



Communications and Digital Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Media literacy

Tuesday 22 April 2025

2.30 pm

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Baroness Keeley (The Chair); Viscount Colville of Culross; Baroness Fleet; Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill; Lord Holmes of Richmond; Lord Knight of Weymouth; The Bishop of Leeds; Lord McNally; Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge; Baroness Wheatcroft.

Evidence Session No. 4

Heard in Public

Questions 52 - 67

Witnesses

I: Will Gardner OBE, Chief Executive Officer, Childnet; Chris Morris, Chief Executive Officer, Full Fact; Hannah Perry, Associate Director (Information Ecosystems), Demos.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Will Gardner, Chris Morris and Hannah Perry.

Q52 The Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to this meeting of the Communications and Digital Committee. I am Baroness Barbara Keeley, chair of the committee. I welcome our three witnesses for the first panel and thank them for joining us today. The session is being broadcast live and a transcript will be taken. Our witnesses will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript where necessary. Can our witnesses introduce themselves?

Will Gardner: I am the CEO of a children's charity, Childnet International, which focuses on online safety, and a director of the UK Safer Internet Centre.

Hannah Perry: Hello. I am associate director for information ecosystems at Demos. We are a cross-party think tank. I focus explicitly on researching the online and offline information environment. I am a former secondary school English teacher. I left after the pandemic and took up a thesis focusing on media literacy approaches in schools.

Chris Morris: I am the chief executive of Full Fact, the UK's fact-checking charity. We have editorial content which seeks to put accurate information into the public sphere and technological content. We produce AI tools which are used in 30 countries around the world to help people deal with information at internet scale.

Q53 The Chair: I will ask the first question. As we go around, members may have to declare interests, but I do not have any related to our evidence session today.

What do you see as the biggest risks in today's digital and media landscape? Are they more pronounced for certain age groups?

Will Gardner: The focus of our work is around online safety. The online risks to children and young people have been categorised as four Cs—contact, content, conduct, and commerce or contract. These take a variety of forms. I can explain a bit more detail about those. The context around those risks facing children and young people is also important to take into account, including the fast-moving environment that tech provides and how it is difficult for those who provide traditional support for children—those closest forms of support: parents, carers and educators—to keep up with that landscape and provide their role of supporting children online.

Looking at the four Cs that I mentioned, we have got misogyny under the content risk, and algorithms, which are much under discussion and of great concern. Generative AI has the potential to erode trust at a wider scale. In the context of media literacy, it is very challenging because it is still in development and is happening very quickly. It is not always clear what we need to be communicating to young people and at what ages and stages. On your last point, about the ages, it does vary across the ages of children depending on their experience and involvement digitally.

We will see that happening from games and apps for the younger ones, moving into social media for the older ones.

The issues will adapt but it is never mutually exclusive. Although there is the age of 13, which is a watershed, it is very fluid. There is no passport-level entry into the older age group. When we are talking about risks facing children and young people, we need to be looking at children who are under 13 and at primary schools, because issues around harmful content and even some of the things around misogyny still filter into that age category too.

Hannah Perry: When I think about risks of the digital media environment, I think about what it is a risk to. What are we protecting? What are we trying to create this environment for? I am particularly interested in the risks to the health of democracy. When I talk about that, I am not talking specifically about voting but about our Government's ability to govern and our ability as people to deliberate with one another, to live in a shared reality, so that what we are debating is based in fact, and our appetite to participate in democracy, which we can look at through signs of voting, which are at their lowest for 30 years.

There are other vulnerabilities to our democracy which we should be alert to. We have seen from the V-Dem Institute that we have a global climate of democratic backsliding, a rise of authoritarian leadership. However, in the UK we have also seen from our British Social Attitudes survey a real diminishment in trust in our government, which will just touch on, as well as in politicians. That is the lowest that it has been in 50 years.

When we look at how that compares with other countries, we are lower than any other OECD country. This is a really serious problem for us, and it is combined with our relationships with one another, the members of our society. There is misogyny, we have seen reports to Prevent skyrocket from teachers, but we have also heard from the Runnymede Trust that racism is at its worst in 30 years.

That is the second risk that I am interested in. However, when I think about specific risks in the media and digital environment, I break that down into demand, supply and control. From a demand perspective—this has been well documented by this committee in its future of news report—interest in news is also very low. It has plummeted over the last decade from 70% of people saying that they have a general interest in news to 38%. That contrasts with Finland, where the proportion has remained stable, and it is lower than Germany, which we know has other problems. Over half of the population is now using social media to access their news, which is much higher among young people.

The supply of good information is also very low. I will not go into lots of detail about that because this committee knows about this, but we are particularly worried about local news and local coverage. That is where people really feel themselves represented in media. We know that in a number of communities there are local news deserts or the coverage is particularly poor. Demand is very low for good-quality information and

supply is very low. We have a situation where people are getting their poor-quality information from social media.

This takes me to control. We lack control over our information supply chains around our social media platforms. Our own social media platforms are US-owned and US-headquartered. At a particular time in our geopolitical environment, when we see our approaches as a country to free speech being potentially up for negotiation in trade talks or subject to discussion at security conferences, this is something that we should be very alert to: our control over those social media platforms. Those platforms are changing their content policies in a way that we cannot control—the reinstitution of Tommy Robinson and Andrew Tate to these platforms, attacks on fact-checking organisations and cuts to those programmes.

The final point that we should be paying attention to is the level of foreign influence on these platforms, the kind of foreign players. How we currently define “foreign influence” is “state-sponsored foreign influence”. However, foreign influence is really changing. We need to think about the quasi-state actors that we have in the US and the mobilised foreign groups that we see of the far right in other countries, which played such a huge part in the Southport riots. When these things are put together at the nexus, they mean that we have an urgent threat to our democracy presented by our media and digital media environment, which we need to be alert to.

Chris Morris: When I think about the biggest risk, I want to build on Hannah’s initial remarks about the rather extraordinary political environment that we are living in. We are an impartial charity, but we have had to say many times recently that we will not be impartial about the notion that facts matter, as does the ability to identify verifiable facts and appraise critically the difference between accurate information and false or misleading information. This is what should be at the heart of a media literacy programme.

Yet we now have a US Administration who tend to distrust people who talk about information, good or bad, in such terms. As you probably know, when Vice-President Vance came to Europe earlier this year, he described misinformation as an ugly, Soviet-era term and suggested that anyone using such terms was essentially trying to tell you what you should be thinking.

That is the position we have got to. The danger is that the logical extension of the Vice-President’s argument, which we disagreed with very openly at the time, is that if everything becomes an opinion—my facts versus your facts—you get to a place where nothing can really be questioned. That is really dangerous for the whole idea of a healthy society where media literacy plays an important role.

At Full Fact, we think now is the time for the Government, Parliament and regulators to think about the values we want to embed in our society and how best to ensure that critical thinking takes root in a world where there are very different views about how information should be dealt with. Because information is such a currency now, and data is what runs

our world, we have serious concerns about the potential for the large internet platforms—some of the most powerful organisations the world has ever seen—potentially backsliding on some of the commitments they have made to things such as fact checking, as Hannah said, and content moderation, because they are so determined to stay out of the crosshairs of the White House.

They have a responsibility in this country, where it is up to Parliament and the Government to decide how best to regulate and legislate. We know that a very careful balance needs to be drawn between protecting freedom of expression and protecting people from harm online. The ability to imbue people with the skills of media literacy could become even more important if we see those companies that control so much of our information environment beginning to shirk their responsibilities.

Q54 The Chair: Just before we leave my question, Hannah, you gave us a very good view of the consequences of not confronting the challenges. Do you have anything to add, Chris or Will? If we do not confront these challenges, what will be the consequence?

Chris Morris: The consequence of not confronting the challenges, from Full Fact's perspective, is that we are in danger of reaching a place where nobody believes anything they read, see or hear anywhere and, therefore, of creating a world of enormous distrust, which is clearly not good for our democracy, for businesses in this country or for our idea of who we are as a society. Media literacy is absolutely fundamental to give strength to what I think we hold dear in our society. We should ensure that the decisions on how we do that are made in this country and not by tech executives, whether they be in California or Beijing.

Will Gardner: I would add only that the Online Safety Act is here and it is coming. Ofcom has its powers, but I guess we have not seen its teeth as yet. There is an element of seeing what happens in terms of how these companies will be regulated, but it will not address the issues that we are talking about here around media literacy. I would not want the legislation to be seen as a panacea for fixing the problems that we have.

Q55 Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge: To what extent can developing media literacy address these risks? Could you be quite specific about which skills individuals need to develop to become more media literate?

Will Gardner: Underpinning the comments we have just heard around critical thinking, that is probably what you think of first when you think of media literacy. If you think of the online risks I have mentioned around the four Cs, that applies to every single thing that young people might face. That may be content or contact—having to assess whether they should accept that friend request. They have to make judgments around content and think critically about the consequences of doing something or not. Whether something is a scam, which I should have added in my answer to the first question, was the issue that young people were most concerned about of the issues that I outlined before. There is also understanding pornography for what it is. That kind of underpins all of it.

There is a very good document, which I want to make sure is referenced in this work that you are doing, called *Education for a Connected World*, produced by something called the UK Council for Internet Safety. It was updated in 2020, so it is absolutely in need of a refresh, but it outlined the eight core areas of competence that young people need to live fulfilling online lives. I can give the list here if you would like; it includes things such as online relationships, managing online information, privacy and security, online bullying, self-image and identity, copyright and ownership, online reputation, health, well-being and lifestyle. It breaks down in each age group—four to seven, seven to 11 and onwards—a list of what competencies young people need. These are “I can” statements—for example, “I can give examples of how the internet and social media can be used for positive self-promotion”, and so on and so forth. It gives a kind of framework and there is a teaching tool attached which can really help develop that further. That is a long-winded answer to your question.

Hannah Perry: Thinking about specific approaches to media literacy, I break them down into three buckets. The first, which has dominated the approaches taken so far because of the location of media literacy via the online safety regulator and the terms articulated in the Online Safety Act, I would describe as a passive, protectionist approach. It focuses on functional skills. Another is creative and constructive, which is also included, where you are creating and producing media, which is very important. The final one, which I think is neglected, is around citizenship. It thinks about values and behaviours, not just online but your deeper values and behaviours as a human in a democratic society.

I apply a lens across those three buckets by thinking about a term which has been long contested in the English curriculum: how you define literacy. That is the difference between cognitive literacy and social literacy in how you define and think about literacy. Cognitive literacy is individual and measurable in functional skills. That approach has been dominant in our curriculum and the way we approach teaching. We have really neglected the social side of literacy, which recognises that, when you interpret texts, a lot of the meaning is associated with your context—who you are as a person and your community.

It recognises that your teaching or approach to understanding the way that somebody is learning or interpreting media requires, to an extent, the young person or people you are teaching to bring their own knowledge into the room, to explore and understand texts with the teacher or parent. It is a much more degraded role for the teacher or parent, but it is one that really recognises the social dynamics of how we construct meaning and how we read. That goes right back to how we understand literacy. We see a translation of that contestation in media literacy and the debates over how you teach it.

Specifically on skills, when we have approached designing a media literacy curriculum, we have forgotten the foundational skills that are needed, which are really important in how you overlay media literacy. I am thinking about this through the lens of a teacher. When a teacher is trying to diagnose what could be described by a media literacy

practitioner as a media literacy problem, they are thinking about it first and foremost as a behavioural, pastoral problem. Is this person believing Andrew Tate and repeating his stuff in my classroom because they are misbehaving? Is it because I am a female teacher and their values are out of step, or is it because they have been influenced by the media?

That goes to the heart of thinking about the kind of foundational skills and social environment that are needed before you overlay media literacy on the top, which is very specifically designed. You must think about individual self-regulation as well as social skills. You can then learn the social skills in things such as developing oracy and debate. You then overlay the media literacy skills—thinking about media concepts, which you find in the English curriculum. These are things such as bias, representation and audience, which are not currently transferred into contemporary texts. This is because a lot of contemporary texts, or texts that the teacher might introduce, have been removed because of a lack of space in the curriculum. We are currently predominantly teaching more cultural heritage texts than contemporary ones, or things that the student might find more relevant, because contemporary media has been stripped out.

The final thing that is often missing in how we think about media literacy, particularly for teachers in schools, is this issue around the responsive knowledge that is needed. Often, what is introduced into classrooms is what students are consuming in that moment. They are coming into school having just watched something about Israel-Gaza online or an Andrew Tate video. That is what they are bringing in. This means that a teacher is constantly dialling into different current affairs knowledge, so that current affairs knowledge is also important.

It is a composite of skills that you need to segment and think about in terms of sequencing. Our problem is that we have just dialled into that media literacy level, without thinking about how they engage with all these foundational skills and then the responsive ones.

Chris Morris: I will not try to compete with Hannah's expertise as a teacher. Let me tell you what we see at Full Fact. In terms of how we engage with people who consume our editorial content, informed scepticism is a good start—knowing what signs to look for to understand where the material might be artificial or specifically generated by artificial intelligence, and having the ability and, critically, the confidence, to think critically about the information that they consume.

When we write our fact checks, we link to every source that we use, no matter how obscure the database. The idea behind that is that if somebody asks, "Who fact checks the fact checkers?", the answer is that everybody does. If you so wish, you can reverse engineer everything that we have done. I am not suggesting that people need to do that every time they open their social media feeds, but the principle is not a bad one. It is about awareness of where information has come from, how it is created and how reliable it might be. Those are critical skills to teach us to be living in this modern society.

Q56 **Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge:** We have already touched upon this, but would anybody like to add anything to which techniques are most effective in helping citizens to develop these skills and conclude on how media literacy skills relate to wider actions to combat online harm?

Will Gardner: I will draw from the work that we do at Childnet International. We are out in schools talking to young people from pre-school right up to the end of school. Over the years we have learned, in relation to the techniques, a list of dos and don'ts. When a child sees an adult coming towards them to talk about social media, the child will think, "I know what you're going to say. You're going to talk about the risks and the dangers". It is important that we talk about that, and that young people are receptive, but we cannot just talk about that in isolation. There is a broader experience than just the risks and the negatives that young people are experiencing. If we want to have a credible voice when talking about using technology, we have to encompass the positives as well as the risks. We have also learned that fear is not a good motivator for behaviour change. It can have a short-term impact, but scaring people does not lead to long-term behaviour change.

It is also partly about needing to be relevant and engaging to the audience. If you show something very scary, a young person does not always connect to that or think, "That is something that could happen to me". There are techniques to try to do that, using discussion scenarios to get to young people's level, to show that you are talking about the tech that they are using, to get that level of engagement.

We believe that education works, and we run big awareness campaigns outside of that. For Safer Internet Day, we have great data on how the reach and impact of big campaigns can serve within this space. However, we also know that young people's involvement is a key ingredient for different reasons. We did research last year in which young people said that they really valued talking about online safety within the school community. The majority said that they valued this, but 30% of those young people said that it did not address the issues that they were most concerned about.

The young people's voice is important to ensure that we are addressing the things that young people are concerned about, but also their voice has this innate power. It is important that we are using young people's voice within school communities to be an educator. There are ways and means to do that. We have a programme educating young people to be those educators in school communities. We have had incredible results from those communities, with young people talking to other young people but also to parents, carers and to teachers within the school. There is a resource there that can make this very current. A voice within the strata of young people's experience can resonate very well. I do not think that anybody has a defence from hearing primary-school-aged children saying things to adults in relation to their online lives and the things that they would like to see changed.

Hannah Perry: On who is doing the educating, I totally agree about the position of fear and of behaviour regulation. This is often what a teacher is predominantly seen as by a student, which makes them a difficult person to then be chatting with about how you are using TikTok. They do not believe that you know anything about TikTok and they do not want to get into trouble by telling you that they have been sharing something that they know they should not have been sharing.

We must think carefully about who is sharing these lessons. There is a missing role that we do not speak enough about in the context of media literacy: the role of the parent. We need to be clear on the role of the parent relative to other professionals. I hear from a lot of teachers in my research about how often parents regard it as the role of the school to teach children how to regulate their social media use and what content they should be using.

Regarding other professionals and other social actors who can relate to the child in a different way, we need as many as possible—not just teachers or people in a professional role but people who are there in a behaviour management role—to be occupying that space, parents but also other influencers who can be trusted to give that advice.

Flipping to a different topic, to move back to the school environment, we are missing an opportunity for children to explore media in a project-based way. A lot of the teaching that we give is very assessment-driven, very quantifiable, meaning that there is not a lot of space for children to play, explore and develop their ideas. These are practices that we see in media studies. They are much-diminished media studies today, but this allows children to understand what they are learning in the context that is relevant to them. That requires a lot of trust for the child and for the teacher to go with the child on that journey, so we need more exploration around that.

Chris Morris: I do not have a huge amount to add to that. Recently, a report came out on countering online conspiracy theories in schools, which was set up by the Pears Foundation. I was part of that. Two of the recommendations are worth highlighting. One is that teaching on conspiracy theories should start in primary school. There is no point in waiting until the age of 13, when 77% of 11 to 12 year-olds have already got social media accounts. It is not too soon to start at the age of five. Hannah has already mentioned Finland. We are probably not the first people to come before this committee and suggest that Finland might be a good example to follow, because they seem to get a lot of things right. They teach children from a very early age how to recognise potentially harmful information.

Secondly, it is important to empower teachers. One of the findings of the commission was that many teachers did not feel that they had permission to discuss sometimes sensitive issues of conspiracy theories. If a pupil came into school and said, "My dad or my mum said this", does the teacher have permission from the school, from the local authority, from the Department for Education, to take on what that parent has said? It is a very difficult position for the teacher to be put in, but if we

are going to set up a successful system, then teachers must feel that they are empowered to make those decisions.

Also, it is important to say that all these things need to happen outside school as well, and at all ages. This Government and the previous Government rightly have focused primarily on young people, on children of school age. However, when we carried out focus groups last summer on misinformation and what it means to people, the overwhelming answer was that "Uncle Stan or Auntie Betty got scammed by somebody online". That is what misinformation means to people. To counter that, they need to be taught how to understand and to operate in a world which is moving so fast and where they feel left behind.

While schools and young people are incredibly important, we should not forget the rest of society.

- Q57 Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Hannah, I was really interested in your initial answer around values and behaviours. A lot of the discussion that we have seen talks about media illiteracy more functionally, as you described, and the skills that are needed to counter it. I have been reading Christine Rosen's interesting book *The Extinction of Experience*, where she talks about addiction to technology and overconsumption of violent material through games and social media reducing empathy in young people in particular. Are those areas that we can tackle in media literacy? If not, where would we tackle them and help parents and others feel more confident about dealing with them in themselves and in their young people?

Hannah Perry: It is challenging, because, when you frame a problem as a media literacy problem, it makes you think that you have to go straight to media. I think about media literacy problems as including the question of why people are using media or going to specific spaces in the media rather than offline spaces. Where are the offline spaces? Why are they not using them?

We know why they are not using the offline spaces. It is because we have historically had a real lack of investment in youth clubs at local authority level. There are no offline spaces. When I was teaching, we were not even offering extracurricular courses because it was not safe, because of the pandemic. We have generations of people who are leaving school, and some since, who for years had no exposure to extracurricular opportunities. Offline spaces are so important for diversifying who you are meeting and for meeting other adults. We need to think about media literacy in the context of when not to use media and how to strengthen relationships that then extend into media.

That is how we live. That is how young people live. They make choices about whether to stay in or go out. Is it safer to stay in or go out? For some parents, it is safer for their child to remain in, because there is a lack of places to go that are supervised. So they stay in and use their laptop or phone, if they have digital access at all. These are the choices parents are making. It is easier for a child to stay in and for them to be on their phone than to create activities which are expensive, and where

there are not other supervised adults to look after them. They have to be able to get to that place safely. A lot of routes to local clubs are not necessarily safe. I was teaching in London, where there is fear about what might happen to a child on their way after school. This causes us to think about offline spaces, and how we make them more desirable and supported for young people and adults.

How do we think about that through a policy lens? I think it is about opening this up more across DCMS and the other ways in which it is supporting our cultural industries, creative industries and youth culture. But it needs to be looked at in that broader way. Otherwise, we end up focusing specifically on that media world and we solve only media problems, not actual problems.

Q58 The Bishop of Leeds: On that point, I want to bring us back to focus on media literacy. What assessment have you made of the current state of media literacy in the UK? You referenced Finland. We have recently met people from Belgium, Canada and Finland, but what about the UK?

Chris Morris: I think we all know that an awful lot is going on but there seems to be a lack of co-ordination. That starts with Government. We have recommended that there should be some sort of cross-government task force. That would involve the Department for Education supporting teachers and students. It would involve the Home Office looking at issues of media literacy and its potential, or the lack of media literacy promoting extremism. It would involve DCMS as a bridge between traditional media outlets and media literacy strategies, and it would involve DSIT looking at online safety, of which Ofcom is the regulator. That sort of fits in with Ofcom's recently released three-year strategy on media literacy, in which it went out of its way to stress that media literacy should be everybody's business. At the moment, a lot of people are working on it but the co-ordination is not there. That needs to start at the top with Government and then filter down through the system.

Will Gardner: Just to add to what Chris said, it needs to be cross-sectoral. There is a need for co-ordination, but the youth voice needs to be included within that perspective. We were asking a group of young people whether they can tell if something is AI-generated or not, and we had a good discussion. The idea was that, if it is text, we have no reference point to determine whether it is real or not; for images, we look at the comments underneath. They were developing their own strategies in order to manage. Sometimes it is very easy to think of young people as passive recipients of online safety knowledge, when they are actively agents within that space, making decisions all the time.

You asked for an assessment. I mentioned *Education for a Connected World*, a kind of framework of skills that young people need. There is a programme which has reached over 15,000 schools called Project Evolve. The educators run sessions with their pupils and it has a kind of assessment. After the sessions, the young people take a test to see how much of that knowledge they have kept. The score was 3.6 out of 5 across the knowledge map. That is quite a positive score, though it is more at primary than secondary schools—it is not at a big holistic level.

There are some positive signs, but there are obviously still negatives and concerns around online safety. I have been working at Childnet since 2000. Every year, people say this issue is more important than ever before, and this year it seems to be on a different scale. This absolutely heightens concerns and people recognise that there are issues we need to deal with beyond the Online Safety Act. There are real concerns: "What can I do? How do I keep my children safe? What steps do I need to take?" Those are absolutely reflected by parents and carers, but young people care about this issue too.

Hannah Perry: It is really important for us to understand the delivery of media literacy in schools, where it is particularly vulnerable, and the reasons why. At the moment, if media literacy is being delivered, it is because there is sufficient investment in the pastoral and safeguarding aspects of that school and there is not too much demand on that part of the school system. Often, where schools are able to invite organisations to give particular training or support, it is because there is capacity within the school to engage externally or develop the curriculum. When you look at Teacher Tapp data, where teachers are saying that they have a policy and an approach to media literacy in schools—if they define it in that way—it is more likely to be in schools that have high prior attaining students and a lower proportion of free school meal-receiving students. We need a really nuanced and careful examination of where media literacy is being delivered in schools.

Based on that data, my assessment is that it is less likely to be delivered in schools which have low prior attaining standards, because teachers are more focused on getting assessment and attainment up, and where there are additional demands on pastoral and safeguarding teams, which is more likely in schools that are serving deprived areas. In those schools, it is more likely that less media literacy provision is being given.

The other side to this is that Ofcom has emphasised in its strategy that it is looking at building relationships with the Department for Education and education authorities, but that is very late in the day. The Department for Education has largely been very absent, historically, from conversations about media literacy. We recognise in the curriculum review that this is now being engaged with, but I worry that it is too narrow. If we look only at the curriculum, we are not thinking about pastoral teams or extracurricular clubs. If we are not thinking about that social, pastoral context, we are missing why it is not being delivered in the first place.

- Q59 **The Bishop of Leeds:** What you have described is real complexity in the state of the sector in the UK. Complexity requires coherence, and that might begin with the Government getting a grip on it. We hear that quite clearly. The other element to media literacy is building the resilience of citizens. I think you used the word "agency". This is not just about negative prevention but positive engagement with media. How do you measure citizens' resilience?

Doing a quick test and then saying, "How much did the kids remember after some session?" is one way of doing it, but what would you expect to see in terms of citizens' resilience? How would you measure it?

Chris Morris: I think it is partly the fact of how confident people feel within themselves to operate effectively in an online world which is changing very quickly. Technology means that in the next 10 years there will be more change in the way we interact with technology in the information sphere than there has been in the last 10 years, and a lot of people find that very destabilising. So it is about the extent to which people feel confident, and whatever they have been taught through media literacy initiatives gives them that confidence that they are, if you like, floating rather than flailing.

The Bishop of Leeds: But presumably, a lot of the people who we are talking about as susceptible to the bad stuff, if I can use a Trumpian term, are very confident about what they are watching and reading. So surely confidence cannot be the key, because you can be misguidedly confident.

Chris Morris: It is quite difficult to reach people who have fallen down the rabbit hole, and sadly, that is a lot of people. A lot of people are swirling around the edge of the hole, and that is where the focus needs to be, to make sure that people do not fall victim to conspiracy theories which can damage their health or their wealth—financial scams or dangerous health misinformation, which we which we track on a daily basis. It is about making sure that people have the tools to recognise when that misleading information is being presented to them, and about making sure that they have accurate information so they can make informed choices on the things that matter to them and to their families.

Hannah Perry: I think it is important to look at the broader system and to measure what is working within the system before coming to citizens and asking for self-reporting metrics. We know the things that make up a healthy media ecosystem, and that they can ladder and then present with an outcome of an individual therefore having real struggles with finding good-quality information and believing and trusting it. So we need to start measuring the system levers and understanding their health before then moving to the individual and social level.

I look at indicators of people's readiness to want to converse with somebody else, whether that is online or offline, what they assume to be that person's belief system, their societal level indicators, and then look at what their media consumption is and how that shifts. I would look at indicators such as news avoidance and appetite for news. On self-reporting, we need those assessment indicators, which are so important, especially for funding, because funders really want them for specific programmes. But as a Government, we need to be looking at the macro and thinking about how we measure that.

Chris Morris: It is also worth noting that, in its three-year strategy, Ofcom acknowledged that more research needs to be done on how best to set up educational strategies which reach people from diverse backgrounds, of all ages and of all socioeconomic levels. It is striking to

me that such research has not been done already, and I think one of the problems is whether the systems we are creating are meeting the urgency of the moment, because the moment is urgent.

The Bishop of Leeds: Perhaps one of the keys is measuring the degree of scepticism or evidence of scepticism, which was mentioned earlier, and confidence in scepticism rather than confidence in the narrative that reinforces what you already believe.

Will Gardner: I have just a couple of things on Ofcom to add to what has been mentioned already. The attitudes to media report is a kind of yearly tracker for children, parents and carers. So there is good data in relation to use which can help inform on attitudes towards tech and online safety, which is useful. Also, Ofcom plays a role in supporting the evaluation of interventions. One of the challenges around education activities is that you can measure the numbers you reach but it is harder to measure the impact, and it is supporting wider organisations to better evaluate the work that they are doing, which is an important addition.

The Chair: Viscount Colville has the next question, but it is worth saying that there is some interest in this committee on how any of our members might assess themselves, given that we are looking at all of this for everyone else. So if anybody can suggest to us a method of assessing our own media literacy as committee members, we would be interested.

Q60

Viscount Colville of Culross: Chris, you talked about the lack of government co-ordination in looking at this issue. There is some concern that the legislation puts all the emphasis on Ofcom to roll out any kind of media literacy. Do you think there is a concern that the Government are outsourcing this media literacy campaign to Ofcom? How can that then be addressed so that it deals with your concern about the lack of joined-up government when it is dealing with this very important area?

Chris Morris: I think Ofcom probably feels that that is the case. Obviously, we are delighted that it now has a three-year media literacy strategy—it is long overdue. But as with many things that we discuss with Ofcom, we would encourage it to go a little bit faster. We realise that the wheels of bureaucracy can grind slowly, but, as I said earlier, this needs to meet the urgency of the moment. I am not sure that the Government are deliberately outsourcing it, because it does need a regulator to regulate media literacy in an online environment. It is about whether Ofcom feels that it has the permission to be bold enough, and sometimes I wonder whether there is sufficient boldness and urgency there.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Who would you like to say what, in order to embolden Ofcom?

Chris Morris: I would like instruction from Government, if necessary in legislation. For example, if you take the role of the online platforms, they do some good work on media literacy and fund initiatives, and so forth, but there is no legal requirement for them to be actively involved. One of the things we would certainly like to see in the longer term is legislation which puts a legal duty on these companies, which hold so much power,

to be actively involved. That, in and of itself, would empower and enable Ofcom to do more.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Hannah, you nodded vigorously.

Hannah Perry: It is really difficult for a regulator—I think Chris is very much saying this too—to play a bolder role without being instructed by Government to be given that broader remit. But what is already challenging is that the remit is very much couched within an online safety lens, which requires and prevents, potentially—I do not know for certain—making it harder to then say what it is for. If you are trying to protect the health of democracy, for example, and you are linking it to those outcomes, it needs to be situated in a broader scope so that you can understand the context in which it is operating, and then be thinking about what levers you need to be pulling in order to really embolden it and generate it.

I am conscious that the Defending Democracy Taskforce has been set up in recognition of the challenges that we have at the moment. It has quite a limited scope—election preparedness. It may be that if we were to look at how resilient our citizens are, perhaps, or what information they are given and the spaces they can operate in, and if that was connected into that remit, perhaps that would empower it to have a broader, cross-functional, cross-departmental scope.

Q61 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Will, you said earlier that we had not really seen Ofcom's teeth yet in addressing this issue. It already has powers from the Online Safety Act to deal with this. What do you mean by not seeing the teeth? What teeth do you want to see from it?

Will Gardner: I am thinking in terms of enforcing the Online Safety Act and the conditions effectively on the social media companies. The codes are in formation and being launched, and they will come into force. Some have come into force and others will come into force. We have seen this period of preparedness-making—I have made a new word—where Ofcom has been getting ready, and it has been constructing itself like a whale underwater. We are all waiting to see what this big beast is going to do. How will it interact with Instagram, TikTok, Snap and the services which are under scope in relation to the wide range of issues which it is looking at?

It is not the primary purpose, but there is a huge educational opportunity in some of those cases when you get to see, "These are the rules and this is what it looks like". That helps frames users' expectations about what services should and should not be doing. I think we are waiting to see that. So we are not yet at the stage where companies are receiving big fines under the Online Safety Act in relation to the children's code, for example. These are things which are going to happen.

Q62 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** In relation to Meta particularly, obviously there is lots of talk about Meta pulling out the third-party fact checkers in the US. Do you feel that Meta is responding in any way to the demands of the Online Safety Act, that it is taking its responsibilities not to harm

users more, and that it is anticipating a requirement to have some sort of media literacy?

Will Gardner: The Chair mentioned at the beginning that I sit on Meta's safety advisory council, and I have done so for many years. Just to set the context, that is a group of different organisations from across the world which have the opportunity to input to the safety team within Meta to give advice in relation to things it might be launching, and so on—it is not an executive board but an advisory board from that perspective.

I think you have seen some changes over the last 12 to 18 months in relation to Meta and some of the things that it has been doing. It launched teen accounts a few months ago, which provide greater levels of protections for 13 to 15s and for 16 to 18s, but there is a degree of variation between the two. There is the Online Safety Act here but there is a Digital Services Act in the EU, and other regulatory pressures are coming. So you are seeing some shift—cause and effect; it is hard to necessarily determine whether one thing is directly causing the other. But sometimes the threat of regulation can be pressure, and regulation itself can apply more pressure to where that is. So I think that there is a kind of recognition that that is coming.

There was that announcement on 6 January when Meta announced quite radical changes in relation to fact checking but also to its policy around hateful content more broadly. Our organisation, along with other organisations working in the safety space on the safety council, wrote to Meta to express our strong recommendation that this be reversed, because we saw that this was just taking things in a negative direction. So we see some things that are positive and other things that are negative—that is my bold conclusion.

Chris Morris: Can I just add something on third-party fact checking? Obviously, we have a financial relationship with Meta; we do third-party fact checking on its platform. You are right that, at the moment, the programme has come to an end in the US, but with the expectation, Meta says, that the same end of that programme will roll out elsewhere in the world. I think that both the Digital Services Act in the EU and the Online Safety Act here have given it some pause for thought. This is obviously a very different regulatory space than that in the US, where the new Administration were pretty much pushing it on from behind. I know that in other parts of the world, Governments in Africa, for example, have been lobbying quite hard with Meta to say, "Are you sure you want to do this?" The problem with the Community Notes system, which replaces third-party fact checking in the US, is that while it has its place in the information ecosystem, it relies on consensus; it relies on two people who previously disagreed reaching agreement. It does not rely on verifiable facts or independent expertise. So for some things it is very good but for some of the most harmful material it really does not work, in our opinion—and it could be coming here.

Q63 Viscount Colville of Culross: Sure. Hannah, do you see the tech companies being pulled apart by the loosening up that is happening in America and the tightening up that is happening in western Europe?

Hannah Perry: Sorry—I am struck by Chris’s comment on Community Notes; if it is okay I will just build on that, just because we are about to publish a paper that evaluated Community Notes during the riots. It is something that we have been really struck by, as at the moment in the US it has been proposed as potentially a solution to the perceived bias of fact checkers. As Chris mentioned, the risk with building consensus means that it is particularly vulnerable in crisis situations, which is what we observed during the riots. The speed of a Community Note being made available was something that took so much longer because it was so much harder to find that consensus. That is okay in a typical scenario if you also have strong professional moderation teams and strong fact-checking teams available. But if you are using Community Notes as a replacement or a means by which you can cut your professional teams or cut back on your fact checking, it creates real vulnerabilities, as we believe it did in the Southport riots, on which we will be publishing soon. So that is just something I am aware of in terms of the use of that system in the UK at the moment on X.

Q64 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Basically, you feel that the Government ought to be pushing further to make sure that tech companies do not just rely on Community Notes and that there is something more substantial, such as the third-party fact checkers.

Hannah Perry: Absolutely. The concern I have at the moment is that in the approach that Ofcom will be taking to terms of service, the contract between users in terms of what they can put on platforms, the requirement is to be more transparent and for those terms of service to be clear and accessible. There is no minimum standard for what those terms of service are. That is the same for the “media literacy by design” requirements. At the moment they require platforms to tell Ofcom what they are but they do not yet tell them, “Those standards aren’t good enough” or “They’re not clear enough”. Also, everyone has mentioned the time that it is taking for that evidence to become clear and then for a decision to be taken as to what to do about it. Over that period we are, as we have seen already, vulnerable to what then plays out on those platforms and the harm that that exacerbates in our offline environment. So I worry that at the moment it does not appear that there will be a sufficient kind of response or a means by which those terms of service can be tightened or a higher standard enforced.

Q65 **Baroness Fleet:** Hannah, I thought it was very interesting how you brought parents into the equation. It has surprised me over the various sessions we have had how seldom parents are mentioned. Therefore I have a sort of slightly left-field question, if I may. I am interested to know what your organisation’s views are of phones in schools and whether your organisation supports a ban on phones in schools, and therefore no access perhaps to social media on phones that would presumably be a central part of a media literacy education. There seems to be a sort of conflict between the desire to have media literacy and yet there is an increasing movement, particularly coming from parents—well-educated parents—that children and young people should not have

phones in schools and should not have access to social media on phones until they are 14 or 16. So could you each individually give us your organisation's rather than your individual views on phones in schools and where media literacy fits into that?

Chris Morris: Preventing the use of phones in schools seems to me to make sense, and Full Fact would support that. Where I think we have a problem is if you try to go further and ban social media altogether; there are moves, for example in Australia, to do that. I just do not think it is realistic. If you ban something, it will go underground, and there is no point in trying to bring the next generation up in a world where technology is taken away from them, because it simply is not going to work. We need to get them to be able to use technology responsibly and safely. Therefore, again, a lot of the responsibility for that lies with the big internet companies and the platforms they are providing, and they need to do more to make them safer places.

Q66 **Baroness Fleet:** So the onus would be on the internet companies as opposed to the necessity for schools to take the responsibility. It takes a long time for Government to move with urgency; it does not move at a great speed.

Chris Morris: Yes. Stepping back, I think the internet companies do need to take on a lot of responsibility. Schools and parents obviously also have responsibilities of their own.

Will Gardner: Following the whole discussion around the ban in schools, it is worthwhile saying that we have to understand what a ban actually means. Sometimes it is about restrictions rather than a ban; a ban sounds like it is absolutely gone forever, which then means that everything is on home—it will cover only a portion of a child's life. There is the home side, and that will not be addressing that issue at all. For reasons of concentrating in class and whatever, most schools have some restrictions in relation to phones already. It is interesting to try to think, "What does a ban mean?" Does that mean they cannot bring it out of the bag, so it has to be out of sight, or it cannot come on to the school grounds? A lot of kids have phones because parents want them to have phones. So there are lots of complications within this, and I just wonder whether a ban is necessarily the nuanced answer to this question that we need to be looking at.

On Chris's point, I agree about the social media element. It is about letting companies off the hook to think, "Well, we don't supply our services to children so we can do what we like, because children cannot be accessing" when we know the restrictions and controls about young people accessing services which are not for their age and not good enough currently. So there would not be any real cause for congratulations around such a move.

But I think there is also the recognition that it is almost like punishing young people for the failure of companies, because there is a lot which is good about social media even for under-16s, and we are effectively saying that the bad is greater than the good. I think it is important that,

when we are making decisions around that, we need to have a kind of balanced and nuanced discussion about what is the cost of a ban, if you see what I mean.

Hannah Perry: Demos does not have a position on this one, so this is me speaking as an individual, but I totally agree with what has been said. Just to come back to your original point about the role of parents, I think we often do not think enough about parents because they are harder to influence. More thought needs to be given to other opportunities to influence parents outside of the spaces that we can influence, such as schools, or potentially platforms when we are able to influence them. But I do not think enough is thought about the opportunities through public service broadcasting, for example, like other routes for influencing conversation and self-reflection, and what solutions different parent communities can come up with to support one another, to be supporting their children, and to regulate their use.

To your point about the message it sends about banning phones, I totally agree that schools typically do ban phones—and this has been evidenced. They are not typically present; they are in bags. I worry about what signal it sends when a student knows that they are not allowed to use their phone but they are using their phone, and then who do they talk to about their usage? That is the concern—that you create more underground activity and less conversation and teaching around how to navigate that world safely.

Q67 **Baroness Fleet:** But to the point that, if phones are not being used in schools, can you really teach media literacy because they might not be familiar with the things you are wanting to teach them? There just seems to be a conflict between two different movements. I was wondering how you reconcile that, or whether you say, "Phones should be available for media literacy classes". I do not know, but it is just interesting to know how you reconcile those two things.

Hannah Perry: There are ways in which a number of private schools navigate this whereby they supply tablets or other means and devices where there are certain controls in place so you can use them; you can have lessons and digitally play, but in a more regulated environment because they are school-supplied devices. But of course that requires investment in that sort of technology and provision. So the issue is when you have personal devices and what is available on them, and what risks that then creates.

The Chair: We are out of time, so thank you very much for taking that last question, and thank you for all your input today. I think this has been an incredibly valuable panel session for us, so thank you for your time.