

Communications and Digital Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Media literacy

Tuesday 13 May 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 Holmes of Richmond; Lord Knight of Weymouth; The Lord Bishop of Leeds; Lord McNally; Lord Mitchell; Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge; Lord Storey; Baroness Wheatcroft.

Evidence Session No. 9

Heard in Public

Questions 163 - 177

Witnesses

[I](#): Frances Yeoman, Head of Journalism, Liverpool John Moores University; Elli Narewska, Head of News and Media Literacy, The Guardian Foundation; Jonathan Heawood, Executive Director, Public Interest News Foundation.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witnesses

Frances Yeoman, Elli Narewska and Jonathan Heawood.

Q163 The Chair: Good afternoon. Welcome to this meeting of the Communications and Digital Committee. My name is Baroness Barbara Keeley and I chair the committee. Today, we are continuing our inquiry into media literacy by hearing about the role that the news industry plays in helping individuals develop their media literacy skills. 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.

I very much thank our witnesses for coming and joining us today. Can I start by asking you to introduce yourselves, starting on my left?

Frances Yeoman: Hi, everybody. Thank you for having me. I am the head of journalism at Liverpool John Moores University. In a former life, I was a reporter and news editor on various national newspaper titles. I research news and media literacy; of late, I have been doing a bit of work around digital inclusion as well. I was a member of the DCMS then DSIT Media Literacy Taskforce Steering Board. I am now a member of Ofcom's Making Sense of Media Advisory Panel and a trustee of the Media and Information Literacy Alliance—lots of acronyms for you. I should add that I have co-authored two reports that were funded or co-funded by Ofcom.

Jonathan Heawood: Hello, everyone. I run a charity called the Public Interest News Foundation. We have been around for about five years. We are the first charity in the UK that exists to promote what we call public interest news. We do a blend of fundraising and capacity building on behalf of the high-quality independent media in the UK. We conduct research. For example, we recently published the first fully comprehensive local news map of the UK that shows where there is and is not local news provision, showing that about 5 million people in the UK now live in news deserts. Where relevant, we are very happy to come and talk to people like you about what we think policy interventions might look like to support more sustainable, diverse media.

Elli Narewska: I am the head of news and media literacy at The Guardian Foundation, which is the global charity of Guardian News & Media. We exist to promote press freedom and access to liberal journalism. Our mission is to equip people with the skills, tools and support to navigate the complex information landscape; and to ensure that journalism remains a force for truth. Our work focuses on building a news and media-literate generation, working mainly with children aged seven to 18. It is also about supporting independent media in challenging environments and championing diverse voices and perspectives in the media. We have two long-standing news and media literacy programmes: NewsWise and Behind the Headlines. These provide online resources and teacher training, as well as workshops and opportunities to interact with journalists and media professionals.

Q164 **The Chair:** We need to start from a definition of media literacy and the key skills that are required for someone to be media literate. Perhaps we could also draw into that whether it is helpful for that to be a broad umbrella term.

Frances Yeoman: I know that the committee has heard multiple definitions of media literacy and that it is a long-standing, slightly knotty conversation, certainly in academic circles. At the level that they make much difference in the real world, all of those definitions tend to coalesce around Ofcom's one-sentence definition of media literacy: "The ability to use, understand and create media and communications across multiple formats and services".

In practice, let me say a few things about what that means, at least in the UK policy context. The first is that media literacy has certainly come to encompass digital inclusion, online safety, access skills and things like that. That is fine as long as everybody is clear what they are talking about in a given context and what they are trying to achieve. Often, it slightly masks the amount of work that is—or, indeed, is not—happening at the more critical thinking, creational empowering end of things. It is worth noting that we have switched, in the language of government, from a media literacy strategy that encompassed digital inclusion to a digital skills and digital inclusion strategy that will ostensibly capture media literacy, as far as we know. There has been a shift in terminology there in government.

The second thing that media literacy often means in these kinds of conversations is a protectionist conception of media literacy. It is about avoiding harms quite a lot of the time. The third thing is that it has come to mean, in these kinds of conversations at least, online. Sometimes that is explicit—the 2021 DCMS strategy was an online media literacy strategy—but, sometimes, that prefix is missing yet that is ultimately what we are talking about. There is not often, in my experience at least, very much discussion of traditional forms of media—offline, for want of a better word. I think that we are slightly in danger of neglecting the millions of people who still use newspapers, magazines, linear TV and broadcasts by TV radio. They have media literacy needs around those things but will also have different ones as they inevitably transition to online over time as those things become in shorter supply.

You asked about how helpful it is. I am not sure that there is a viable alternative that is meaningful. There are certainly advantages to media literacy being broad in that it indicates that all of those things are pieces of the same puzzle. It is not much use being digitally included if you do not know what to do once you get there and you cannot keep yourself safe and think critically. Similarly, it is no good having critical thinking skills if you do not have access to a device or to data.

The downside of that is that it is so complex. Ofcom's media literacy outcomes bank has 24 outcomes in it that, not unreasonably, allow particular projects or people to focus on the part of media literacy that is most important to them, or perhaps where the metrics are most favourable. If we use this umbrella term, it is important that people in

conversations like this—and when people are designing education curricula and things like that—are really clear about what they mean by media literacy, what is in and out of scope for a particular project and what success would look like, so that we are not implicitly suggesting that there is more work being done to cover all of these different outcomes than there is.

Secondly, when we are dealing with end-users, it is moot what term we use because I do not think that any of this language is very meaningful to most ordinary citizens, whether it is media literacy, digital inclusion or anything else. It is important that we talk to our audiences and to society about tangible skills, benefits and things that will be meaningful to them and have them engage.

The Chair: Thank you; that is helpful. Elli or Jonathan, do you want to add to that?

Jonathan Heawood: I endorse all of that. I do not think that there is any need to challenge Ofcom's simple one-line overview.

I would just develop a bit that point about the intended outcome being what really matters. I worry a little that, if the big umbrella of media literacy starts to include things that are really media marketing, there is a real risk that you dilute the impact and the credibility of the media literacy work. If it is a news organisation whose intended outcome is that the public should buy its product, should trust it, should take out a subscription and so on, and it does that under the heading of media literacy, I worry that that compromises the integrity of media literacy proper, which I would see as something more pedagogical that is ultimately about a citizen making, as Fran said, a properly informed decision.

Something else that I can happily go into later is that there is also a sweet spot, which is probably just about within media literacy or on the edge of it. It is not marketing. It is where local media organisations genuinely go out into their local communities not to sell their wares or to educate the public on how great they are but to have a genuine conversation: "What are your needs? What do you need us to cover? What stories are not being told? Whose voices are not being heard?" They develop their product, their news offering, in response to that. That seems to me a different activity again, which we might call media engagement.

As I say, that possibly sits under the broad umbrella or possibly sits outside, but I think that the intended outcome is slightly different. If the intended outcome is simply that the public are properly informed and empowered to make choices, their choice might be none of the above—"I will not engage with any of this media; I do not like any of it now that I am fully informed". To me, that seems a legitimate outcome of media literacy proper, but it might not be the intended outcome of media marketing or media engagement.

Elli Narewska: I agree with everything that people have said already. I also came with Ofcom's very broad definition, which, by its broadness, is

quite helpful because it helps to encompass the big, broad umbrella that it represents.

To expand on that, and to add to what Frances said about the element of creating media and communications being part of that definition but often being left out or forgotten, that is essential to media literacy. You have to be able to do it to understand it. To expand a little, it is about critically engaging with media and having the skills and confidence both to challenge information when you encounter it and to act on it responsibly. Those are the sorts of skills that we look to develop in the participants in our programmes.

We run news literacy programmes specifically. When it comes to that, we look at three core strands to provide a framework for those skills, starting with understanding news and media: what is it; where does it come from; how is it put together; why does it exist; and why is it important for society that you have access to reliable information? Then it is about critically navigating news: once you understand where it has come from, how do you look for whether it is reliable, truthful or biased? Does it represent people accurately and fairly, and what are the consequences if that is not the case? Finally, it is about pulling that all together by doing it yourself, in reporting news or creating media, because you develop greater understanding when you are able to do it yourself; you are also better able to deconstruct things when you can put them together yourself. That is how we help it make sense to the people we work with in our programmes.

When it comes to the helpfulness of the broad term of media literacy, to add to what has already been said, because it is so broad, it makes it flexible enough to encompass new media and new technologies as the media landscape evolves. That is a benefit to it, so that is helpful. Also, because it is so broad, it means that there has been more focus on areas that have not previously been prioritised. People now talk about news literacy, for example, on this panel as part of this committee when it might not have been so previously. There are clear overlapping skills between news literacy, digital literacy, critical literacy and AI literacy. All of those things are related and interdependent, so it is good that there is this umbrella term that brings them all together.

The biggest concern about it is related to what Fran said—that there is a danger that things get conflated. I have been in lots of meetings and panels where I have had to say that online safety is not the same thing as media literacy. Much as it is extremely important, it is not the same thing. When those two things get conflated, there is a danger that schools, for example, because they are doing very important online safety lessons, think that they have done media literacy but they have not.

Q165 The Chair: We met a group of young people last week. It was clear that that is what they thought as well—that, basically, just saying, “This is social media and it is terrible”, is not really media literacy.

I will come back to Fran. In evidence to us, you repeated the points that

the media literacy landscape is characterised by fragmentation and short-term funding; and that it lacks a clear and statutory place in the school curriculum. Can you describe to us what the consequences would be of not taking better steps to improve UK citizens' media literacy skills?

Frances Yeoman: Sure. Again, thinking about the broad range of what media literacy means, at the digital inclusion end, you are talking about access to public services. More and more government services are online, and you have no choice if you want to be an engaged member of society but to have digital skills. Then it is all the way through to the more critical thinking, civic engagement-type skills; there is evidence that news literacy and critical thinking skills improve civic engagement.

To your question, Chair, one of the problems is that it is quite hard to quantify what the consequences would be at the critical thinking, news literacy end of things. We have some data on digital inclusion. The Good Things Foundation has an excellent statistic that it has calculated: £9.48 in returns for every £1 invested in giving people digital skills. I do not think that we necessarily have the same sort of measure for the consequences of people not having critical thinking, news literacy-type skills in such tangible terms. Reductive though they might be, they can be quite useful in focusing minds. Sometimes, there is a tendency for things to slip towards doing digital inclusion and online safety. That is of course really important but the metrics there are so much more tangible—amount of money lost in scams, number of devices given out and amount of free data handed out—that there is a temptation to focus on areas where you can give a concrete, "This is what we have done". Therefore, sometimes, the news literacy and critical thinking stuff goes by the wayside a bit.

Q166 **Lord Storey:** I am really interested in what Jonathan said about some people just not wanting to engage. Fran also made the point that you increasingly need digital literacy to access services. Presumably, society has a responsibility in both of those situations. For the people who cannot access public services because they are all online, we need ways of giving them the skills to do so, if they want it—it is mainly elderly people, of course—or we have to recognise that, if they do not want anything to do with it, we, as a society, still have to provide for those people. It came home to me in Liverpool, where somebody applied for a disabled badge and it was all online. This person did not have the skills to do that and it was a nightmare. Do you have any reflections on that, or is that something that we perhaps should not be considering at the moment?

Jonathan Heawood: There are two dimensions to that. One dimension that I am completely unqualified to talk about is the fact that public services are increasingly delivered digitally and what that means for the 5% or 10% of the population who are not regularly online. I agree that that is an enormous problem; I do not have the solution.

On engagement with the media, I feel that what we are looking for is a virtuous cycle where people want to engage with the media because the

media meets a real need for them and is worth engaging with, as both trusted and trustworthy. I know that Lord McNally and others on this committee have done lots of work over the years on issues of parts of the media that have not demonstrated their trustworthiness. This is my concern about media literacy being treated as a silver bullet to wider questions about media sustainability.

As I said, it is perfectly imaginable that people would be fully media literate and switch everything off. That is not the desired outcome. The desired outcome is that they do not switch everything off: they discriminate but they go to news sources in which they can rightfully place trust because those news sources are worth trusting. Obviously, at the moment, there are news sources out there that are worth trusting, but we have to accept that a growing proportion of the British population does not think that they are trustworthy. Simply telling them to trust them will not get us very far if they can point to evidence of lack of trustworthiness.

The Chair: There might be a point about trustworthiness in the question that is coming from Baroness Fleet now.

Q167 **Baroness Fleet:** Yes; it is really about trust. I am a former journalist, as you may know, so I am particularly interested in this. As we know, AI can now control how journalism is used. I want to ask you about digital dumping, which is the outcome of aggregated material. Do you think that you have a role, or should have a role, in influencing how your material is used? Should there be legislation? What is your view about digital dumping and the way in which it can lead to inaccuracy and to using well-researched material alongside misinformation or disinformation?

Jonathan Heawood: I just want to bounce that back. I am not sure that I am familiar with the term "digital dumping".

Baroness Fleet: I will read a reference that was given to us in a submission from the *Financial Times*. It describes it as: "The practice when AI developers flood the market for news and information with outputs that are created using gen AI models in response to natural language user prompts. Digital dumping is flooding the market for news and information with outputs that purport to be news but are in fact low-quality simulacrums of the journalism that they seek to replace". It is a particular view that was put forward.

The Chair: Fran, can you start because, obviously, you are also a journalist?

Frances Yeoman: I am not sure whether I can still self-define as a journalist; I do not get round to much of it these days, but I do a bit.

AI is clearly the next big media literacy challenge. It is also a good reason why media literacy cannot be left to news organisations, because they have a huge amount else on their plate. Indeed, people finding journalism of the type that supports their media literacy will become increasingly challenging, first, because of things like digital dumping,

and, secondly, because—not unreasonably—more and more news sites are going behind paywalls, apart from the PSBs. This means that there is a kind of paradox here in that that business model probably creates the conditions that are more favourable to doing the sort of journalism that supports media literacy. You have an engaged audience and more time for explainers, context and fact-checking—all of the things that we want—yet, at the same time, that information is less visible in the free information ecosystem and is probably less likely to reach the people who arguably need it most.

Some figures came out just this morning about the impact of Google AI on click-throughs to the *Daily Mail*. Whatever you think about the *Daily Mail*, there is a massive drop-off in people clicking through to *Daily Mail* content because of where it appears in Google overviews. That is yet another challenge for an industry that, as you will all know from your professional experience and your future of news report, has enormous financial challenges facing it at the moment. The idea that it has the capacity to lead on media literacy as well as everything else is a challenge.

I am not sure if that answers your question, Baroness Fleet, but AI will clearly be an important part of information literacy going forward, as well as another barrier between quality journalism and its potential audiences.

Elli Narewska: To bring it back to media literacy, people having the skills to identify whether the content they are engaging with is reliable or synthetic media, or having the AI literacy skills to give accurate prompts to chatbots so that they get good-quality results at the end, all forms part of media literacy.

The other thing to remember is that people do not tend now to go directly to news sites to get their information. The places where they are encountering information is a wide and varied ecosystem but they are not necessarily seeking it out deliberately; it is coming to them. That is really important to consider when you are thinking about media literacy skills in relation to the information that people are encountering. People need to be equipped with the skills to think critically: “Where has this come from? Is this a reliable source? Can I find this information and corroborate it elsewhere?” They need to be doing that as a matter of course and thinking, “This is information that I want to make sure I know is correct”, and they need have the skills to do that. That comes back to critical literacy skills: whether that is because it is synthetic media or because it is unreliable, more traditional media, the core skills are the same.

Jonathan Heawood: I will quickly add this: on the literacy side of it, we work with a network of more than 100 smaller independent news providers that are constantly grappling with this. Lots of them are very excited about AI; they are using it to research, write and disseminate stories, and they want to do the right thing and be transparent about that. At the moment, crudely slapping a label on the end saying, “This story was generated with the assistance of AI”, does not tell you very

much because that could mean that every word in it was written in response to a prompt or simply that the prompt, the AI, gave you some research leads that you then used to conduct real-world interviews. I think that we might need to find some slightly better taxonomy to describe that so that the audience can understand, “Am I talking to a machine, 50% machine or 10% machine?”.

On the sustainability side, on the legislation point, yes, we need new legislation. The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act may give news providers a slightly greater chance of negotiating with developers for remuneration but, as the Act is currently drafted, only the very biggest tech firms in the world will be caught. The small to medium-sized developers get away scot-free and could flood the zone without any duty.

Baroness Fleet: Out of interest, have you had a chance yet to read what Baroness Kidron said in the House of Lords yesterday in connection with the use of data? No, you have not; I just wondered if you had a view about that.

Jonathan Heawood: We shall immediately we leave this room.

Baroness Fleet: It all links into the same story. Thank you very much for dealing with the point about legislation.

Q168 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** I start by asking my question to Fran. Do you think that the national media are doing enough to promote media literacy? You have talked about trust. Do you think that the public service media should be doing more because they are more trusted? Then, I come on to Jonathan, who has already talked about the trustworthiness of the media. You said that a growing proportion of the population do not think the media are trustworthy. If that is the case, what can be done about it? How can we rebuild that trust? Where should they go?

Frances Yeoman: I will take the point about the PSBs first. The BBC is a case apart in this space in that it has its whole BBC education remit. It is doing quite a lot and it has that particular place. You have BBC Bitesize, Other Side of the Story and the journalism that it is doing about these issues, with Marianna Spring, documentaries about fakes—all that kind of thing. I think that the BBC is doing a fair bit.

On the other PSBs, I point you towards ITV’s response to Ofcom’s consultation on its media literacy strategy, if you have not seen that already. In essence, it says, “We are investing millions of pounds in accurate journalism and we are facing enormous headwinds as an industry. It is not for us to lead on dealing with the harms created by global tech companies with very profitable business models, thank you very much”. There is a certain amount of push-back from some broadcasters on the idea that they should be expected to deal with this on top of everything else that they have on their plates at the moment. That is their position.

To the second part of your question, on the news media more generally, there are three broad ways in which the news media can support media literacy skills. The first is direct involvement with education; the second is by doing their journalism in certain ways; and the third is about advocacy and amplification of the work of others. Education is probably the one that gets the most attention; some of these initiatives are talked about quite a lot. I make no comment about their quality but it is fair to say that the collective, explicit educational contributions of the industry are quite small compared to the scale of the population-level challenge that we are dealing with. A number of the mainly national print and digital outlets have specific branded news literacy projects: the *Sunday Times*, the *Times* and the *Telegraph*. Others deliver them through linked educational foundations like NewsWise from The Guardian Foundation, or the *Economist*, and Thomson Reuters, but I do not think anybody involved in them would dispute the idea that these are on a small scale relative to the numbers of people who need support or the complexity of the education that needs to be delivered.

Then you get to actually doing journalism that supports media literacy. There is a range of ways in which journalists are doing that with fact-checking initiatives and transparency efforts. Jonathan knows more about this than I do, but there is also co-creational community journalism in the independent sector, as well as publishing accurate information that counters mis and dis. It was interesting when, last week, the Chief Inspector of Constabulary published their report into the aftermath of Southport, saying that the police need to be more open with the mainstream media so that they can do their job in countering mis and dis by reporting what is going on. We have had an age of blurring of the lines—"Is there any distinction? What is a journalist? Everybody can do this now"—and we may be slightly coming back to a point where some public bodies and others are starting to say, "Actually, there is a distinction". You can ask whether it is all perfect—such as whether the media do everything right and whether they could do better; that is an important conversation—but there is a distinction between professional journalists and their role in media literacy by doing journalism as opposed to everybody else.

The final one, because I know I have waffled on a lot, is advocacy and amplification. The committee heard from Cwmpas in Wales about how it really wanted to work with mainstream media to reach more people. Media by definition have the ability to reach lots of people; maybe more could be done there. Jonathan has spoken about marketing. I wonder whether, rather than these individual projects, or maybe in addition to the individual projects, which are valuable—educators say that they like them—the news media collectively could be a bit more co-ordinated about advocating for media literacy, identifying priorities and supporting awareness raising.

You see that done more in an international context; we hear a lot about Finland, but there are others. They have a press week or journalism days and things like that. Schools in this country have Safer Internet Day, which, as we have discussed, is about scams and online safety, but is

there the capacity to do something collaboratively that is a bit more positive around media literacy?

Viscount Colville of Culross: Jonathan, can you respond to those concerns about trust in the media? How on earth can it deliver any kind of media literacy when there is that lack of trust in so much of the media?

Jonathan Heawood: I was thinking about that as Fran was speaking and thinking that we may have to reconcile ourselves to a future where never again will we be able to say that everybody trusts one particular outlet. Maybe we just have to accept that we will not be able to do so. Lord Reith may turn in his grave, but the BBC may not be able to be a unified source of trust to the whole population. We should strive to ensure that everybody at least trusts some media source that is trustworthy. It is no good if everyone goes into rabbit holes or worlds of their own making and own suiting, but it may be about thinking about a slightly richer, broader ecosystem in which there are sufficient trustworthy sources so that everyone finds a media home somewhere without going into alternative reality.

I suppose that that then comes down to accountability. I would distinguish between hard and soft forms of accountability. If you think of hard as good, old-fashioned regulation, we know that broadcasters are still in general trusted more than non-broadcast forms of journalism—print and digital. What distinguishes broadcasters in this country? Well, they come under Ofcom. Whether people are consciously aware of it or not, there is some cultural awareness that broadcasters are held to a certain standard, so one driver of trust is regulatory accountability.

The other kind of media that is still well trusted is local. It may or may not be regulated in the institutional sense but it has the distinguishing feature that people can see it, touch it, feel it and connect with it. If a local journalist says that the sky is green but you look up and see that the sky is blue, you hold them accountable right there and right then. You live in a shared reality.

There are hard and soft forms of accountability. The soft forms, as Fran said, flow from initiatives that we see in the US, the UK and parts of Europe, which are increasingly about in-person journalism—really maxing out on that sense of, “I see you. I connect with you. We’re human beings. We live in this place together”. Local news outlets are developing what they call news cafés. There is literally a café, with the journalist or the editor, and you can go in and chat about what is on your mind. The next day, you see a story about it.

- Q169 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** It is all slightly sort of dreamland—never-never land. We know perfectly well that local media is under enormous pressure. It has cut its staff by three-quarters. Newspapers are closing all over the place and you raised news deserts. How on earth are we expecting local media, when they have so few resources, to be able to have an extra burden? The idea of an editor sitting in a news café when there is only him and probably some poor intern running the local office

is for the birds.

Jonathan Heawood: I would turn that around and say that it is the only way out of the crisis and the hole that some of those companies have dug themselves into. The more they have disengaged from those communities—if you look at the correlation between the decline in fortunes of some of the big local media companies of the past, they like to pin it on the internet and the rise of social media, but it does not correlate precisely with the rise of social media. It correlates with the conglomeration of the industry and the removal of local newsrooms from local high streets. I think that the solution is literally to say to the editor, “Get out: get down to the café, talk to people and show you are trustworthy. You will get some great stories. The stories will connect better with the audience. People will be more inclined to pay for what you offer and to understand that you are doing it because you are well intentioned, not because you are trying to suck advertising revenue out of us”.

Q170 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Elli, can you build on your idea that people should create news for themselves? Is that a parish magazine they are doing? How do people create news for themselves? Maybe they are doing that already on social media.

Elli Narewska: Absolutely—maybe that is the platform they are using—but it is about the sense that there are stories in my community that are no longer being told by local news outlets but should be heard. There is the sense that there is some truth that needs to be told here and we need to find a way to tell it. I run educational programmes, so I am not in the business of setting up hyper-local news organisations, but communities may be.

To go to your point about the sense of trust in news, when we do consultations with communities, families, children and young people, we often encounter the sense that the news does not represent them; that journalists are nothing like them; and that the only time they hear about their community on the news is when a crime has been committed, so it does not represent their community. They do not feel a connection to it, but maybe there are stories that should be being told about their community that do not exist. In our programmes, we encourage children, in a very structured way working with their teachers in the classroom, to report their own news stories about their own lives and communities. It is building the sense of, “These are things that people should know about in our community. They’re not for an international audience, but people in our community should know about this”.

We have had children writing stories about school playing fields being sold to developers. We have had them writing about fly-tipping, where they corresponded with their local MP and local councillors about it, and about the first Muslim mayor in their community; they brought him in and interviewed him. This was big news for their community, and they spoke about it. It is about developing the sense that, “I have a voice. I can make myself heard. I have that agency and power to change things”.

This goes beyond telling local news stories but the point of all of this is about the sense of agency: "I can do something about it". Disengagement comes when you feel like, "There is no point because I cannot make any change anyway".

Q171 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Are you talking about your Media Literacy Ambassador Programme?

Elli Narewska: That is one of our programmes.

Viscount Colville of Culross: I am really interested in that programme. It is aimed at nine to 13 year-olds and teaches their peers about fake news. Last week, we had a very interesting meeting with 15, 16 and 17 year-olds from the Youth Parliament who told us how difficult it is to talk to their peers about fake news and how entrenched people get with their views. What do you do in your programme that helps teenagers get their peers to look critically at the media they are absorbing?

Elli Narewska: Essentially, it is a train-the-trainer programme. We have a smaller group of young people. It is a slightly older age group that is the main target audience, and they are trained up in core media literacy skills. They develop sessions that they run with their peers, then they go out and deliver them in their school or college context. You have a smaller group of experts who get input from us at The Guardian Foundation; they go on to deliver it to their peers. It is absolutely about building confidence. What we have seen in the evaluation and results of it is not only improved media literacy skills but improved public speaking; the soft skills of confidence are a key part of it as well. That is part of your point about them finding it difficult; developing those skills is really important.

Viscount Colville of Culross: When you say "input", what is that? Is that about warning people or empathising with people? What is the input?

Elli Narewska: It is: "Here are some activities that you might run with your peers about identifying misinformation and disinformation, the difference between fact and opinion and spotting bias". It is about those skills and running fun activities with your peers on them. The other feedback we get is that, because it comes from peers rather than a teacher or an external expert—a figure of authority—the people on the receiving end of it are more accepting of the learning and the lessons.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Is this rolled out in a few pilot areas, or could it be rolled out nationwide?

Elli Narewska: It has been in pilot areas. It could be rolled out nationwide but it needs the resourcing and funding to do so. It is a peer learning and a train-the-trainer programme, which means that the cascading of knowledge happens quite quickly. There are colleges that, after initial input from The Guardian Foundation, have been running the programme for years now, so generations of students coming through the programme have benefited from it.

The Chair: Lord Knight has what I hope is a quick question.

Q172 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** I have a question for each of you; I need quick answers, otherwise Baroness Keeley will get very cross. First, Fran, is there a problem with the digital and media literacy of editors? When I look at what Tortoise has done with podcasts like Pariah and “Who Trolled Amber?”, they have done great work on media literacy. I do not see that in mainstream media.

For Jonathan, I have a question about what we heard from those young people. They thought that their parents trusted media—local media particularly. Do you think that the levy that will be raised from tech companies by Ofcom could in part be used to fund some of that media literacy by local journalism?

Finally, Elli, you said that you are not really in the business of creating media but are more about educating. Is there a role for young people to create media as part of their media literacy and, in effect, become publishers filling the void of local news?

The Chair: As you were asked, can you give quick answers to all those questions?

Frances Yeoman: I would not presume to comment on the media literacy of my individual erstwhile colleagues but there is clearly an ongoing training need for people in the media industry. They are not necessarily immune to the same challenges of rapid technological developments and other things as the rest of us. The Thomson Reuters Foundation is working on a toolkit to help with that for newsrooms around the world at the moment. I am involved in that, training media workforces but also embedding media literacy in journalistic practice. It is also an issue of business models, what works and the capacity to do the kind of journalism that supports media literacy, which is something we spoke about before. Some organisations have more freedom, because of the way they make their money, to do that than others.

Jonathan Heawood: On the question about Ofcom and taking money out of big tech, the short answer might be, “Yes, let’s take money wherever we can find it to help the Government revitalise local journalism”. The only concern, if we are thinking about fines that Ofcom or the Competition and Markets Authority might levy, is the uncertainty: when and how much will come through?

We published a report about six weeks ago suggesting that the Government should instead look at the dormant assets scheme, which is currently used for various good causes—young people, financial literacy and so on—to see whether regenerating local news could be pursued under one of those existing headings or whether we need a new statutory cause, because hundreds of millions of pounds reliably come on stream every few years through that initiative. In principle, take the money where you can, but, in practice, there are some reasons to be a little wary.

Elli Narewska: “Yes” is the short answer to your question. Absolutely, there is space for young people to be journalists and report their stories. We are just starting a project called Untold Stories with Ofcom; that is very much the focus of it. It is a media literacy programme but, at its heart, it is about young people telling those stories and sharing them more widely. The question is: what platform are they using to do that? To go back to something that was said earlier on what news organisations can do, there is potential there for a space for young people’s stories to be published on those platforms as well. It is central to all of our programmes that young people are creating media as part of their media literacy.

Q173 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** I accept that local media is all-important and agree with a lot of what you have said, Mr Heawood, but there is good local journalism and bad local journalism. If we concentrate on making consumers of media generally critical in the way they approach it, can each of you say what you think the most effective use of the limited resources available at the moment has been so far in improving media literacy?

Frances Yeoman: Just to clarify, so that I understand your question, are you asking what has been the most effective media literacy intervention from the media or in general?

Baroness Wheatcroft: In general.

Frances Yeoman: Okay. This is a cop-out of an answer but the honest truth is that we do not know about the effectiveness of a lot of these interventions because of the paucity of long-term evaluation, which links back to short-term funding cycles and things like that. Probably the most robust evaluation of any single media literacy initiative is that of NewsWise, which demonstrated the link between news literacy and civic engagement. The low-hanging fruit is about curriculum; I know that you have heard that from other people so I will not labour the point.

You talked about limited resource. I have done a number of projects speaking to practitioners involved in different news and media—and, separately, literacy programmes—and they all talk about scrabbling around for classroom time. Teachers do not have the time because it is not in the curriculum, as well as short-term funding, difficulties of evaluation and not knowing what “good” looks like. It seems to me that all of those can be solved reasonably easily by embedding this stuff more fundamentally in the curriculum and finding a way to make sure that it is assessed and embedded there—notwithstanding the teacher training and support challenges that come with that.

Jonathan Heawood: The honest answer has to be that we do not know, because so many of these interventions are so young. If the intended outcome is people becoming more informed citizens over time, it is hard. I echo what Elli said a moment ago. We have been running a project in Newry in Northern Ireland with a group of young people to get them engaged in producing local journalism, working with more established local media outlets. We felt that that had huge potential because, if the

stories that the local outlets produce respond to the interests of young people, you might think you have a future generation that will be more inclined to pay attention to local media and to get into that virtuous cycle, but you need to come back in 30 years to see whether that was successful.

Q174 Baroness Wheatcroft: If we accept that the problem exists now, and not just among schoolchildren, what is the most effective way of dealing with those who are at risk?

Elli Narewska: Putting it in the school curriculum. I know that that does not account for people who are no longer in school or not accessing education, but it is reaching the majority of young people, so that is an important thing to do—as is supporting educators. We find that we have the best impact and outcomes in the programmes we run when we have the most engaged teachers in schools—teachers who recognise that this is important, engage with the programme then deliver it in a way where their pupils are really engaged. You get better outcomes from them. That is a really important element of it: people caring enough about it to want to do something about it. School is a great place to reach people, so that is really important.

The other thing that we find effective is being very authentic. That is where the benefit of our relationship with the *Guardian* comes in; we use not just *Guardian* sources but genuine news articles all the way through. It is also about relating things to real life in the real world, so that it is immediately translatable to your online experience or your experience in the real world. That is important and engaging, so you get the benefit of both things.

Specifically with the age group we are working with—I think that this is the case with all generations—we are focusing on opportunity rather than risk. Although the reasons why we might do it may be because there is a big risk if we do not do it, it is not an engaging message to say, “These are all the reasons why this is scary or why this is dangerous, and here are all the things you should not do”. Focusing on, “Here is what it will allow you to do when you are media literate. Here are all the opportunities that it will open up for you, and here is a really fun way of engaging with media”, is when you get the engagement and great outcomes.

Baroness Wheatcroft: Do you think that it is best taught as a separate subject, or is it actually critical thinking and could simply be integrated into every subject?

Elli Narewska: It should be across the curriculum. There are specific subject areas where it makes sense for certain skills to sit but, in the 21st century, if you are teaching but not taking into account media literacy across the board, you are not equipping children for the world they live in.

Baroness Wheatcroft: I go back to Mr Heawood. If we want to reach older generations, what is the most effective way of doing that?

Jonathan Heawood: It is a very good question. I am tempted to say, “in partnership with the media they do trust”, because older generations still tend to be a bit more trusting of the BBC or national and local newspapers. All I would say on that, as Fran has already indicated, is: be very careful that it is led by media literacy professionals who can draw on the skill, expertise and street cred of the media. Do not let it be led by the media, because I always worry that that blurs back into marketing rather than genuine literacy.

Baroness Wheatcroft: Do you think that the most important thing is that youngsters have access to a wide variety of media—not just local but national and international? Increasingly, the world they live in is international.

Jonathan Heawood: Quite. One of the things that often comes up when we look at the sustainability of public interest journalism is the complete collapse of international journalism, by which we mean that the *Guardian*, the *Times*, the *Telegraph* would once have had foreign correspondents—or at least stringers—in every major capital of the world but they do not any more. We worry about that, but a way of turning that around is to say, “There are amazing independent media outlets in every foreign capital of the world”. Some of them are published in English—such as the *Kyiv Independent* in Ukraine, which I support—although many of them are not, but another wonder of modern technology is that you can get it translated immediately.

Baroness Wheatcroft: How do we make a wider audience aware of what is available?

Jonathan Heawood: We could go into a very different debate here. I will just lodge the fact that the way most people come at news media is via search engines and social media platforms. If there were a slightly greater duty on those platforms to direct people towards an array of accurate, trustworthy media that sometimes challenged their worldviews and assumptions rather than reinforcing them, that might be at least part of the solution.

The Chair: That leads us nicely on to the next question.

Q175 **Lord Holmes of Richmond:** Thank you all for making the time to be with us this afternoon. What policy changes would make the greatest difference in increasing media literacy in the UK? What assessment do you have of the Government’s 2021 online media literacy strategy—success or otherwise? What has your engagement with Ofcom been like? Feel free to be open. Finally, do you think that media literacy should be embedded in a local media strategy? If so, how?

Frances Yeoman: Wow. There are a lot of questions there; they are all excellent ones. On policy changes, Jonathan has alluded to this, but it is really important to make the obvious point that media literacy is not a silver bullet. We cannot expect individual citizens to deal with all of this by themselves; some of it has to be about policy and regulatory measures that make it possible for people to surface this stuff and to

function—not passing all the burden on to them. I would add AI into the mix, to the questions we had earlier.

On policy changes, it is about the curriculum, as we have alluded to, and thinking about schools. Also, there is a moment now where we have this digital inclusion action plan. Clearly, digital inclusion is a priority of this new Government. We also have a cross-departmental ministerial committee on digital inclusion, which is the kind of thing that those of us in media literacy have been asking for for ages; it is being framed as digital inclusion and promising to do some media literacy. I do not think that we will get a separate ministerial-level, cross-departmental media literacy committee any time soon—they are too close together.

Therefore, the thing there will be ensuring that media literacy gets ring-fenced time and attention in the framework that is being set up. It is promising as long as you have the coherence and clarity that we talked about at the start.

The 2021 media literacy strategy was your next question, I think. As I said, I was on the task force set up by the strategy. The good things were that there was a strategy, that it brought government awareness to the issue and that it funded some good work. Lee Edwards wrote a useful report, *The Theory of Change*, some useful pilots. It also identified a lot of the key problems of fragmentation: short-term funding, lack of co-ordination and these kinds of things. All of that was good. We still have fragmentation and short-term funding; if anything, those issues have probably got worse in the intervening time.

The other issue with the strategy is that it was grounded on the premise that there is a “rich landscape” of media literacy activity already happening and being delivered by a range of organisations; and that the Government’s role could stop at making life easier for those organisations and co-ordinating them. It is no comment on the quality of the great work that is happening by a range of organisations in this space to say that this committee has heard there is not enough of it. They are not of sufficient scale and they do not have sufficient funding; a lot of them do not have sufficient duration. That 170 number became a bit totemic. The questions are: what were they, what did they amount to, who was reached and what were they getting? What we are seeing with the digital skills stuff and the cross-departmental work will perhaps be a bit more fundamental—I hope so—although the strategy was a worthwhile thing.

Ofcom funded some of the work that I did. I am on the MSOM panel. Its research is really valuable. It really does ground a lot of what people do. Some of the practical resources it has been putting out in response to that research—some of which is mine, I should say—have been valuable, such as the outcomes bank and the evaluation toolkit. It is trying to approach this stuff in quite a pragmatic way and to make life easier for people in this space. That is all to be welcomed.

It is operating to a remit and is a regulator; therefore, it cannot do all of this by itself. I do not think that Ofcom is necessarily the appropriate organisation—I do not think that it would think that, either—to advocate

for, champion, cheerlead and promote media literacy in that way or to be the convener of the entire national strategy. Even within the news media, it regulates some parts of it but not others. It has a differential relationship with different parts of the news media. There are limits to what Ofcom can be expected to do, but what it is doing has been valuable.

Is that all of your questions, Lord Holmes? There were a few.

Lord Holmes of Richmond: The final one was on the local media strategy.

Frances Yeoman: Yes. I should stress that I have not been party to those discussions. It would be great if there were a local media strategy. If that strategy provides funding that genuinely supports some of the things that Jonathan has been advocating for around re-engaging with communities and telling stories that are not being told, all of that would be to the good. However, that strategy needs to be clear-eyed that the point of it is creating a sustainable future for a pluralistic local journalism landscape. That is a different goal and a different outcome to having a media-literate population. There is some overlap but they are different things. I would hate for the local media strategy, as much as I love media literacy, to become about something else—that is, for it to become a way to load another responsibility on an already-stretched sector: local media.

Lord Holmes of Richmond: Thank you; that was extremely helpful.

Elli Narewska: On policy changes, media literacy in the curriculum is one of the biggest things that would benefit media literacy, but I have already made that point. A cross-cutting competency across the curriculum would be one of the most important things. Issues of funding and resourcing have been brought up several times in this discussion, as well as other discussions.

A cross-sector effort to have some kind of sustainable funding for sustainable media literacy would be also important, from early years to further and higher education, as well as adult education and informal education. You cannot say, "It should happen in this place, therefore we cannot do it in that place". It has to be in all of those different places, but that takes funding, so the Government need to do something that will help us to do that. Tech platforms that have money are a potential source of that funding but, of course, you need to make sure that any of those initiatives are not just serving the interests of the tech platforms that are funding them. Is there a mechanism by which the funding could be distributed by different organisations, such as Ofcom?

There is also something around the tech platforms in terms of transparency of algorithms and how they target users, because what is also central to media literacy is people understanding how they are encountering information and why they are seeing certain things. That is very opaque at the moment, so is there something that the Competition and Markets Authority could do with its new powers to make tech platforms share that information more widely?

On the online media literacy strategy, I broadly agree with all the things that have already been said, so I will not repeat those. It was an important piece of work, and it was great to see it being taken seriously by a government department. The fact that we are discussing it today shows that it is a reference point. We have something to refer to. Although this has been on the agenda in the past, where are we now and where have we come since then? It is important in that respect.

Our Media Literacy Ambassador Programme, which I have spoken about already and which was asked about, was funded by DSIT as part of the digital media literacy strategy. We definitely saw a benefit from it, and we developed a great programme from it, but it is limited in its impact because the funding only goes so far and for so long. There are some good foundations but we need to sustain it for longer.

Likewise, we have worked with Ofcom in various ways as part of its Making Sense of Media network. Its toolkit for evaluation is very useful, so it has done some great work there. The media literacy programmes for which it has supplied funding are in the name of research, so they are, by their nature, pilots to discover how this might work. That is great—we now have a good bank of knowledge—but it means that they are small-scale and not taking place for a really long time. There is also a limit there because of the nature of its remit and because it is not part of the Department for Education. Coming back to making things scalable, that is a limitation, but we are working closely with it and it has done some great stuff.

On the local media strategy, I am absolutely not an expert on this, so I do not feel that I am a great authority to talk about it. Jonathan will be much better on that but, to reiterate something that I have already said, although media literacy and local media sustainability are not the same thing, having local media to engage with is part of being media literate. Feeling that the news and the media represent you and your community is part of being media literate, so you cannot have one without the other.

Jonathan Heawood: I will pick up exactly on that point. There are two sides; media literacy and media sustainability are two sides of the same coin, and neither is particularly useful without the other. I am sitting between two great experts on media literacy so I will not repeat what they have said.

The only reason why some of us who focus very much on media sustainability are sometimes a bit cautious about media literacy is a feeling over the years, particularly since the Cairncross review, which was published six years ago. One of nine recommendations was the online media literacy strategy. That was the only recommendation that the Government really took forward, whereas the recommendations that were more geared towards investing in sustainable local journalism were not taken forward. It has been problematic; it is as if one agenda has been used as an excuse for not pursuing the other. We would like this committee to get behind the principle that both have to be pursued in tandem, with mutual recognition and crossover.

We are also very happy in engaging with Ofcom. I sometimes feel, as Fran was hinting at, that, as a regulator, when Ofcom does research, it has some very smart people and has considerable resources compared to most of us in academia or civil society, yet it sometimes has to sit on its hands in terms of what it can say or do with its research. Perhaps we should think a bit more about how we can unlock some of that research and become a bit more energetic with it.

We await the local media strategy. The Culture Secretary promised it last autumn. We have been invited to various meetings at DCMS to discuss what it might include, and we are quite interested and excited by what we hear it might include, but I would love to come back and discuss what it does include when it has been published. All I will say is that, if it is about media sustainability, it is important that it acknowledges the role of media literacy, but I would be rather more positive if it had—front and centre—measures to invest in, as both Fran and Elli have said, the kind of media that is most likely to engender trust and engagement because it is genuinely trustworthy and engaging. It is about trying to unlock that virtuous cycle.

Q176 Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge: I have just a quick question, picking up on Elli's point on algorithms being quite opaque and Jonathan's point about how more legitimate news media will counter misinformation. To what extent are children being educated on the way in which what we would deem legitimate news media works? It is based on similar models of driving clicks to sustain engagement and almost ending up, in a way, in the same position as social media in trying to drive clicks. To what extent is that taught about, as well as social media algorithms?

Elli Narewska: Certainly, in our programmes, it is not differentiated in that respect. We say, "These are the tools that someone might use to try to get you to click or to engage. This is how they might try to provoke certain emotions, and that could be on social media or in more traditional media formats". It is about recognising that that is happening regardless of the platform, because most children and young people are not going directly to news sources; they are encountering information online. So that is more relevant for them.

Jonathan Heawood: I cannot speak with the same level of expertise as to what they are being taught, but the data shows that they and their parents believe that some of the differences between social media and news media, which were quite clearly drawn in survey results 10 years ago, seem to be collapsing. I suggest that that is, to some extent, an accurate reflection of what is happening, for all the reasons you give. The industry, if it is pursuing the bottom line, has massive incentives to game the algorithm and to pursue people into their echo chambers, confirming their prejudices, beliefs and worldviews. It is very hard to run a news organisation up a down escalator. I think that perceptions are changing but, I am afraid, the reality is changing at the same time.

Q177 The Chair: My final question is to clarify something you said earlier,

Jonathan. You talked about what a broadcaster is and said that they come under Ofcom, but what about podcasts? Increasingly, adults in particular, rather than young people, are getting opinions—you could say news—and information from podcasts. Some of them are incredibly popular. Should they be regulated? If that is a big question, let us not open it now, but I wanted you to give an opinion on that.

Jonathan Heawood: As you probably know, I previously ran a regulator called IMPRESS. It regulates smaller independent outlets, some of which produce podcasts. They are mainly print or digital, but most media is multimedia these days, and the regulatory landscape is about 20 years behind the reality of what different companies do. Personally, I am in favour of the kitemarking system, where you have the law for the most harmful forms of content and you have voluntary but heavily incentivised forms of regulation for everything else.

If podcasters could be incentivised to get themselves regulated and there were real commercial, legal or advertising benefits to them being regulated, and if the public were properly media literate so that they understood, “Okay, this is a regulated podcast so I know what to expect” versus “This is unregulated so I am in the Wild West”—and they could make choices based on that—I would be happy with that rather than necessarily saying that Ofcom must now regulate all of the tens of millions of podcasts that are out there.

The Chair: Some of them are very big these days. That is a very helpful clarification. Thank you from all of us for your evidence today. It has been really helpful. It is great that we get written evidence—you have contributed to that too, I think—but it comes alive when you take us through the answers to our questions.