Dossier: Media literacy and the UK's Communication Act 2003

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Following our recent Expert Meeting on the subject of Media Literacy, we have compiled this informative dossier to bring together helpful key documents for anyone interested in the present and future of media literacy in the UK. The dossier organizes links to these resources as follows:

1. Key documents
2. Definitions of media literacy
3. The role of government
4. European developments
5. International perspectives
6. Academic research and key questions
7. Pressing policy questions

1. Key documents

1.1. For the first time in UK law, section 11 of the Communication Act 2003 gave the Office of Communications (Ofcom) the duty to promote media literacy.

1.2. Ofcom's approach to media literacy

1.3. Ofcom's Media Literacy Audits for children and adults (2010)

1.4. For more in depth analysis from Ofcom, see these recent reports also:

- Online trust and privacy: People's attitudes and behaviour (December 2010)
- How people assess online content and services (November 2009)

2. Definitions of media literacy

Definitions of media literacy remain contested, with different dimensions emphasised or marginalised. Of most concern is the tendency in some policy statements to downplay the importance of critical or creative/communicative dimensions.

2.1 What is media literacy?

- 'The ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms.' (US National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, Pat Aufderheide, 1993)
- 'The ability to use, understand and create media and communications.' (Ofcom, also see here for more information on Ofcom's media literacy activities)
- 'Media literacy relates to the ability to access the media, to understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media content and to create communications in a variety of contexts.' (EC)

2.2. A short discussion of the nature of media literacy, 'What is Media Literacy?'

2.3. A classic view from the BFI, 'Making Movies Matter'

2.4. Despite decades of arguments over definitions, the multiplicity of literacies remains contested and confusing. These include media literacy, digital literacy, information literacy, critical literacy, audiovisual literacy, advertising literacy, health literacy, financial literacy, film literacy, search literacy and more.

3. The role of government

3.1. Since the General Election of May 2010, a range of media literacy initiatives have been closed down, including the Media Literacy Taskforce (or http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/14718), the National Media Literacy Plan (mentioned in the Digital Britain Interim Report but now archived) and the National Plan for Digital Participation that followed it.

> "The necessary education, skills and media literacy programmes to allow everyone in society to benefit from the digital revolution will be a central part of the Digital Britain work and key to our success." (Digital Britain Interim Report 2009: 5)

3.2. Still, as the Communications Consumer Panel makes clear, there is still a long way to go

3.3. Yet, as the government's own analysis of UK social trends reveals, the 'e-society' is advancing steadily if unevenly and unequally.

3.4. In a letter to Professor Sonia Livingstone, Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport, Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP explains that media literacy is indeed 'a priority' for the present government.

3.5. Instances of ongoing policy initiatives include:

- Race Online promotes digital and internet literacy (see its Manifesto for a Networked Nation)
- The appointment of the Digital Champion, Martha Lane, whose remit is to 'encourage as many people as possible to go online, and improving the convenience and efficiency of public services by driving online delivery'.
- The Bailey Review
- UK Council for Child Internet Safety
- The DfE Technology Policy Team
- The Wolf Review commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE)
- Media Smart
- The BBC First Click
- The Review of the National Curriculum (Department for Education)

3.6. Other non-governmental national initiatives include:

- Learning for the Fourth Age (L4A): An organization whose aim is 'to provide educational and learning services to frail elderly people who live in residential accommodation settings'.
- Citizens Online: A national charity whose aim is 'to ensure that the benefits of digital technologies can be enjoyed and shared by everybody, so that our society may become more inclusive and just.'
- Age UK: An organization whose aim is 'to improve later life for everyone through our information and advice, campaigns, products, training and research'.
- Digital Unite: An organization that is in partnership with Race Online 2012 to help promote elder people's use of digital technologies through national campaigns, training and teaching and other innovative initiatives.

3.7. But, do these activities match, alter or exceed the energy and vision for media literacy of the previous government? Isn't media literacy vital to meeting the goals of the Big Society (overview and web site)? Or is the main action now taking place in Europe?

4. European developments

4.1. "I want to assure you that I take digital literacy seriously", said Vice-President of the European Commission, Neelie Kroes.

4.2. "We must make sure everyone is media literate so nobody is left out," said Viviane Reding, European Commission Information Society and Media Commissioner, European Commission, 2009.

4.3. As part of the Lisbon strategy, in response to calls from the European Parliament and from the media and communication sector, and informed by the High Level Expert Group (2008), the European Commission has worked to promote media literacy as follows:

- Communication on media literacy (2007) – alerted member states to the importance of media literacy.
- Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS) Directive 2007/65/EC – article 26 introduced a three-yearly reporting obligation regarding levels of media literacy in all member states.
- The task of producing indicators is now underway, building on the work of EAVI Consortium (European Association for Viewers' Interests (EAVI), CLEMI, Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona, Université Catholique de Louvain and the University of Tampere): Study on Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy Levels – A comprehensive view of the concept of media literacy and an understanding of how media literacy level in Europe should be assessed (2009). See full list of studies.
- Recommendation on media literacy in the digital environment for a more competitive audiovisual and content industry and an inclusive knowledge society, EC(2009) 6464 final. In this Recommendation, the Commission recommended that:

> "the Member States […] open a debate in conferences and other public events on the inclusion of media literacy in the compulsory education curriculum, and as part of the provision of key competences for lifelong learning, set out in the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning". http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32006H0962:EN:HTML and http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2009:227:0009:01:EN:HTML

- The Digital Agenda (2010) emphasises the importance of e-skills
- See also the December 2010 Brussels Declaration on Lifelong Media Education from over 300 media literacy experts

5. International perspectives

5.1. The OECD identifies a range of key competencies essential for full participation in society, several of which relate to media or digital literacy (including the ability to use knowledge, information and technologies interactively)

5.2. UNESCO –'Information and media literacy enables people to interpret and make informed judgments as users of information and media, as well as to become skillful creators and producers of information and media messages in their own right.' See particularly the section on information literacy.

5.3. Canada's Media Awareness Network states that:

> "Our vision is to ensure children and youth possess the necessary critical thinking skills and tools to understand and actively engage with media. Our mission is to be the leading Canadian provider of media education resources and awareness programs for educators, parents, children and youth."

5.4. In the United States, Renee Hobbs, R. (2010) has produced Digital and media literacy: A plan of action. Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute.

See also: FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn on the recommendation for a National Digital Literacy plan.

> "Nothing can open more doors for a person than literacy. But knowing how to read is no longer sufficient to be 'literate' in the 21st Century. Basic literacy must be supplemented with digital literacy" (Clyburn, 2010: 4).

5.5. Australia – The Australian Communications and Media Authority on digital media literacy

6. Academic research and key questions

6.1. With the growing importance of media, information and communications in society, media literacy contributes to:

- (i) democracy, participation and active citizenship;
- (ii) the knowledge economy, competitiveness and choice; and
- (iii) lifelong learning, cultural expression and personal fulfilment.

6.2. But academic research suggests that media literacy initiatives are still needed:

- By the whole population, since they are faced with rapid changes in the choices, complexity and importance of communication technologies;
- By disadvantaged populations in particular (e.g. young, elderly, poor, disabled, ethnic minorities), for whom knowledge gaps compound prior disadvantage;
- In areas of importance to the state (e.g. health, civic participation, e-government, e-commerce, creativity/innovation, digital take-up/switchover), since currently the population does not meet government expectations;
- In areas of importance to citizens (e.g. for empowerment, alternative lifestyles or politics, critical information skills, creative production)

6.3. Also, key questions persist:

6.3.1. Is media literacy about empowerment or protectionism?

6.3.2. Should media literacy be defined minimally or ambitiously?

6.3.3. What does research show about media literacy?

6.3.4. What new challenges do new media set for media literacy? For adults and for children:

6.3.5. Do media literacy interventions work?

There are significant differences between the post-test scores of experimental and control groups, indicating that the media literacy course offered to college students was 'at least partially successful' in achieving the course goals of improving knowledge of media structures, increasing awareness of media influence, and being critical of implied messages. (Duran, Yousman, Walsh, and Longshore, 2008)

Media literacy interventions can be helpful or harmful. Students who had the cognitive activity after the lesson about violence in media reported a reduction in willingness to use aggression, while children who did not had the cognitive activity after the lesson reported an increase in willingness to use aggression. The media literacy lesson offered might have brought students' attention to violence without helping to develop the cognitive skills required to process the information. Future studies should have more refined comparative conditions in order to

understand the boomerang effect, and determine what factor in each condition works or does not work. (Byrne, 2009)

Survey conducted to a random sample of U.S. university students shows that those who are more critical about tobacco use in advertisements, TV and movies ('smoking media literacy') are significantly less likely to be current smokers (Primack, Sidani, Carroll, and Fine 2009).

Media detective: "Media Detective is a media literacy education program for 3rd- to 5th-grade students. The goal of the program is to prevent or delay the onset of underage alcohol and tobacco use by enhancing the critical thinking skills of students so they become adept in deconstructing media messages, particularly those related to alcohol and tobacco products, and by encouraging healthy beliefs and attitudes about abstaining from alcohol and tobacco use."

6.3.6. Why is critical media literacy important?

6.3.7. Aren't young people already media literate?

6.3.8. What do recent research findings show?

- Although economic capital is the first and foremost mediating factor in digital divide, cultural and social capital are also important factors as the possession of them means having the know-how and resources to operate and engage with technologies meaningfully at the personal level. (Grant, 2007)
- Children's digital skills should be enhanced through regular education, focusing especially on information and strategic skills (given their already high level of operational skills). As to the elderly, the illiterate, the disabled, and ethnic minority, there should be special courses offered to them, adapting to their needs, learning pace and style. If nothing is done, the "information and strategic skill divide" will continue to widen, with the skilled people being 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 and van Dijk, 2009)
- Regarding content-sharing online, although there is significant difference between genders, after controlling for internet experiences, the difference no longer exists. In other words, users' online ability mediates online content-sharing. (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008)
- "[N]ew digital media, due to their interactive and highly socializing nature, are more adept at breeding the social and cultural competencies needed for a full participation in today's digital environment than traditional media, which are inherently more passive" (Literat, 2011; see http://newmedialiteracies.org/blog/2011/02/measuring-new-media-literacies.php and http://newmedialiteracies.org/blog/2011/02/measuring-new-media-literacies-1.php)
- When given the opportunities to learn about political participation online through digital media literacy education, students are more likely to engage in political participation online. (Kahne, 2010)
- "Teens who have poor health literacy are more likely to search for sexual health information using slang terms, which may lead to less credible Web sites." (Brown, Keller, and Stern, 2009)

6.3.9. Far from promoting empowerment, is media literacy really a neoliberal strategy to reduce top down regulation?

As the UK's then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Tessa Jowell, stated: 'if people can take greater personal responsibility for what they watch and listen to, that will in itself lessen the need for regulatory intervention' (The Daily Mail, 21/1/2004, p. 23).

Ofcom concurred: Robin Foster, Ofcom's Partner for Strategy and Market Developments in 2005, said,

> "As regulators and policy makers we need to radically adapt the way we think about the communications sector as this group evolves into the mainstream. And we need to start doing this now. We will have to learn to rely more on market

> than ever before. And we need to rely more on individual consumers and on companies exercising responsibility in those markets, with increasing emphasis on self-regulation and co-regulation."

7. Pressing policy questions

7.1. Does the evidence show that media literacy is increasing?

7.2. Can such increases, if any, be attributed to policy efforts to promote media literacy?

7.3. How can media literacy initiatives and interventions be meanin gfully evaluated?

7.4. What policy recommendations would result and will policy-makers follow them?

7.5. Who is getting left out of media literacy opportunities?

7.6. Which dimensions of media literacy tend to get neglected (Critical? Creative?)

7.7. Can teachers be held primarily responsible for teaching children about media literacy?

7.8. How can adults be reached, once they have left school, to increase and update their media literacy?

7.9. Should it remain Ofcom's remit to promote media literacy?

7.10. Should internet safety be a key pillar in media literacy or, even, should it be part of a separate policy? (For UK policy on internet safety, see http://www.education.gov.uk/ukccis)

7.11. As a new UK Communications Act is announced, should the present section 11 be maintained, altered or dropped? What would be the justification, the evidence base, for any of these decisions?

7.12. If media literacy is no longer actively promoted as part of UK public policy, who will be the biggest losers and why?

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