

EU Media Literacy Experts Group Offers Lessons for UK Media Literacy



The Institute of Education's **Andrew Burn** warns that media literacy in the UK is not as stellar as it might appear and shares some lessons from broader European expertise that could focus intervention in the UK and upcoming revisions to EU level policy.

The European Commission's **Media Literacy Expert Group** is the second of its kind. The **first existed** from 2006 to 2010, to advise the Commission on practices and policies relating to media literacy in member states. Its most visible outcomes were **commissioned research** and a recommendation to the EU Council and Parliament defining and emphasising the importance of media literacy, in light of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVSMD), which required member states to report regularly on the state of media literacy.

The second expert group's focus is on media literacy education. I am the UK delegate to this second group, serving as a proxy for the DCMS and the DFE, neither of which provided representatives for the first two meetings. Its mandate requires it to analyse 'if and how media literacy is included in educational policies of each country'; and to evaluate 'the feasibility of and possibly proposing a plan for assessing media literacy levels in Europe'.

Status of media literacy in the UK

In findings from a Spanish study presented at the group's last meeting in February, the UK seems to come out top of the tables – one graph showed the UK with 89% receiving mandatory media literacy education. However, it became clear in the ensuing discussion that the ICT curriculum had been bundled into the picture, producing a distorted representation of the UK picture and an unrealistically optimistic representation of Europe's efforts in general.

By contrast, **a report** commissioned last year on Film Literacy by the BFI, the IOE and Film Education took a much more stringent view, suggesting that there was virtually no entitlement film education, very few assessment frameworks (and therefore no reliable evidence of student attainment), very little evidence of national policy, and inadequate training for teachers.

What can be done in the UK?

In the UK, we might consider a number of recommendations arising from the work of this European level experts group. These include:

Research

The existing commissioned reports do shed some light on the pan-European picture, though they need to be read critically and don't always agree. The small number of studies, commissioned by the EC also need to be read in the wider context of media literacy in Europe. Higher education institutions and others may also wish to bid for future research contracts, though funding is uncertain. It is worth noting that the outstanding research record on UK researchers, in particular Sonia Livingstone and David Buckingham, is frequently cited in the studies emerging from the expert group. Similarly, the role of the BFI in research, advocacy and practice is often noted.

Recommendations: We have played an important role in both research and educational practice, and should use the Commissions' reports and research studies to leverage recognition of this role in the UK, in policy and in research funding.



We can contribute to the improvement of information-gathering under the AVSMD. OFCOM have, for example, recently released their Media Lives study of 15 participants, which exemplifies the value of longitudinal qualitative work.

We should make the case to the EC for representation of the UK's nations, which have their own distinctive media literacy education practices, and media cultures and economies.

Safety

As usual, this is a complex picture. The recommendations of the EC always incorporate measures promoting internet safety, and can be invoked by UK programmes addressing these issues. However, as the UK debate testifies, overemphasis on safety leads to regressive forms of protectionism. The prevailing debate in the Expert Group seems to be moving towards this position also – though this is not true of all member states.

Recommendation: We should support the general move in attitudes from overemphasis on safety, finding the kind of balance between safety and creative engagement with the media which the UK's Byron Report recommended.

Education

A worst case interpretation of the evidence is that rhetoric in member states about the importance of media literacy is not reflected in curriculum policy. Even in the case of film, the most 'respectable' of the media forms, and the one most emphasised and supported in the upcoming **Creative Europe** initiatives, enjoys no core curriculum status or sustained progression or assessment anywhere in Europe (with the possible exception of Scotland's moving image assessment framework). In the case of the UK, though the European media literacy community routinely acknowledges its unique history of media education, current curriculum policy has all but obliterated the slender references to media education at Key Stage 2 which formerly existed. Meanwhile, revisions to GCSE and A-level syllabuses are awaited. The recent report on Arts education (the Henley Review) commissioned by the government failed to mention media education or media studies, despite the large numbers of students these attract at GCSE and A-Level.


Recommendation: We should press for an outcomes-based media literacy framework, on which we can build real actions. There is a danger of the EC's work simply documenting the state of play, and producing no action. One possibility is to join a new consortium considering a European Observatory on media literacy. However, we should work towards practical, constructive outcomes such as a curricular framework, exchange programmes, a research portal, and preservation of a clear concept of media literacy, distinct from e-learning.

Erasmus +

Finally, the Expert Group meeting in February heard **a report** from an EC official attached to the new Erasmus + programme. This funds exchanges at all levels of education, including vocational and Higher Education; and while it makes no specific mention of media literacy, we were assured that bids from this area of work would be favourably received.

Recommendation: We should take advantage of what opportunities exist, even if not explicitly labelled "Media Literacy" – such as the Erasmus + programme.

Looking towards the AVMSD revisions

We are coming up to a revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive. No initiatives concerning the directive will likely appear until the new commission and commissioner is in place. Based on the current AVMSD, the Commission recently asked what initiatives at Euro level  could

improve levels of media literacy across Europe and received over 200 contributions. Among these were demands for funding and support for exchanges between countries; for more actions building on the information gathered; for promotion of partnership across regions and sub-regions; and for promotion of media literacy among parents. At the UK level, there has been some excellent work and research, but there is still room for improvement, and need for a more robust promotion of media literacy in society, as distinct from research. With the above recommendations, we can take upcoming revisions in EU policy as an opportunity to improve our record in media literacy and education.

This article gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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