



Communications and Digital Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Media literacy

Tuesday 29 April 2025

2.30 pm

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

Evidence Session No. 6

Heard in Public

Questions 86 – 100

Witnesses

I: Carolyn Bunting MBE, Co-Chief Executive Officer, Internet Matters; Jonathan Baggaley, Chief Executive Officer, PSHE Association; Claire Pollard, executive board member, Media Education Association.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witnesses

Carolyn Bunting, Jonathan Baggaley and Claire Pollard.

Q86 The Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to this meeting of the Communications and Digital Committee. My name is Baroness Barbara Keeley and I am the chair of the committee. We will be hearing from two sets of witnesses today as we explore ways to build children and young people's media literacy skills. Both sessions will be broadcast live and a transcript will be taken. Our witnesses will have the opportunity to make corrections to that transcript, where necessary. I would like to welcome our first panel of witnesses and thank them for joining us today. I start by asking you to introduce yourselves.

Carolyn Bunting: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for having me here today. I am co-CEO at Internet Matters. We are a not-for-profit organisation that is about encouraging parents, professionals, policymakers and industry to take more positive steps to keep children safe and well online. We do a lot of research with parents, and one of the things that we find from them is that the vast majority want media literacy to be seen as as important as English and maths in school. We also offer a growing selection of resources for schools, including our Digital Matters platform, which is an interactive learning platform that we use at the top end of primary schools. So I am happy to be here today.

Jonathan Baggaley: I am CEO of the PSHE Association, which is the national body for personal social health and economic education—which is a terrible mouthful but a wonderful thing. PSHE is the school subject where young people learn about health and well-being, relationships and sex, careers, financial capability—and, of course, being about life, it is also about how digital technologies mediate all aspects of our lives.

Claire Pollard: I am a member of the Media Education Association's executive committee. We are a subject association that represents almost 1,000 media and film educators at primary, secondary, further and higher education. I worked as a teacher of English and media studies for 16 years in inner London schools, and I am employed also at the English and Media Centre, which is a charity that provides training and resources for secondary school media and English teachers, and which supports them in promoting literacy in all forms. As part of my role there, I also run a secondary media PGCE course at Goldsmiths University within the initial teacher education department. So I work with trainee teachers on placements in lots of schools across London and surrounding boroughs. At the MEA and across all the organisations where I work, we believe that media literacy and media education is the right of every child and should be embedded in schools from early years onwards.

Q87 The Chair: I shall kick off the questions with trying to establish what the situation is at the moment. This first question is quite difficult to answer because I am not sure how much information exists. To what extent are schools delivering media literacy education at present?

Carolyn Bunting: That is a difficult question. Where we would start as Internet Matters is: what is the definition of media literacy and what exactly are we talking about? We know that to navigate the online world, children need various overlapping and intertwined skills. We have different definitions from Ofcom about what media literacy is, and we have a definition from DSIT, so when we talk about how we teach and evaluate media literacy and what resources we need for it, narrowing that down is an important first step.

The second thing I would say on whether it is being taught effectively is that we do not have much critical evaluation of how resources are used in schools. However, we know that children's experience of a broad range and basket of difficulties online, be that interpreting fake news and misinformation or really harmful things, remains stubbornly high in terms of young people. We are not seeing, through the research that we have conducted over 10 years now, any particular falls in terms of children's experience of online harms. As a parent myself, with children at two different schools, I know that it is almost a postcode lottery—not even a local area authority lottery. The way in which schools interpret what media literacy is and teach it is up to the school and how it defines that. So there is a lot of room for a more consistent framework about what media literacy is and some clearer evaluation of it.

The Chair: If you were to take a stab at to what extent it is taught, what figure would you put on that?

Carolyn Bunting: I think it is taught—all children have some element of media literacy taught to them. Certainly, they have the basics of online safety taught to them. But it is really variable, dependent on the school. We often find that when we talk to teachers, some media literacy is delivered by outside experts who come into the school, which some schools can afford and some cannot. It is done through ad hoc assemblies or in response to a safeguarding incident, as well as the places where it is in the curriculum. I do not think that I could put an exact figure on it because we do not really know what good looks like either at this stage.

Q88 **The Chair:** Jonathan and Claire, do you want to add to that? Obviously, we are interested how you think it varies according to school type and location. Perhaps you want to talk about any differences in ages, between academies and others, or anything else.

Jonathan Baggaley: To this definitional point, there are some things we can say about aspects of what now falls under the banner of media literacy. For example, the sorts of things that are taught within PSHE tend to be about how you navigate digital technologies safely and take advantage of their opportunities. However, that tends to be in terms of things such as relationships, mental health and careers. The Children's Commissioner did some research into PSHE and found that, of all the topics in PSHE, students were most likely to report learning about online safety—83% of them. They were also, interestingly, most likely to think it was boring, which is a real shame.

To this definitional point, historically, we had media literacy, which was about the ability to use, understand and create media information. We were talking about newspapers, television and understanding who owns platforms—those sorts of things. So it was not a straightforward but a relatively bounded thing. Then we had things like online safety—so, how do you navigate these technologies safely? However, what has happened over the last 20 years is that almost all aspects of our lives have become media. We have become information. So, the things that young people need to learn are both about interpreting media and information but also about living in a world in which media and information are a part of how we form relationships and tackle our mental health. Our intimate relationships might involve the sharing of digital images. Our health might involve tracking our steps or our glucose. Some of these things are what we might traditionally think of as media literacy, but really it is about how do we maximally benefit from digital technologies while minimising and managing the challenges? How do we do that in a way that keeps us healthy and safe and enables us to lead flourishing lives?

I realise that is broadening the definition but when the Government, for instance, produced a new media literacy strategy, they deliberately incorporated a much wider span of things than we might have traditionally thought about, which is why it is quite complicated to talk about now. We can say that schools are doing a lot of online safety work. There is certainly prevalence and some quality. The relationships, sex and health education standards have radically improved the extent to which PSHE is being delivered in schools, which covers a lot of things around things like nude image sharing or understanding pornography. So there have been improvements, but this wider piece about how we use and interpret media and information, which would speak to things like misinformation and disinformation, is probably much harder to get a handle on.

Claire Pollard: We would say that media literacy is the product of a good media education. A lot of good media education was going on in schools for a period of 25 years between 1990 and 2014, but it is marginalised now. A lot of the media literacy work that goes on in schools happens through assemblies and PSHE. It is a more protectionist approach—keeping yourself safe online—or a focus on news and fact-checking. The concerns that a lot of parents and people have around young people and media literacy are probably more to do with other aspects of their media consumption that need to be addressed.

A good media education would encourage a broader capacity to be curious and questioning about the media that students encounter and consume, and to have that capacity internally. A lot of online media students and young people consume in isolation on their phones. We want them to be able to have in their minds a critical framework for picking apart things that they might see and which they find alarming, disturbing or exciting.

I taught English and media studies for 16 years. Media studies is a much-misunderstood subject but it delivers the kind of media education

that we think young people need. Obviously, it is an option subject, so students do it only from key stage 4—in years 9 or 10, around the age of 13 or 14—which we would argue is too late. We think that there should be a media education that spans early years all the way through to the end of secondary school.

The media studies curriculum, after the last curriculum reform in 2017, has become horribly distorted, with an increased focus on just learning 'knowledge' about media texts. One of the things that a lot of people do not understand about media studies is that it is not really about the text; it is about the conceptual framework for approaching anything. It could be the *Times* front page or Taylor Swift's Instagram. That framework is there; I can give you some examples from it if you would like.

Prior to 2014, media education or media studies was part of the English curriculum and the English language GCSE exam. It was there from 1990 to 2014. In 2014, the subject content document for English stated that transient texts must not—that is the exact wording—be studied for English GCSE. At that point, if it is not there in the GCSE exam at key stage 4, it trickles out of the rest of the curriculum.

I work in and go into quite a lot of schools. In my role at the English and Media Centre, we have surveyed English teachers on this because, in the Online Media Literacy Strategy, it refers to English as being one of the places where media literacy and media education might be delivered, but our experience is that that is not really the case. There is great anxiety among English teachers about that aspect of learning to read, critique and create multimodal texts, which is now missing from the English GCSE.

We would say that there was a lot more media education and media literacy up until 2014. Arguably, we need it now more than ever. It is a constant source of frustration for media studies teachers that there are people who deride the subject and do not value media studies as a subject but who, on the other hand, are really concerned about media literacy and young people's ability to evaluate critically the media that they consume. That subject is there; it already exists, and it used to be there in English as well.

Q89 Lord Knight of Weymouth: Claire, pedagogically speaking, in your experience, is the creation of media the best way to engage young people and children with this issue, and then to get into the business models and data and all the other things that go around it?

Claire Pollard: Yes; the creation of media is an important aspect. I have children in primary school. I ask them whether their experience of understanding the internet and media is purely about staying safe online. Even in year 4, their response to that is, "What? The internet's amazing. I have a great time online, and I'm just being told that it is this kind of dangerous place".

In my child's school, they have a suite of iPads that they use only for doing online quizzes and stuff. We would like to see a lot more. It really

helps you to read a media text if you are used to creating media text. That could be short films, moving images or advertising—even branding or social media content. Even from primary school, young children encounter those things online and have some understanding of them. Creating stuff is a really good way of understanding the processes behind the stuff that they are consuming and who might have created it.

I am sure that you all know of the academic and cultural thinker Stuart Hall. We have a concept in media studies that comes from one of his essays, *Encoding/Decoding*: reception theory. It simply states that all media texts are encoded with meaning by their producers. It is something that we teach at key stage 4. Everyone comes to that and decodes that in different ways depending on, for example, their age or experience. As a model, that seems a valuable way of engaging young people with their media analysis, even from the early years.

Jonathan Baggaley: I want to build on that by saying that creation of content is also a way of teaching young people to navigate the internet safely, just as we do not teach young people to ride a bike safely: we teach them to ride a bike but, of course, you do it safely. You can build that sort of thing in without it young people seeing it as this protectionist thing: “Gosh, the internet’s a terrifying place”. We should be making sure that we are building on those kinds of pedagogical approaches in schools.

Q90 The Bishop of Leeds: We have had witnesses and written submissions that shed different perspectives on how media literacy ought to be taught or—perhaps this is better expressed—learned. Some of our international comparators suggest that it should be taught as a distinct subject, while others suggest that it should be embedded across the curriculum. With that in mind, can you address the question of whether there are any specific changes to the national curriculum that you think are necessary in relation to media literacy?

Carolyn Bunting: We would promote changes to the national curriculum. The teachers and school leaders we have spoken to feel very much that it should be not a separate subject but a cross-curriculum subject. We would like to see a framework created for media literacy, perhaps modelled on something like the national reading framework. We have had various examples. For example, there was the “Education for a Connected World” competency framework, which was done by key stage and which I know a number of schools have adopted. We would really like to see that.

It is fair to say that a lot of things are covered in the PSHE curriculum and some in the computing curriculum, but improvements could be made across different subject areas. For example, in STEM, more work could be done on how the designs of algorithms and the design of technology influence and shape what you see online. In RSHE, one of the things we have explored is more gender-based education, because some of the issues that people face online are quite gender specific. We have done

research with young people that suggests that they feel really uncomfortable being taught in mixed-group classes.

The final thing that we feel is really important, whether it is a curriculum change or not, is that we know that children with vulnerabilities—be they special education needs or mental health issues—experience sometimes the best of being online and sometimes the worst of being online. If we really want to address children's skill sets and capabilities to stay safe and to get the most out of being online, SEN children should perhaps have some sort of differentiated support in school when it comes to a broader definition of media literacy, particularly in terms of keeping safe.

- Q91 **The Bishop of Leeds:** Before we move on, I just put to you that one of our colleagues from Canada took the view that if media literacy is not embedded in a particular subject, no one takes responsibility for it. Therefore, its being taught as a particular subject ensures that it is somebody's problem. Could you just quickly respond to that?

Carolyn Bunting: I will quickly respond. It goes without saying that if you are going to embed it, you need to have the evaluation and assessment of it through Ofsted. One of our other recommendations is that Ofsted is given the responsibility to evaluate schools' teaching of media literacy as well.

Claire Pollard: Certainly, at secondary level there is a model for this. It is the responsibility of schools to track literacy and numeracy across the curriculum. That is the responsibility of a teacher of every single subject. You also have subject English and subject maths, which exist separately. I was at Goldsmiths yesterday with my trainees and we had a whole day on literacy and numeracy across the curriculum. I feel that media literacy could be part of that. The way that would work in a secondary school is that someone would have a paid responsibility to monitor and speak to heads of department across all the different subjects on how they are delivering media literacy through their curriculum. I do not know about all the subjects, but I can think of lots of ways in which that could be incorporated in science, geography, et cetera.

I think that it needs to be both: it needs to be something that is mapped across all subjects, in the way that literacy and numeracy are, but it also needs to be its own individual subject. Media studies, as I mentioned, is an option. Students do or do not pick it up at year 9 or year 10, but it should be part of the key stage 3 curriculum. There are subjects like drama or textiles that, when students start secondary school, they will do on a kind of carousel of subjects—that is usually how schools do it to make sure that they fit in all the subjects, so that students get a bit of a taster of all those subjects. There are examples of schools that have done that and that do it, but it really is only if they have a particularly strong media studies department in the school or if the senior leadership team has a particular interest in delivering media education or media literacy at key stage 3.

On specific changes that could be made, I know that this is not what we are here to talk about, but some changes were made to the GCSE media

studies and A-level curriculums in 2017 and those could be changed again—a few simple changes—to make sure that those curriculums better deliver media literacy outcomes. For example, prior to 2017 at GCSE and A-level, as a media studies teacher you could choose any media text for your students to study. You had your conceptual framework and you could bring in anything that was happening, anything that was pertinent or anything that one of your students brought to the table, saying, “How do we make sense of this?” You could then study it as part of your lessons. Now, media studies at GCSE and A-level are entirely set texts. Those texts were originally approved by the Department for Education. It has become much more a matter of learning knowledge and information about specific texts rather than applying that conceptual framework. It would be very easy to change that. We have stated that as the MEA and I have done so as well through my role at the English and Media Centre in the curriculum and assessment review. It will probably be four or five years before anyone looks at media studies, because it was the last subject to be reformed last time.

I will say this again: it should be part of the English curriculum. It is not now. It is not part of the exam and, if you know anything about schools, certainly the schools that I work in in inner London or schools where you have lots of students with low prior attainment, you will know that the focus is really on how you get the assessment results out of students at GCSE. If it is not on the GCSE, in many schools that means that students do not spend any time on it from key stage 3 to key stage 4.

We would really encourage the return of media studies or media education as part of the English GCSE language curriculum. It was there for 25 years: a piece of coursework was to analyse a moving image text and there was also an unseen element of the exam, which could be a non-fiction text from any mode of text—it was a radio transcript one year and it might have been a website. Students were asked to read and analyse the information—the visual media language elements as well as the written elements. That has been replaced in the English GCSE with a focus on pre-1914 non-fiction. That means that a lot of the key stage 3 curriculum is now helping students to understand the Victorian era and read Victorian texts, so that they are better able to encounter that unseen element of the GCSE exam.

Jonathan Baggaley: I sometimes feel when we are having discussions about media literacy—we have already mentioned the breadth of what we are discussing—that we are looking at it through the wrong end of the telescope. The sorts of changes that Claire has been talking about to get that media education—how do we understand text, how do we understand meaning and language?—sound like no-brainers to me. But then we ask: where do we put it? I do not know that we are grappling with the extent to which the exponential change of digital technologies is disrupting subjects full stop. So rather than asking how we place media literacy in these different subjects, we should perhaps look at the way in which technology changes the type of knowledge that we need in particular subjects, whether that is biology or geography or history, or

think about the sort of disruptive impact of that technology and the sorts of functional skills that young people need in those subjects to be able to thrive in a world in which so much of our lives and our careers are taking place with or through digital technologies.

In the context of PSHE, PSHE is about life. Digital technologies have of course massively altered the way in which we do our relationships and the way in which we think about mental health. There is a huge amount within PSHE that needs to be taught that is about digital technologies and media literacy. PSHE should not be the place for media literacy education, though.

Claire Pollard: You cannot do it all.

Jonathan Baggaley: Exactly. When we are thinking about teaching young people about their mental health, we need to accept and recognise that they may be forming relationships with large language models. What does that mean? What does that mean if they are concurrently being sold large language models as therapists? How do we grapple with that? These are real problems in the classroom right now.

I think you asked for specific changes. We currently have the relationships, sex and health education guidance under consultation following a draft released last year. There is some new stuff in there around generative AI—for instance, around deepfakes, which is a huge issue for children and young people. I think there should be greater emphasis in there on things like pornography, generative AI in relation to sex and relationships, and online misogyny. It is relatively easy to put a few bullet points in some statutory guidance, but it is much harder to support teachers to grapple with the realities of what that means in the classroom and how you address that.

The Bishop of Leeds: That has opened up a lot of questions, but we probably need to move on.

- Q92 **Lord Storey:** You have thrown so much at us that I am rather reeling from it all. You mention cross-curricular work. My experience is that some cross-curricular work is stunning, but often, because there is no department or individual to lead it, the quality depends on who was the last person to pick up the work. PSHE is an example of that. Unless you have qualified teachers committed to that subject, it often gets pushed to one side. The other thing that I would like you to comment on is the point—I cannot remember who made it—about the changes brought in by the previous Government. The curriculum was made to be more about learning facts than doing and we need to bring back some doing as much as learning.

Claire Pollard: I would like to comment on that. As I say, I have worked in schools since 2003 as a teacher and now as a PGCE course leader. One of the challenges that that sort of pedagogical approach of direct instruction and imparting powerful knowledge to young people has, in some schools, resulted in a shutting down of discourse. My trainee teachers report to me students who say, "If this is not in the exam, why

are we doing it?" We have young people who think that way. They have been told so often that they need to learn this stuff because they are working towards these exams that that sort of broader appreciation of why you might do something in school just for educational benefit is not there. You also have a lot of schools with very rigid and strict behaviour policies—policies around the sorts of language that students are allowed to use when giving a response in class. There are schools where you have to give your response in standard English and we do not all think in standard English. Sometimes when we need to bring out ideas, that is best done in non-standard English or through drawing or through creation. There has been a closing off of certain practices and approaches such as group work and project work that could be really useful in this space of delivering media education and improving critical thinking in schools.

Jonathan Baggaley: Let me pick up on that knowledge versus doing point. Certainly in PSHE we are trying to equip young people for the real world—for things outside the classroom. While there is a huge amount of knowledge that it is really important to have—for example, knowledge about the laws of the situation and what different drugs might do for it—if simply knowing stuff changed anything, there would not be any doctors who smoked or ate doughnuts.

I have sat in rooms discussing the list of STIs that young people should know. That may be important, but fundamentally, being able to negotiate condom-use and consent are really critical, and some of these are skills as well. That is slightly off the point on media literacy, but within this context, while we do not have to return to a skills-based curriculum at the expense of the reality that there are facts to be known—absolutely not—we have got to do better there.

Carolyn Bunting: The other reason, we would say, is that by key stage 4, a lot of young people are formulating a lot of their beliefs and ideologies, and so forth. It would be wrong to put media literacy into optional subjects. It needs to be in core subjects, because we have some 700,000 to 800,000 children taking maths, but we only have some 20,000-odd taking computing. I am not sure how many take media studies—

Claire Pollard: Some 34,000, but 808,000 take English language.

Carolyn Bunting: That is why it is good for it to be in English, woven within the core subject.

- Q93 **Lord Mitchell:** This is still a new subject, clearly. There must be great disparity between teachers and their ability to communicate this—I think that is a given. What training and ongoing support do these teachers need to be able to confidently deliver media literacy education? How could this be co-ordinated? I would like to link to that the continuing, rapid technological developments that are taking place. How do you incorporate that into teaching the teachers?

Carolyn Bunting: In our research with teachers, we know that 30% of teachers cite a lack of relevant training as a barrier to delivering effective media literacy. Over half say that there is at least an area that they feel least confident on.

As parents, I think we all sometimes feel that our kids know much far more about technology than we do. We would certainly want media literacy to be covered in initial teacher training, so that all teachers would be exposed to that, and for that to then continue through continuous professional development.

In particular, there is the potential need for teaching assistants to have some form of initial training. Teaching assistants often work with the most vulnerable children in schools and provide much of the pastoral care, so it is really important that teaching assistants are not overlooked in the desire to teach teachers and make them feel more confident about what they are teaching.

Jonathan Baggaley: I will leave the details on media education to Claire. From a PSHE perspective, when we are talking about teaching young people about their use of digital technologies, we are often talking about quite sensitive and personal things—such as nude image sharing or being exposed to pornography. These are things that young people might have had experiences of and have been traumatised by. There is some really basic good practice in PSHE, which applies whether we are talking about the digital world or the rest of the world—whatever that is.

As a basis, they need the creation of a safe learning environment and distancing techniques, such as not putting young people on the spot by saying, for example, “Who has ever sent a nude image?” I know that sounds absurd but we have seen that in schools. There is that basic grounding so that they can walk in confidently, whatever the topic is, and really start where young people are.

Critically, in PSHE as well—we might come to this in terms of assessment—you have got to get an understanding of young people’s baseline understanding of the issues that you are talking about. Unlike any other subject, such as French, you probably know what they know because you taught it to them. But with PSHE, they will be coming in having had all sorts of experiences and misconceptions, particularly from online, and they might have knowledge that is more advanced than yours. You have got to get that baseline in the first place and then use that to assess whether they have learned anything later. This is bread-and-butter PSHE, but it very much applies to media literacy.

In the context of specific digital issues, there is obviously going to be relevant subject knowledge about their own understanding of technological and societal change, and the things that young people need to know. What do we know from intervention science, psychology and health interventions about what is actually going to be effective in helping them navigate those situations? There is a range of things, but I think it can sound quite overwhelming, particularly in terms of keeping pace with exponential change. There is also a tremendous gap between

society and where technology seems to be going.

I think it is worth recognising that we should not underestimate how much we do know. We know quite a lot about the affordances and characteristics of digital technology—such as the fact that it is endlessly replicable and persists online, and things about anonymity. There is quite a lot that we now know. Although it is new, I first started working on children on the internet 20 years ago now. We made loads of mistakes, so we at least know quite a lot of the things that we should not be doing. We should not underestimate that.

At the same time, how do we keep teachers abreast of changes when, frankly, we are all struggling a little bit? It is tricky. At the moment, subject associations, such as our own, play quite a critical role there. We try to keep abreast of changes in the landscape: we are doing a lot around online misogyny, we are doing stuff around AI literacy with the Turing Institute and we are trying to support schools.

When I first started working in this area, there was Becta, the British Educational Communications Technology Agency, which played that role in being able to hold a lot of knowledge for schools. Obviously, there are questions about quangos and arm's-length bodies, but we do not have a place that logically pulls together technological change for teachers.

Lord Mitchell: The question is about training of the teachers and making sure that they are all brought up to the required level.

Jonathan Baggageley: I suppose what I am saying is there are a lot of things that we know, there are lots of things happening and there are lots of things that are not distributed through initial teacher education. We provide a lot of training that will get you to 80% of that. The bit that we do not have is the question of "How do we understand what it means to start forming relationships with chatbots and how do we turn that into teaching?" We are doing that as a small charity, but where are the academics coming together and saying, "We are horizon-scanning; this is technological change, this is what this might mean for schools and this is what it might mean for the curriculum"? Whether we need that is a question. We certainly had something akin to that in the past, and there seems to be a gap there.

Carolyn Bunting: It is pretty challenging. We did a PIT study on nude deepfakes, and we asked kids if they have been taught about nude deepfakes—only 6% of kids had. If you are a teacher and you have been taught nothing about how to teach about nude deepfakes, you can see why that is problematic. There needs to be some sort of focus on mandatory requirements for training on some of these issues.

Q94 **Lord Mitchell:** Miss Pollard, would you like to speak?

Claire Pollard: Sorry, I am dying to speak. I second what Jonathan said: it is important to draw on the expertise of subject associations, such as the Association for Citizenship Teaching, the Media Education Association and the English and Media Centre, because we have been working in training teachers and working with teachers in these areas for

a really long time. We have a real understanding of the role that media education has played in schools over the last 50 years. Most media teachers out there, certainly if they taught the version of media studies before the 2017 curriculum reform, would have a strong grounding in being able to have those kinds of difficult conversations that might arise.

Similarly, in media studies, as Jonathan described, you have students coming to your lessons who have this knowledge of the media landscape that you do not have. We might use the phrase “The pedagogy of the inexpert”. Popular culture almost belongs to the young people that we teach more than it belongs to the teachers. For years, media studies [teachers] have had to deal with this problem of growing out of touch and your students knowing more about the subject than you do. The way we would challenge that would be by saying that there is a conceptual framework that worked in media studies when there was only newspapers, television and radio and which still applies and functions and works very effectively in the age of social media and AI.

A couple of things from that would be, under media language: how the media represents the world and constructs versions of reality; the function and uses of stereotypes and the effect of ownership and control of media organisations. Those things are all there in the GCSE media studies framework and media studies teachers are trained to teach that framework. There are experts out there and teachers of that expertise out there, as subject associations.

Teacher training is obviously a key issue. The inclusion of media literacy in the core content framework would mean that every institution that delivered ITE would have a remit to talk to PGCE students about media literacy and media education.

I feel quite strongly that media studies should be brought back into English, but we have a generation of English teachers who have been trained to teach a version of English that does not include media studies. We have lots of English teachers who have been asked to teach media studies who come to the English and Media Centre for training, and we kind of support them in navigating that new world where you are perhaps not the expert on Shakespeare or the person who has read literature at university—you are not presenting as an expert. You are there as a guide with this conceptual framework to help students to understand media studies.

This ties in with what Jonathan said, that one concern or anxiety of teachers is about having those difficult conversations. There was a headline in the *Guardian* a couple of weeks ago about teachers’ concerns to do with issues around racism and misogyny. A lot of schools that I know are very nervous about teachers having those conversations with students; schools sometimes talk about having scripts for teachers to use when they talk about difficult issues such as racism and misogyny. So there is that baseline fear, if you are a teacher, that if you have those conversations you might go into territory that is difficult.

One of my colleagues at the English and Media Centre is a head of media, film and politics four days in the week. In his school, they are told not to mention Andrew Tate; they just do not discuss it—they shut it down. They are told sometimes to shut down conversations about race, as well as about Israel and Palestine. They are told, “Just don’t engage—that’s not appropriate for school, just shut it down”. That is not every school, but I can give you five or six personal examples of people I know who work in schools where they are told not to engage in those topics of conversation. There needs to be a coming together of heads of media and English, heads of sociology and safeguarding needs, to figure out how schools are going to navigate that so that teachers feel comfortable or protected, having those conversations.

- Q95 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Claire, on your experience around training teachers, if you were successful in persuading Becky Francis and the department to change the curriculum to do more on media literacy and media studies, as you have described, how long a lead-in time would we need to train the teachers sufficient for that to be a successful implementation?

Claire Pollard: I guess it depends where the funding is and who you are going to get to do it. The Media Education Association, probably the citizenship association and the EMC have the expertise, but we certainly do not have the finances, personnel or capacity to do it, so it would need to be properly funded. I train media studies teachers in nine months on the conceptual framework for media studies, and they go into schools and have a go at it. It would not be a huge task.

The last time when this happened, in the early 2000s, a colleague of mine at the English and Media Centre made a publication for the DfE, or rather a training pack, and went around local authorities training consultants there on media education and how that might be done across the curriculum, and how it might be done in English. Local authority consultants cascaded that down to schools in their area. We have a different system now with lots of academy chains, so it would be harder to get schools to buy into that kind of training. However, if it was mandatory, in the national curriculum and the English GCSE, and if media studies was a compulsory subject, I think people would find the time, inclination and money to do it.

- Q96 **The Bishop of Leeds:** You talked about teachers closing down discussion of certain things and you used the word “difficult” a number of times. Is it the complexity of the subjects, or is it fear of what might come if you do open up these discussions?

Claire Pollard: Both, I think. Possibly when any conversation veers into Israel and Palestine there might be a certain amount of discomfort for anyone, but as adults you have learned how to discuss, communicate and debate. You go in with a certain set of skills to be able to navigate those difficult conversations as a human being. Young people do not have that and I do not think that they are taught that in schools. There are also the concerns about outcomes and what you would have to do. I

was teaching in Tower Hamlets at the time of the Prevent strategy, just around the corner from the school from which Shamima Begum and her friends disappeared. There was an interesting moment in teaching in Tower Hamlets—I am still a governor at a school there—with regard to shutting down conversations or reporting students who tell you things rather than talking to them about it. That is why it is really important that safeguarding leads in schools were part of that conversation as well, so teachers knew what they *could* do, and that they would be supported if they navigated those difficult conversations with students.

Jonathan Baggaley: In relation to the previous point about how long things would take, although this is not related to training, the relationship, sex and health education statutory requirements came out in 2020. On things that can get better, a few months ago the Higher Education Policy Institute did a survey of students coming into higher education, and 47% of them felt prepared for relationships and sex. You might think “only” 47%, but in 2021 it was 27%. We cannot put that all down on the changes to relationships, sex and health education, but I would wager that a lot of it was to do with that. That came with very little training, but it was a lever that incentivised schools to access training to embed this in education. Things can change quite swiftly. On Claire’s point, if she can train a teacher in nine months, we could see really quite swift and incremental movement on that, like a snowball.

Claire Pollard: Also, at Goldsmiths University as part of the teacher education department, when the PSHE guidance came out, it reinvigorated us to make space for it in our teacher training curriculum. It is not in the CCF—but with an awareness that that was going to be a focus in schools and that things were changing in the PSHE curriculum in schools. We made sure that we cover that with our trainees, and we do a much better job since that change.

The Chair: I think we are straying a little bit into our next question.

Q97 **Lord McNally:** Listening to the evidence, I think that we are really in the foothills of trying to deal with this. The challenges that have faced Government and public bodies have changed out of all recognition, with problems that were probably never thought of. I sat on the 2003 Puttnam committee, and we actually put in a request that Ofcom makes a priority of media literacy—but looking back I am not sure that we had any idea what we were asking it to do. That was safe, because it never did anything for 10 years anyway.

In trying to develop this, how much do you run into problems of strongly held views of religion? Are pupils at Eton taught media literacy better than they are in the public sector?

Claire Pollard: I said this in response to Baroness Keeley’s first question, on the extent to which it differs in different schools. At the moment, a lot of media literacy initiatives require either a teacher to follow it in their own time or to buy in resources or guest speakers, because it is not part of the curriculum. Obviously, if your school is

better funded, you can buy that support in more easily. I do not know whether they do it at Eton—I have never been.

Q98 **Lord McNally:** What types of assessment, if any, are the most appropriate for media literacy?

Carolyn Bunting: From our point of view, schools have a lot of competing priorities. And at the end of the day, they are going to focus predominantly on things that are assessed. If media literacy is not assessed, there is a risk that you then get differentiated learning across young people. Some schools will do it well; some schools will not do it well. We would really like to see, as I mentioned before, Ofsted given some direction in terms of assessing media literacy. I think that necessitates DfE coming up with some sort of framework for assessment. And therein lies a challenge, because the responsibility for media literacy sits across many different government departments. DfE deals with education, but DSIT has experts on media literacy, for want of a better word. Ofcom has responsibilities about media literacy as well.¹ Interestingly, Ofcom's responsibilities do not go anywhere near children in education, so it has focused on smaller projects that support vulnerable children and vulnerable adults outside school. It is the same with DSIT. It has not done things in education when it has been trying to test its media literacy strategy. It is very much done outside the school environment.

Therefore, there needs to be a bringing together of government departments and a single view of what media literacy should look like within education. We recognise that there are 13 bits of guidance that reference some form of media literacy if you take the broad definition. Only three of those are statutory. So for schools it is really hard to work out how they do this well.

Jonathan Baggaley: On that point of it only being taken seriously if it is assessed, it is quite clear that that happens. At the same time, I would be careful about the kinds of assessment that we are calling for. Only talking about PSHE, obviously, a lot of the media literacy things that we are talking about are personal, sensitive things about relationships or mental health. We would not want to see that delivered through a sort of a GCSE. The joke we always make is: would you marry someone who failed their GCSE in consent? No, that is not really the right way of measuring whether someone is developing the skills, knowledge and attributes that we want them to develop through PSHE.

However, of course, it has to be assessed because, otherwise, how do you know if anyone is learning anything? It is a basic point that teachers should be assessing the lessons that they are delivering. One of the techniques we used, which I referenced earlier, is sort of ipsative assessment, where you get a baseline understanding of where young people are at in terms of a subject. Then, at the end of the lesson, you

¹ Amended by witness: "DfE deals with education, but DSIT are the experts on media literacy, for want of a better word, and Ofcom have responsibilities about media literacy as well."

will get them to perhaps return to that assessment and correct things or fill it in further. There are lots of different techniques for doing that. So you build up this assessment of individual pupils' progress over time so that you know that learning is happening. The form of assessment that is most appropriate is going to depend on the subject that it is being delivered through. From a PSHE perspective, those are the sorts of methods that we would want to see.

Claire Pollard: Obviously, measuring effectiveness over time is important but I would urge anyone who has the capacity to influence things that we need to start doing it first, because these conversations around putting media literacy in schools have been going on for years. We might not get it right initially but we really need to start. I listened to the evidence given by the chap from Finland and they have been doing it since 2013 in all sorts of ways. Here we are in 2025, and we are still trying to figure out the best way to do it.

Having said that, I would build on what Jonathan said. You have to find appropriate ways in which to assess difficult skills. One way might be pupil portfolios of work, analysis or creative project work—getting students to make things that will give you a sense of their understanding of how things are made. Actually, Bournemouth University developed a theory of change. It is a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of media literacy initiatives. It was funded by DCMS when media literacy was under its remit as part of the online media literacy strategy. I know of teaching colleagues who have used that theory of change framework to assess how far their work in schools and GCSE media studies courses are delivering media literacy outcomes. That framework works well and could be used much more widely.

Obviously, if it was part of the national curriculum at primary and secondary—I know that Ofsted has its problems—schools would know that when Ofsted comes in it would be looking to see where media literacy or media education sits in their curriculum offer. It is examined in a subject like GCSE and A-level media studies; that would be assessed through the normal examination channels—although one of the reforms of 2017 stripped back quite a lot of the creative production work, and not just the kind of production work in media studies but also the evaluation element of that. So, prior to 2017, you researched and planned something, you made something, and then you had to critically reflect on the thing that you had made and your decisions, and how it might work. Whereas now pupils just make and submit the thing, and it only counts for 30% of their course.

Increased production work at media studies GCSE would be one way. If media studies was part of the English language exam, it would be assessing 800,000 16-year olds every year through the formal assessment structures that we already have. However, I probably should add that that would mean stripping something out of the English language exam, possibly the pre-1914 non-fiction element, and replacing it with a kind of investigation into multimodal texts.

Q99 **Lord McNally:** Around this table, there are a lot of people who have had experience of government and I suspect that most of them would say, unless you have somebody to take responsibility, any campaign will be an orphan. It seems that a lot of what you have said is that the schools have got to be that body. Should they be held to account for the delivery in this area, and if so, how?

Claire Pollard: Yes, it should be schools' responsibility to deliver media education. There are a lot of issues with accountability measures, certainly in secondary education, and how that slightly distorts the way in which things are enacted in schools. I slightly tense up when you say, "Should teachers be held to account?", because teachers are held to account in all sorts of ways, for all sorts of things that maybe stifle the way in which education might be delivered.

To come to your point on if no one is in charge, if it falls under specific subjects like English and obviously media studies, you have a head of department in school who is responsible. You have a line manager who monitors that head of department and ultimately a head teacher. So there are structures there to hold heads of department to account. If you have a cross-media education or cross-media literacy strategy across all subjects, that will be one person's role and who would be accountable. If Ofsted were to come in and inspect your school and ask questions about media literacy, that person would have to say, "This is what we are doing. This is how I know it is being carried out across all these subjects. This is what they are doing in geography, this is what they are doing in history, et cetera".

Q100 **The Chair:** We are into our last couple of moments now. Can other panel members give us a quick assessment on that question?

Jonathan Baggaley: This is an emergency. From the perspective of no one being responsible, the Government have to be responsible and schools contribute to this. Schools should certainly be held accountable in the mechanisms and in the ways in which schools are held accountable already, but they are contributing to something. The countries that do this really well have long taken this as a national security issue. Should schools be held accountable for national security? They should be contributing to societal well-being and functioning and the critical functioning of democracy. Of course they should be, but they should not be solely accountable for that.

As a result, we need mechanisms for looking at this across society. We do not have a singular measure of media literacy skills but we live in an age in which, thanks to the surveillance nature of the technologies that we use, we are constantly generating information about the media literacy of the population by their daily use of technologies to do absolutely everything in our lives. Of course, that data sits with technology platforms but there are increasing ways of researching that through things like data donation, where you can donate your YouTube history to researchers and then look back over 10 years and look at the way in which your YouTube history has changed. If you do that at a

population level, you can start to see things about media literacy. I think we are in the foothills, but we have quite a lot of paths to get to the top and to scramble up quickly. That responsibility has to be taken by the Government and seen as a national emergency, for part of which schools play a critical role, but certainly not the only part.

Carolyn Bunting: I am also struck that we are having this conversation about media literacy in schools when, across the country, parents are having conversations about banning smartphones, banning social media and preventing children from getting on that technology in the first place. Yes, I agree that schools should very much have a responsibility in this space, but it is so much bigger than that in terms of tech companies, effective regulation and the role that parents have to play. It is a massive issue and one that we need to address now.

The Chair: Thank you. That is the whole purpose of our looking at this in our inquiry, and you have really helped us look at how it is currently incorporated in the curriculum. We thought that questions around that and how it could be improved were difficult, because it is messy, is it not? But we have some really good content there.

Claire, you said that you had some examples of things. If there are things you want to send us later, any further thoughts about the curriculum or examples that you mentioned, we would be really grateful for them. With that, I will bring the session to a close. Thank you very much.