –
* **Financial literacy** * **Environmental literacy**
* **Political literacy** * **Emotional literacy**
And now:
Information literacy, visual literacy, digital literacy, cyber-literacy, internet literacy, network literacy . . .

Figure 2: A Concept Whose Time Has Come

Literacy is clearly a concept whose time has come, and if you look beyond the field of media and information and communications we see literacies everywhere in fact. So I was intrigued to see that the National Consumer Council for the Department of Health has defined health literacy in a rather similar way to the way in which I think many of those here are thinking about media literacy. The Financial Services Authority and the Department for Transport and Industry (DTI) and so on are thinking about financial literacy. We talk about political literacy, environmental literacy, emotional literacy. Literacy is everywhere, and particularly in relation to media and communication technologies there is, similarly, a plethora of different kinds of literacy being proposed, heavily overlapping I might say, but nonetheless, information literacy, visual literacy and so forth. To the point that I wonder how,

previously, we talked about this range of knowledges and competencies and skills that together, all of a sudden, we have bundled under the notion of literacy.

Converging technologies, industries, spheres of activity

Media literacy: “The ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms”

Information literacy: “The ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues and problems at hand”

Parallels: core – access, understand, create

Contrasts: critical literacy, standards/progression

Figure 3: Converging Literacies

I want to pick out two of those particularly and think about their convergence. Because, as media and information technologies converge and pose new problems and challenges for citizens in their everyday understanding of those technologies, two particular traditions are converging. One, broadly, we could call media literacy, the other comes from information literacy, and people here may be more or less familiar with those different traditions. But of course, as technologies converge, skills converge as well, and so we need a convergent notion of literacy.

So, I've put up two very standard definitions in the academic literature, of media literacy and information literacy, each of which was the definition that emerged from a very large-scale international conference held in the United States during the 90s, and it's striking that they came up with some very similar definitions. So the parallels that we can see – and I think this is probably true of most definitions of literacy – there are three or four elements which are core, and it won't have passed you by that these three core elements comprise Ofcom's definition of media literacy. The first is, questions of access: being able to locate, find, access media communications information. The second is the notion of understanding, and the third is the notion of creation.

Two points I want to make about that: the first is that to create – creating content, creating information, creating and contributing to a media and communications environment – is essential to all definitions of literacy; right from when we were first thinking about reading and writing, writing was always in there, but is relatively easy to drop off or to see as a kind of last step once we've done the other things. I would like to urge against that.



“... as technologies converge, skills converge as well, and so we need a convergent notion of literacy.”





“... the information literacy tradition is ... far advanced in comparison with the media literacy tradition ...”



The second point I would like to stress is that, in both the two definitions I've given, the notion of evaluation is central, and in the Ofcom definition that's wrapped up into understanding, which is fine as long as it's included, and problematic again if it's forgotten. And the reason I stress this point, apart from believing that skills and competencies in evaluating the different kinds of content that as everyday citizens we meet are important, is to say that, in the history of media literacy, that's always been the predominant theme – the relationship between the understanding and the critical, and how far does understanding need to be critical?

So, I pull that out as a contrast between the two definitions. In the tradition of information literacy there isn't that same critical edge. But it's crucial when we ask ourselves what's included in media literacy, and it is becoming more important also in relation to information literacy. Does media literacy, for example, include not only understanding the news, but also an awareness of the political alternatives so that one can understand why the news is as it is? Does media literacy include not only being able to access certain kinds of content, but understanding and being able to critique the product placement, the sponsorship, the branding that's gone into that particular creation of content? I think for many people, and for that long tradition of literacy scholarship, those are very important questions. But what's interesting about the information literacy tradition is that it is far advanced in comparison with the media literacy tradition in terms of concepts of standards and progression. It maps out a set of stages, of levels, a curriculum almost, that's required for each level of literacy, and it therefore offers an approach to evaluation that allows those in information literacy to ask who needs how much literacy, or how much information literacy is enough, and how do we know when we've got there? I don't think the tradition in media literacy is so far advanced.

And just one other point I wanted to make there, is that I would like to caution against the idea that critical literacy, like creation, is something that comes at the end of the process once you've got the basics, once you've done the access and the understanding. But rather, I would say, that critical literacy and creative literacies are perhaps the best way to gain the access and to gain the understanding. What we see among novices – this is evident in both the Internet and digital television research – is that the novices are often the most critical, or let's say, often the most distrustful, often the ones with the most anxieties. So I think those questions of critical and creative literacy need to come very early on.

Ok, that brings me, I think, to one of the core points I wanted to make, which is to ask what media literacy is for. If we are promoting it, we need to know why we're doing it. Perhaps there hasn't been enough attention yet to identifying what its purposes are, and therefore how are we to know when we've done it, how are we to know when we've adequately implemented a policy of media literacy? I suspect that

- Need clarity over purposes:**
- **Against which to evaluate implementation**
 - **Multiple stakeholders with multiple expectations?**
 - **Define narrowly or broadly?**
 - **Define negatively (prevent harms/costs) or positively (enable benefits)?**
- Suggest:**
- **Democracy, participation and active citizenship**
 - **Knowledge economy, competitiveness and choice**
 - **Lifelong learning, cultural expression and personal fulfillment**

Figure 4: What is Media Literacy For?

there are multiple stakeholders in this debate, and they may have multiple expectations about what media literacy is for, and when we've done it, and the debate that we hear most often is the debate between the rather narrow and rather broad definitions of media literacy. Is media literacy about learning how to press the red button? Is media literacy about how to use the mouse? Or is media literacy about being a skilled and competent citizen in quite a creative and complex information and communication environment? Where are we going to draw the line when we say we need to promote it? And we need to make sure that people have it, not only using that very narrow definition, that very functional definition, but also that they have it according to a more ambitious definition.

The second debate that I hear when people say, as of course we all do, what is media literacy for, is the difference between positive and negative definitions. Do we see media literacy as a way of preventing certain harms, of avoiding certain costs, of evading certain negative consequences for the individual, or do we see it more positively as a means of enabling certain benefits? Again, I think there is a distinction to be made there, and I would like to urge that we think about media literacy primarily as a way of enabling benefits. The benefits that are much discussed in the literature and, I think, much discussed among people here and among other stakeholder groups, are three kinds of benefits. Today media, communication and information all seem essential skills that people are competent in if they are to be active citizens and to participate in democratic fora. They seem to be essential areas of skills and knowledge if people are to compete in the job market, if they are to be part of it, if Britain is to continue to be a competitive market that provides choice for its consumers. And it also seems to be essential that people are skilled in relation to media and communications if they are to continue to learn, to be expressive of their culture, to be personally fulfilled, and so forth.



“Today media, communication and information all seem essential skills that people are competent in if they are to be active citizens ...”





They seem to me three different areas, and others might divide them up in different ways. But if we're going to evaluate how well we've implemented media literacy, I would suggest that this is a good starting point for thinking about the different areas in which we want people to be active and competent and skilled, and in which the media and communications technologies and services are a vital means of doing that. Therefore those would be key areas for implementation.

Possible analogues –

- **Public understanding of science: focus on disseminating facts and stimulating interest through ad hoc public campaigns, evaluated through surveys**
- **Health campaigns: focus on raising awareness and changing behaviour among vulnerable target groups, evaluated through changing health practices**
- **Adult (print) literacy: focus on remedial and continuing education among excluded groups, evaluated through educational testing**

Figure 5: Implementing Media Literacy – Possible Analogues

OK, so just focusing in on implementation I hear a lot of questions about how on earth we are to implement media literacy, particularly for adults who are not at school and not subject to exactly what curriculum we choose to deliver to them. A while ago I did some thinking about the possible analogues, where we try various kinds of adult education, or adult campaigns, to improve the knowledge and competence of the population. I think that thinking of the analogues is helpful because each has a tradition, each has its problems and each has its advantages, but I'll put three of them to you.

The first is the public understanding of science. You'll remember a few years ago there was a lot of anxiety that half of the population thought that the sun went around the earth, rather than the earth going round the sun, and there was a public understanding campaign to try and ensure that certain facts become better known among the public. As part of that, people wanted to stimulate interest in science, so it became part of the getting women into engineering debate, for example, or getting more kids to want to do science 'A' levels and so forth. So, a model of disseminating facts, stimulating interest through a series of ad hoc campaigns that get evaluated through opinion polls, that's one model of what we might do for media literacy.

“... we have a long history of knowing exactly how difficult it is, not only to get information over, but especially to change practices.”



A second model, which is the health campaign model, is focused on raising awareness in order to change behaviour, and I would ask those charged with promoting media literacy how much this is about disseminating knowledge and facts, and how much this is actually about changing behaviour, and particularly about changing behaviour among vulnerable or target groups, which is, of course, the focus of much health campaigns. So, whether we're trying to get people to stop smoking or practise safe sex or improve their diet, we have a long history of how to manage this, and I think we have to say we have a long history of knowing exactly how difficult it is, not only to get information over, but especially to change practices.

And then, back to the model of media literacy as drawing on the print literacy tradition. Of course we also have a very strong tradition in this country of continuing, remedial and adult education, which has focused primarily on print literacy, particularly focused on excluded groups, and is evaluated through educational testing. And, I think, as a model of evaluation, that's an interesting one because you couldn't evaluate it through a survey or through polls, but we need quite a careful notion of how it is that you can assess people's levels of print literacy, and that might be a model for media literacy.

Each of those models, and probably there are others that people will think of, suggest a curriculum if you like, a set of things that people need to know. They suggest a delivery mechanism: how it is we suppose we're going to reach people. And they suggest some outcomes by which we can evaluate whether we have effectively improved media literacy.

- **Media literacy – where is it to be found?**
(an individual skill, a societal competence, or a matter of design/marketing?)
- **Relying on the public to gain in media literacy**
(campaigns have uneven, unequal, short-term take-up; digital exclusion maps onto social exclusion)
- **Media literacy – in whose interest?**
(or, who/what suffers the costs of illiteracy?
what happens if we get this wrong?)

Figure 6: Persistently Tricky Issues

So I leave those as questions and come to – well, I thought about a pompous title for my last slide (Figure 6) but I think it's just about persistently tricky issues,



“... we have to recognise (media literacy) to be an unevenly distributed individual skill.”





“What happens if we get the policy of promoting media literacy wrong?”



because there are a lot of persistently tricky issues in this field and we are going to struggle with some of them.

So, there is a continuing debate about where we suppose media literacy to be found, very pragmatically. Do we see it as an individual skill? In which case, I think we have to recognise it to be an unevenly distributed individual skill. Do we see it as a societal competence? Do we want to talk about the literate society, media-literate Britain, the levels of critical literacy in our society? And do we want to see it partly as a matter of – I’ve called it design or marketing, but the analogy that’s always in my mind is the illegible book, or the badly-designed website. If a book is illegible or badly typed, or if a website is badly designed, we don’t simply say we have to teach people to read this book better, we have to make sure that people can access this Internet site and understand it better; we also say, literacy is partly a question of design. Literacy is partly about how well something is laid out, and how well something reveals its sources, or guides the reader in order that the skills that they do have can be most effectively mobilised. There’s a continuing question there about how much literacy, therefore, is a matter of public skills and how much it’s in the design and in the marketing.

My second tricky issue comes up when I hear the suggestion, the implication that media literacy is – it sounds too negative, but I do hear people say it’s kind of the policy of last resort. If it’s too difficult to address matters in the industry, if it’s difficult to frame more kinds of Government regulation, well we can turn to media literacy and we can place a responsibility on the individual, on the public to become more media literate. Now, with any public information campaign, it is easiest to raise awareness among those who already knew something, and it is hardest to reach those who don’t, who we now, of course, label ‘the hard to reach’. So, the more we promote media literacy, the more we can expect it to be unevenly taken up. So, I have concerns about relying on media literacy as the kind of catch-all at the end or as instead of other policies. A very simple way to express this is to ask, how far digital exclusion or media literacy exclusion maps on to various other forms of social exclusion?

So, my final question, I guess, is media literacy in whose interest? Who is it that is really pushing for media literacy? How much is that coming from the public, how much from industry, Government, other stakeholders? And the clearest way I can think of putting it is the other way around, which is: who suffers the costs of illiteracy? What happens if we get the policy of promoting media literacy wrong? I’ll leave that question for the discussion

The ideas that I've presented have been written up in a longer paper for those who are interested – just email me at s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk – and hopefully there's some questions. Thank you.

Danny Alexander MP: Sonia, thank you very much for that extremely thoughtful and interesting presentation. I'm now going to call on Paul Jackson, the Chair of Media Smart, to speak to us today. Thank you.

