



## Communications and Digital Committee

### Corrected oral evidence: Media literacy

Tuesday 3 June 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; Lord McNally; Lord Mitchell; Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge; Lord Storey; Baroness Wheatcroft.

Evidence Session No. 11

Heard in Public

Questions 210 - 247

### Witnesses

I: Kate Davies, Public Policy Director, Ofcom; Ed Leighton, Group Director, Strategy and Research (interim), Ofcom.

### USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on [www.parliamentlive.tv](http://www.parliamentlive.tv).

## Examination of witnesses

Kate Davies and Ed Leighton.

**Q210 The Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this meeting of the Communications and Digital Committee. We are now broadcasting live. I am very pleased to welcome today's witnesses from Ofcom to discuss its media literacy work. A transcript of today's discussion will be taken and our witnesses will have the opportunity to make corrections to it, if needed. I start by asking our two witnesses to introduce themselves.

**Ed Leighton:** I am acting group director for strategy and research at Ofcom. In my previous role as strategy director, I was responsible for media literacy.

**Kate Davies:** Good afternoon. I am the director of public policy at Ofcom.

**Q211 The Chair:** Thank you. How have Ofcom's updated duties under the Online Safety Act altered its approach to media literacy? How would you respond to the criticism we received in evidence that your media literacy strategy is too focused on online harms? Are media literacy and online harms distinct enough in your strategy?

**Kate Davies:** As this committee very well knows, we have had duties to promote and research media literacy under the Communications Act 2003, and it has been a focus of Ofcom's work over that time, with a programme of research and various other work. More recently, the Online Safety Act 2023 clarified and updated those duties. In 2019, we had launched our own programme of work called Making Sense of Media, which built on the work we had done to date, but started to think more expansively about how we needed to think about media literacy in online services. We absolutely think that media literacy is broader than online safety. We need to think in both sectoral and broadcasting terms, and about media more generally.

On the Online Safety Act, which I think is very helpful, we had already recognised that we need to think about digital in that broader landscape. The Online Safety Act clarifies what Ofcom needs to do specifically in relation to online safety. Things that it includes, such as the requirement for Ofcom to make a statement of recommendations for services as to the things they need to do on media literacy, are really helpful. When it comes to online services, one of the changing dynamics that is more important to think about is the role that services themselves need to play. That is a question in the broader media landscape, but when it comes to online services, because their design is so important to how people take in information, the fact that the Online Safety Act added that measure—the statement of recommendations—is really important. Ed, do you want to speak to the broader interaction between the two?

**Ed Leighton:** When we published our strategy last autumn, we were keen to recognise the changes that the Online Safety Act had made and put enough focus there, but also to recognise that we have had

responsibilities in this area since Ofcom was founded in 2003. It covers our whole remit, and it is those rules that were amended by the Act, rather than a completely separate media literacy set of expectations. We chose to focus on the online platforms, but also on broadcasters. We will be bringing forward proposals in the public service media review that Ofcom is required to produce on a regular basis. The next will be in the summer, in which we will be updating our expectations of broadcasters on media literacy.

**Q212 The Chair:** On Ofcom's current definition of media literacy, do you think it places sufficient emphasis on critical as well as functional skills? We heard from the Voice of the Listener & Viewer that it thinks Ofcom's definition of media literacy is inadequate because it contains no reference to critical analysis or assessment.

**Ed Leighton:** We heard the evidence from the Voice of the Listener & Viewer, and we regularly engage with it. I was at its conference last autumn. Our definition mentions the ability to use, understand and create media. For me, it is really important to recognise that understanding involves critical understanding. That is clearly a short definition; we have fleshed out a definition of media literacy in our outcomes bank, which we published as part of an evaluation toolkit. It tries to set out a common definition for the whole sector to adopt, and we have seen really good pick-up from that.

In the outcomes bank, there are five segments of media literacy, including digital inclusion, getting people online and safety and privacy. The third area of outcomes concerns the critical understanding of media, including news, misinformation and disinformation. Critical understanding is right at the centre of that evaluation toolkit, and we would not want to give the impression that it is not.

**The Chair:** But it is not in the definition.

**Kate Davies:** Just to build on what Ed said, I understand that perspective. I was also heartened to hear in some of your evidence that people like that it is one sentence and they can read it back. I emphasise the point that to understand, use and create involves critical thinking, and that is why they are very helpful words. When we established the Making Sense of Media programme in 2019, I was the director at Ofcom responsible for this area. We absolutely talk about critical understanding; that is part of what we are talking about.

**Q213 The Chair:** There is a follow-on point related to how you use your media regulation powers to promote that aspect of media literacy, because the Voice of the Listener & Viewer again argued that public service broadcasters do not produce enough programming that encourages critical engagement. It pointed to a number of cultural criticism programmes that used to exist and be broadcast, and no longer are. In the couple of examples that it gave us, the programmes have shrunk away to radio and are now only on BBC Sounds. Can you talk about how you are using your existing media regulation powers to promote that

aspect? If it is important and at the heart of your outcomes, then how are you promoting it? It is the broadcasters that produce the content and need to take that into account.

**Ed Leighton:** No, I think we quite agree. We did put broadcasting in the strategy as an area alongside online platforms that we focus on. What does that mean in practice? Well, for the broadcasters and online platforms together, we will be bringing forward a statement of recommendations this autumn, which will set out, including on critical understanding, what good practice looks like for those organisations. I would also highlight the public service media review, which we had a call for evidence and call for input on just before Christmas. That has invited comments from stakeholders on what the broadcasters can be doing in the current information landscape to be most effectively contributing towards critical understanding of media and media literacy more broadly in the current world. I am mindful that, clearly, programmes change over time, and there will be examples of things that were done in the past which have not continued or have moved online. But I thought it was clear, from the recent speech from Tim Davie at the BBC, the emphasis on its fact-checking service and the greater strategic emphasis. We welcome that as part of its efforts. That will feature in charter renewal as well.

Q214 **The Chair:** That is just moving away from the point. I was saying that the particular criticism is that there is a lack of programming around this aspect of the definition of media literacy—critical thinking, critical assessment. If the BBC—to use that example, because I think it was the BBC that was being criticised—used to have cultural criticism programmes which it now does not have because it has moved them from TV on to radio and now they are available only online, then will you use your powers to encourage it? If that is what it has done and you have the powers, then clearly you can do something about it.

**Kate Davies:** There are two elements to our duties here and the duties on broadcasters. The BBC has a public purpose that specifically relates to education—a very broad public purpose to support education across the UK. Obviously we look at that and the programming it provides in that space. Then if we think about our media literacy duty specifically to promote media literacy and research media literacy, we are picking up on that, as Ed says, through our public service media review. We will be reporting on that in advance of the Summer Recess. The particular area there—which I know, again, is not directly what you are talking about, but is very relevant to this conversation—is the importance of trusted and accurate news. We see media literacy very much as part of that question as well for the public service media broadcasters.

Q215 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Thank you very much for that. You have talked about the critical understanding of the media. You talked about broadcasting, but I am also interested in the way that users receive news. So many young people, particularly, receive news online. As we know, that news is aggregated by the online platforms, so there is no

provenance. Surely part of critical thinking is having some understanding of where the source of that information is and how valuable that source is. If it is not possible to find out because the news has been aggregated by Facebook or whoever, that makes it very difficult for the user to be able to deploy that particular aspect of their critical thinking. Is there something you would like done to try to improve that situation, to enforce some sort of provenance on to the platforms?

**Kate Davies:** That is a very good question. We have done various pieces of work in this space. We have looked at the role of online intermediaries when it comes to news through our work on media plurality—how people are engaging with a range of news sources. As you say, we know from our research that equivalent numbers of people basically are now looking at news on social media as on TV. The thing that we have focused on particularly is the role of public service media in providing that news. What we see, interestingly—in part because of the standards that Ofcom requires—is that trust in news on public service media is much higher than trust in news that people view on social media.

Your question is a very interesting and big one. People are engaging with at least some of those questions in the state of the world as it is, because they know that, when they look at news on social media, they are not trusting it in the same way that they would when they are engaging with TV news.

**Q216 Viscount Colville of Culross:** Despite what you have said, decreasing numbers of young users are actually using public service media to get their news. They are doing it using the online platforms and their aggregated news platforms. Is there anything that can be done to look at that, because that, after all, is the trend of where it is going?

**Ed Leighton:** These are big themes, as Kate says. We are going to be considering them closely in our public service media review. What we said on this in December in the document we published was that, as users of all kinds of media, including news, move online, the public service broadcasters need to redouble their efforts to reach those users where they are consuming media. We also said that clearly there will be questions about how prominence is updated for those kinds of channels. The Media Act goes some way to updating prominence rules and is a really welcome step forward. We are working hard at the moment to put in the raft of rules and implement that legislation. What comes next is ultimately a matter for government, but we are hoping to make a material contribution to that from what we have heard from the industry and stakeholders and consumer groups in the summer.

**Q217 Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Ofcom does a really good job in publishing rich longitudinal data around the public's understanding of the media over time. What is really striking is that, according to Ofcom, only 45% of UK adults are confident in judging "whether sources of information are truthful" and just 30% are confident in identifying AI-generated content. Assuming that this is not a failure of 22 years of media literacy duty on behalf of Ofcom but because of the changing nature of media, how are

you changing the amount of resource that you are applying to media literacy within Ofcom, in order to counter that changing and greater threat to public understanding?

**Ed Leighton:** It is a good question. As we said, the Online Safety Act places considerable detail around what we should be doing on online platforms in particular. That is very welcome. Since 2021, we have doubled the amount of funding we put into media literacy. It is not just about the funding. It is also about the kind of areas that we target. Our focus is on identifying and then filling gaps in the provision from what is quite a broad and active sector. Our network has over 600 different third-sector providers involved in it that we engage with.<sup>1</sup> For example, new technologies can emerge, so while the fundamental skills of critical thinking, as we were discussing a moment ago, or the skills to be able to engage and participate online are the same, they have new applications. We cannot assume that because someone has been very confident identifying a scam in a junk email they have the skills that will equip them to identify a generative AI image-based fraud. For example, we are doing research to complement our longitudinal work which identifies those trends. There is research into technology development; we have someone working for us at the moment looking at the media literacy challenges that arise from generative AI, and we will then put that out to that network of 600 providers to try to update and keep pace with technological change.

Q218 **Lord Storey:** Ed, you mentioned in your introduction that in your previous role you oversaw media literacy. I am going to ask a cheeky question. What do you think were your achievements during that time?

**Ed Leighton:** Delivering the media literacy strategy is something the team are really proud of. The Online Safety Act came into force, and the requirements to publish a media literacy strategy were within a year of the Bill passing, which is actually ahead of the deadlines for implementing the rest of the Act. We consulted and heard a wide range of input in what is a very broad-based sector. I am glad that we were able to put out a strategy which has given real focus and allowed us to meet the challenge that is set for Ofcom in the Online Safety Act.

The second one I would highlight is the evaluation toolkit that we published in the autumn. It includes the outcomes bank I mentioned earlier, which has five areas of media literacy that provide a really rich definition for these specific outcomes, as different interventions can make a difference. It has provided a common basis for whoever is intervening, whether it is the Government or a small community charity working on digital inclusion. Everyone has the same toolkit and the same outcomes that they can use to measure the difference. The platform enables a greater degree of co-ordination and a common language in what can often be quite a confused and complex area.

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<sup>1</sup> Note by the witness: The witness would like to clarify that Ofcom's network comprises over 600 members, including third-sector organisations, higher education institutions and other organisations.

**Kate Davies:** Obviously, a lot of credit is due to our online safety colleagues, but our work in media literacy enabled us to include measures, in both the illegal harms code and the protection of children code, that are very much based in media literacy. These are things such as requiring in-scope services to provide information at critical points, either for adults and children, in the case of illegal harms, or for children specifically. For example, that means providing crisis information at the point when somebody is searching for suicide material. It requires services to engage and provide information at points when people really need it, which comes from a great understanding of media literacy.

Q219 **Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge:** How is Ofcom translating its research on best practice into longer-term, sustained media literacy activity?

**Ed Leighton:** The research can only ever be part of the picture. It is important to track those areas over time and build our understanding, but it is also important that it is of practical use on the ground. What we do, over a range of facets of media literacy, is partner with, and fund pilots in, community schemes or specialist third-sector providers. That establishes what works in media literacy—"establishing what works" is a phrase we keep coming back to in our work. We can then bring the wider sector together to convene and amplify those findings, so that they can be scaled into larger programmes. We have done small pilots and studies to establish what works in local communities and schools, and with care providers and youth clubs, on misinformation and disinformation. We have learned from those pilots and it enabled us, during the general election, to work with Shout Out UK and the Electoral Commission on a campaign that targeted first-time voters, which reached 6.2 million people. Smaller pilots can help us understand what translates and has an impact on people, which can then translate into scalable efforts.

Q220 **Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge:** We have some examples of your pilots and the numbers they reach, such as the 13 organisations commissioned to deliver media literacy that reached 2,717 people. How do you respond to criticism that small-scale pilots have limited impact?

**Ed Leighton:** That is the risk. The small-scale pilots are the best approach, as with any kind of trial and learn basis, to establish what works. The most useful role we can play most commonly is establishing what works, and to use the same evaluation toolkit on our own programmes that we recommend to all the providers in the sector, to test whether we have made a difference for the people who are reached. The contribution is not only to the people who are reached directly, although that is always wonderful. It is in being able to show the wider sector of hundreds of providers—and the Government, who will be designing their own interventions—what is effective at making a difference to media literacy in the UK and informing the actions of others.

Q221 **Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge:** What is Ofcom doing in the long

term to address issues of fragmentation, duplication and short-term funding in the media literacy sector? We have an example from Wales, where one of the social enterprise providers received follow-on funding from Ofcom. He said, "There are 22 counties in Wales, but we are working in just one. It's inequitable and probably unfair". How do you respond to that?

**Kate Davies:** We have focused on where we can add most value—that is, in the research that we have already talked about, getting into underserved communities, working with partners to develop evidence about what works in particular areas with particular communities, evaluating it effectively and sharing that information with a wide range of people. We found that—and this does not necessarily speak to national coverage—often what works with those underserved communities in particular areas is doing things through local trusted partners, or in spaces where they feel comfortable and want to learn, which naturally lends itself to a more bespoke, tailored, local approach. Of course that has challenges; we do not deny that, but it is something that we have found through the work we have done.

We have absolutely focused on the bigger picture piece as well. We have been talking about one area, but we then think about—it is why we built the network with over 600 members—how we share that learning. As Ed says, how do we build the products so that there is a kind of a common approach to evaluation across the sector? How do we convene and drive a single understanding of the outcomes bank and all the ways you can think about media literacy, so that there are more common approaches? That is where we can also add value. But I do not think we are in the space where Ofcom can run all the programmes or do it all directly, and I do not think that would be the right thing, given how active and invested the sector is.

**Ed Leighton:** When we are working on a pilot, we are not going to provide national coverage, and that is actually not the role we are asked to play. We need to make sure we get a diversity of engagement up and down the country and recognise that, where we are doing pilots, there may be very different community organisations which would be the most effective to tap into. On digital inclusion, for example, we did work in Glasgow, Birmingham and Rhondda Cynon Taf in Wales, and it showed some really interesting differences in those communities. It is right that we work in a disparate way across the country. Clearly, that means we did not do all the areas beyond that in Wales.

Q222 **Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge:** To what extent is Ofcom's role in media literacy limited by its status as an independent regulator?

**Kate Davies:** I do not think it is limited. As an independent regulator, we can do a set of things that others might find hard. We have not talked about the fact that media literacy is devolved. We are an independent regulator that covers the UK. We have offices in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, and we engage directly with the devolved Governments about the work we are doing. We are engaging directly

with them on the framework for digital competence in Wales, and learning what they are doing and how.

That means that, when it comes to that evidence piece, we are in a really great position to set out independent evidence about what works, without an agenda. On the convening piece, I feel very privileged to work for Ofcom. We hold quite a special place in being able to bring together people in a particular way because we are independent.

**Q223 Baroness Owen of Alderley Edge:** The Media Education Association said: "Ofcom appears to be more interested in supporting one-off interventions run by third-sector organisations because these only infrequently involve 'stepping on the toes' of other government departments such as the DfE. Some of these interventions are useful and illustrate good practice. However, it is our belief they will not develop media literacy in a sustained or nationwide way". Do you think that is fair?

**Kate Davies:** We have already covered what we are trying to do and the role we are trying to play. Obviously, there are questions here that are rightfully for the Government. They have a very particular role to play; they can bring together the work on online safety in DSIT with the work in the Department for Education on reviewing the curriculum, which we fed into. We work very closely with the Government, but I think we can play very important and complementary roles in this space.

**Ed Leighton:** I agree with Kate. We are very clear that our work with communities is to inform, and we assess our impact locally, but then it is measured by how widely we spread the message. Making media literacy everyone's business is a key part of our strategy. It concerns not only the Government; the private sector can have a really important role in taking opportunities to make media literacy interventions. When someone comes to a bank and has a query about a suspicious payment, that is an opportunity for a bank to provide a media literacy skill session, to educate them about why they are getting this prompt and warning that adds friction to their banking transaction.

It is true across the whole of the public sector. When GPs are interacting with a patient who has seen some information that might suggest their symptoms are more serious than they actually are, or have seen a dodgy cure online, these are opportunities to make those interventions. It will continue to be the case, we have found, that the most effective way to improve the media literacy in the UK is all of those different pieces fitting together and making sure that we are complementary rather than duplicating each other.

**Q224 Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Kate, you mentioned the digital competence framework in Wales. I am interested in how well you think that is working, particularly as virtually all the evidence that we have received has argued that we need to change the curriculum here in England in order to embed media literacy more thoroughly across the curriculum. To get your reflections on Wales, which has already done

something like that, would be very helpful.

**Kate Davies:** I do not have huge amounts to share, but I can follow up with colleagues in our Wales office and see if we can share more. We have been talking to the Welsh Government. The thing I would say, which links directly to your point, is that they built the digital competence framework and rolled it out, and it is very clear that it fits right across and needs to apply to other areas. Interestingly, my understanding is that it has the status of numeracy or literacy more generally, so that is really important. Then, alongside, they are now thinking how that fits with the new curriculum; I believe they are reviewing the curriculum in Wales as well. But I can check if we have any more information. I would not expect us to have assessed it per se, but I can check if we have any more insight.

**Lord Knight of Weymouth:** If there is any more you can send us by this time next week, when we are talking to Ministers, that would be really helpful.

**Kate Davies:** I will do my best.

Q225 **Lord Dunlop:** Can I continue this theme of Ofcom's role and the allocation of responsibilities? Ed, you mentioned what I think has been an Ofcom mantra about media literacy being everyone's business. But my question is: who is providing the strategic leadership? Is that you or does that sit somewhere else?

**Ed Leighton:** Clearly there is a big role for government in setting out leadership on the national approach to these questions in areas that are the Government's responsibility—national education in England, and it is for the devolved Governments elsewhere. Ofcom does have a role, though, in setting out a strategic approach to media literacy, and I think we have contributed some leadership here in the last few years. The Online Safety Act was very clear that we needed to set out a strategy, and it was right that Ofcom do that—not to take ownership or monopolise thinking on how media literacy should be done, but to maximise how we can contribute as a distinctive contributor to media literacy versus the rest of the sector.

Q226 **Lord Dunlop:** You are obviously the keeper of the one national media literacy strategy that we have. Perhaps you could just develop a bit more about how you see the division of responsibilities between Ofcom and the Government. How do you respond specifically to what we have heard—that media literacy has, in effect, been outsourced by the Government to Ofcom?

**Ed Leighton:** I will start, and then perhaps you can come in on the second half, Kate. In terms of our role with government, it is neither one nor the other. We work really closely and have distinctive roles and contributions to make. The Government had a media literacy strategy, which we very much welcomed. It ran from 2021 to 2024. That was done alongside bringing in the Online Safety Act. Under the Online Safety Act, we have published our media literacy strategy and have brought forward

the toolkit. We will soon be bringing forward the statement of recommendations to platforms and broadcasters as a natural sequence to that. But it is not that the Government have stepped away from that. They have recently put out their digital inclusion action plan, which is a really big facet of the media literacy picture—getting people online, getting them the skills to be able to participate. We have engaged with that process and welcome the Government’s contribution there. Particularly notable, we thought, was an action plan that was launched by multiple Ministers from multiple different departments, which showed a kind of “one Government” approach to this, and that has been our experience in engaging with them.

- Q227 Lord Dunlop:** I want to come back to that action plan. One of the themes we have heard, and perhaps one of the criticisms we have heard, is the need for a joined-up cross-government effort, and the implication is that there is not that at the moment. That avoids duplication; I think a lot of the witnesses feel there is duplication. Do you think Ofcom has the necessary bandwidth, reach and authority to achieve that joined-up approach, given that you are the most active player in this area? For example, do you have a mandate to influence at a local authority level? How do you exercise influence over the curriculum, which has again been something that people have highlighted to us as being very important?

**Kate Davies:** We absolutely are taking a joined-up approach, as we have talked about—it is broader than online safety, and we are looking at a range of areas in our pilots and our research. I believe some of those pilots are with local authorities, but Ed is much more across the detail of those. I do think, though, that Ofcom cannot do the job of government here. As I said earlier, Ofcom does have a really important role to play. As an independent regulator, in specific areas we can bring particular value. Also, obviously the Government are currently reviewing the curriculum. In the interim report, we really welcomed that one of the four priority areas effectively pointed to media literacy and critical thinking. There is the curriculum, but Ed was also talking about the digital inclusion action plan. Government has that ability to then bring the whole of government together to think about online safety in relation to the curriculum, et cetera. It is possible for those two roles to exist alongside each other in a very complementary way. We can both add value here and we work very closely together.

- Q228 Lord Dunlop:** Just to help illustrate the point, how have you, as a body, sought to influence the curriculum review?

**Kate Davies:** We have engaged directly with the Department for Education. We actually provided a formal response, but we have also engaged with it directly.

**Lord Dunlop:** As a department, do you find it well engaged in media literacy? How far up its list of priorities is it?

**Kate Davies:** I am not sure I can speak to that directly, but we have—

**Lord Dunlop:** Well, just give us your perception.

**Kate Davies:** We engage mostly with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and DCMS, as you would imagine, so the conversation with DfE has been only about—

**Lord Dunlop:** Not much engagement with DfE.

**Kate Davies:** We have talked to it only about media literacy, so I cannot say, “And therefore in its overall priorities, it sits here”.

Q229 **Lord Dunlop:** Just on this point about priority of media literacy in public policy-making, we talked about the focus on digital inclusion and skills. I note that the media literacy task force has been subsumed into the digital inclusion action committee. Is there a risk, do you think, that media literacy becomes downgraded or overlooked in that broader canvas that we have there?

**Ed Leighton:** We have set out in our media literacy framework the outcomes bank. I mentioned that digital inclusion is a really important facet. We know from our work as the regulator of consumer issues in broadband how, over time, getting people online is more exclusionary now if it does not happen than it was a few years ago. Our research recently showed that, since the pandemic, the number of people who are not using the internet at home at all has halved, but the half that are there have changed their profile very significantly demographically. They are much younger and they are typically less affluent. We can see and welcome what the Government are focusing on in digital inclusion.

Within that, effective digital inclusion cannot just be giving people a broadband connection and the devices to use it. There are skills to be able to participate online that build on top of that. Our work with the Good Things Foundation is an example of where we can complement what the Government are doing in exactly the way the question is teasing out. We have partnered with the Good Things Foundation across all their 50 or so digital hubs across the country—I think Dr Emma Stone provided evidence to a previous session—so that their work in libraries and communities now includes modules that our teams worked with them on and designed, in order to have media literacy skills as part of a digital inclusion intervention. That is an example of how we can identify the opportunities for an existing programme—a trusted local group in the third sector working with a public institution such as a library—to come together with research-based training from Ofcom, and suddenly we have an impactful programme.

Q230 **Lord Dunlop:** In summary, you are confident that media literacy is receiving the focus, attention and priority that you think it deserves?

**Ed Leighton:** We are clear on the Government’s approach to digital inclusion, and we very much welcome that they have set that out. We are clear that we can complement it with a wider range of media literacy work, as we are required to under the Act. Beyond that, in terms of where this priority sits for education and wider cross-government policy, that is a question for the Government next week.

**Q231 Baroness Wheatcroft:** This is a question about where in Ofcom's priorities media literacy comes, given the huge workload that keeps being added to. I look at these job titles, for instance, and you are now interim, Ed; I do not know how long you think you will be interim, and when your appointment may or may not become permanent. Media literacy clearly cannot be a major part of your role. Where does it come in the scheme of things? How important can it be to Ofcom?

**Kate Davies:** It is very important to Ofcom. It is a duty that we have had in some shape or form since 2003. It is really important because it fits very much with Ofcom's approach across telecoms media and now technology. It comes back to the questions the Chair asked at the start. In our telecoms work, it is relevant to how we think about people engaging with scams or fraudulent text messages. It speaks directly to how we think about the role of public service media, and now to online safety. That is really important from our perspective and, as such, it is one of the significant priority areas in the three-year plan that we set out for our organisation. It is run out of our strategy group, which obviously Ed is responsible for.

**Ed Leighton:** It is a perfectly reasonable question. As Kate says, we see media literacy as a cross-cutting function that touches all the corners of Ofcom's work. Earlier this year, my group published Ofcom's three-year strategy, which is for the whole organisation alongside our plan of work. In that, we identified media literacy as a cross-cutting priority for the organisation. We know that it is both a toolkit and a lens to think about how providers, platforms and regulated services can reach consumers most effectively, but it is also an activity in itself which needs sufficient funding. I mentioned earlier how we have increased the funding significantly over the last three years.

**Q232 Baroness Wheatcroft:** It is obviously cross cutting, not only everything at Ofcom, but everything in government as well. As much as we all want joined-up thinking in government, unless someone or an organisation leads, it tends not to happen. If we want to speak to the person at Ofcom whose real focus was on media strategy, would there be an individual to whom we should speak?

**Ed Leighton:** I am pretty sure that is me. I was the director responsible for media literacy and I am now acting group director, and it is a significant part of our work. We spend significantly on research and it is a material part of my team.

**Q233 Baroness Wheatcroft:** You have been very helpful today, but it would appear to be a tiny part of your job description. How much of your time do you think it takes up?

**Ed Leighton:** That is an interesting question.

**Kate Davies:** It might be helpful to explain the structure, rather than your job.

**Ed Leighton:** My group consists of our market research function, which is a considerable function that researches all kinds of trends relevant to media agency and beyond. Media literacy is a material amount of the spend we make each year, and how we track consumer behaviours over time. In terms of the priorities for the group this year, consumer research and our strategy function sit there. We have got a team in strategy that is working with teams across the organisation to produce our statement of recommendations, which is a priority in the online safety delivery road map, and we will be producing that in September. Our evidence set out the range and diversity of programmes that we contribute to with that team. It is not small and it is significantly larger than it was. It complements the role our group plays in supporting the rest of Ofcom to deliver its wider research priorities.

Q234 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** Although you say you work very well with Government and various departments, do you think that media literacy in the country as a whole would benefit from having not just a government department but potentially a Minister whose main focus it was?

**Kate Davies:** I do not think we have a view on the specifics of a Minister. We support more attention being given to media literacy. We have published a strategy and we are going to publish a statement of recommendations specifically for services. We have made this a serious priority, but we are one actor. As we say, it is everyone's business. There is a very active sector but, as Baroness Owen said, there are funding challenges and we would therefore welcome making this a priority and giving it more emphasis.

Q235 **Baroness Fleet:** What are you doing about the significant declining trust in the public sector media suppliers? Do you think that things are not working as well as you would like them to? What actions can you take? You have done investigations—for example, into GB News. Are also doing an investigation into BBC Verify? They reflect different opinions. How do you deal with that?

**Kate Davies:** There are a few things to unpack. We have content standards, a process for the occasions when people complain about a particular piece of content that has been broadcast, as a post-broadcast regulator. We would then look at it and determine whether we need to investigate, and, in certain cases, take that all the way to a breach or enforcement, which I think is what you are referring to. That is a very specific process.

More broadly, as we look at public service media, I will unpack a couple of things. In relation to the BBC specifically, we do an annual report in which we look at their performance over the year, and trust is very important to that. Over a longer time horizon—every few years—we do a public service media review in which we look at the sector in the round. This year a particular focus—which I know does not speak to the whole of your question—is the question of the sustainability of trusted and accurate news, which is incredibly important.

**Ed Leighton:** To build on that, we know from our research that we have tracked over a long time that trust in TV news in particular is persistently high. Trust in the PSBs as contributors to news is also persistently high, versus other media. We also see, as you rightly say, that that is not consistent across all parts of society. Younger people tend to seek out PSB news less often, and there are groups who will be more suspicious of all institutions and favour user-generated news reports. We think it is welcome that the public service broadcasters are contributing in different ways beyond news bulletins several times a day. BBC Verify is an example of the fact-checking contribution that they can make, and that contribution is then picked up more widely among other media sources, alongside the wider sector that do the same. They still have an important role to play in trust, but they are regulated very differently than social media.

Q236 **Lord McNally:** How much do you see your role as a kind of evangelist in this area? Would you pick up the phone and talk to the chief executive of a company or a sector and say, "I am from Ofcom and we are wondering whether you want a health check on what you are doing"? As you say, it is a wider responsibility, so how much do you feel it is part of your role to evangelise to others about their responsibilities?

**Kate Davies:** We have done that in quite a regulatory way. Before we got to the point of the strategy and the Online Safety Act, we published best-practice principles that set out what we think services should be doing. We got four large services to sign up to those principles, and we continue to engage other services on signing up to them. What we have learned through that will feed into the statement of recommendations that we publish in the autumn. For the statement of recommendations to work, part of it is about driving progress in the sector, which takes a degree of, if you like, evangelising. We need to say what "good" looks like and, frankly, what the very best looks like, and try to pull everyone up to that standard.

Q237 **Lord McNally:** Does any organisation ever ring you up and say, "Will you take a look at our media literacy approach and give us any suggestions?"

**Ed Leighton:** I quite enjoy being an evangelist for the role that media literacy can play in communications. I have seen the impact of rich personal stories from qualitative research, from work in partnership with community organisations, and how they can inform much bigger ideas when they are rolled out at scale. I am quite happy to say how it has helped shape not only our media literacy responsibilities, but how we now think about the role that broadcasters can play in news and how online companies can keep people safe.

We do work with companies in the way that you describe. Ahead of the statement of recommendations, we decided to do an initial set of work on media literacy by design, a phrase you have heard throughout the evidence of the last few weeks. We produced what we called the best practice principles. We engaged with companies to understand what they

did and measured, and we set out those principles. It was really welcomed; four companies signed up and were willing to pledge to adopt those in full, and we have now got their first self-assessments. It is important that, as a regulator, we are able to have different types of conversations with industry to build and establish best practice ahead of making formal regulatory provisions or expectations. We do have different conversations of the kind you describe.

**Q238 Lord McNally:** Would you say those conversations are as welcome with government departments? Would you presume to say to a government department, "We really do not think you are doing enough in this area"?

**Ed Leighton:** I am very happy with the relationships I and the team, with Kate's team's support, have with Government, in that we are able to make suggestions and recommendations. We fed in, informally and formally, to the Department for Education curriculum review. It is important that we do that with confidence in what we understand, from what we see in our engagement with the media literacy sector, but with the humility that we do not understand the full complexities of education policy. It is right that Ofcom does not try and dictate in any way what the best approach should be; that is rightly for the Government and for the experts in the Department for Education. That engagement has been appreciated by them, whether it is in health or HMRC—in Digital Inclusion Week, we had our research team there—or talking about something as complex as the curriculum review.

**Q239 Lord Knight of Weymouth:** I have got a whole series of questions, so we will have to be really snappy because we are running out of time. They are around what Ofcom is doing to hold platforms to account in relation to media literacy. First, what is your level of satisfaction that tech platforms are taking media literacy seriously?

**Ed Leighton:** The first thing that we are doing is setting out clear expectations in the illegal harms code and protection of children code, which are the first codes off the rank in implementing the Online Safety Act, and baking into those codes clear descriptions of what companies can be doing and at what points in the user journey. We are now moving into a new phase of the Online Safety Act, as those codes head in and come into force, in which we are monitoring and enforcing. That is one mode.

Beyond that, we have the best practice principles which we are advocating to all providers. We are partnering in greater depth with a few, and we are taking that and building on them to put in place a statement of recommendations in the autumn, which is about design but also on platform interventions and how they support the wider sector, and how they evaluate and report on what they are doing.

**Lord Knight of Weymouth:** You will expect platforms to have media literacy by design as part of their basic best practice principles.

**Ed Leighton:** Yes, we will be recommending in the autumn that media literacy design features are in line with the best practice principles.

**Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Will that include, for example, educating people around how the platforms' own business models and their algorithms work?

**Ed Leighton:** Yes. We have options. We are very happy to share the document when we produce it in September, if that would be useful.

**The Chair:** That is a bit late for us, I am afraid. We are expecting to finish this in July.

**Ed Leighton:** The best practice principles are a good guide for what we will be including, as well as what we have already put into the illegal harms and the protection of children codes.

**Kate Davies:** Also, the violence against women and girls guidance, which we published in February, has a range of measures that specifically relate to media literacy—for example, it refers to when there should be more labelling on materials. Again, that is more of a best practice approach, similar to the media literacy statement of recommendations.

Q240 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** You have been doing this for 23 years. It sounds like all this activity started with the Online Safety Act. Is there anything around your expectation of platforms before that date?

**Kate Davies:** We were engaging with a number of services before that date, but again, the duty from 2003 was to promote and research media literacy. In 2019, we set up our Making Sense of Media work. Right from the get-go, we engaged directly with some of the services—I would need to remind myself exactly which ones, but we set up an advisory panel. We had some platforms directly engaged in that advisory panel. We had already been thinking about the digital angle, but that was the moment at which we shifted to bringing in this broader concept of how service design plays in. We had had those conversations and we had started to look at it in our research, but it is in a different mode now with the Online Safety Act because, in the codes themselves, we can make requirements of what services have to do, and then we can also make recommendations.

Q241 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** We had evidence from Ben Bradley, who works for TikTok, and he has followed up with a letter to us. He has reminded us that, because of their video function, they had a pre-existing relationship with Ofcom as a regulator. In terms of that relationship, prior to these codes, would there have been an expectation for TikTok around video?

**Kate Davies:** That is a very helpful reminder. The video-sharing platforms' regime had a specific element related to media literacy, and we set out what we expected on that. We engaged with TikTok specifically and a few other platforms. The video-sharing platforms' regime was for services with a UK base, so it is a much smaller subset, although TikTok is one of the larger ones.

Q242 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** On TikTok, Mr Bradley was very proud of

the 60-minute limit that they set for children and young people, and then children and young people from the Youth Parliament told us how easy it is to override it. Are you satisfied with the performance of TikTok on media literacy?

**Kate Davies:** I am not going to be able to give a snappy response to that question. I do not think you look at one thing when you think about media literacy; there are a range of things. Obviously, the video-sharing platforms' regime already existed, but under the Online Safety Act there are things they will have to do, such as the example I gave about information at the point of crisis and particular information for children at critical points in their journey. The things they have to do are the things we will judge, and we will look at how they perform against the statement of recommendations.

**Q243 Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Listening to you, to an extent it feels like your theory is that you will fund pilots, you will find out what works and it is for others to then fund that at scale. But there are opportunities to secure long-term funding for media literacy programmes from tech platforms, through the digital services levy, et cetera. Is that something that you are looking at as you implement the Online Safety Act duties—whether you can levy money from the platforms to fund some of the things that work at scale?

**Ed Leighton:** That is not something we are actively looking at currently. It is not the role that was envisaged for us to play by Parliament when it put the legislation in place. We have heard in consultation on our strategy, and in the meetings that I have, how important funding from the online sector is. To give you one example, Internet Matters is an organisation funded by a number of telecoms companies and online platforms. We have heard consistently from the whole media literacy sector that too often funding is for a single year and multi-year stable funding would allow them to scale better.

**Q244 Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Do you think the Government should levy the money to fund what works at scale?

**Ed Leighton:** We are clear it is not our role at the moment. Through our wide engagement with the sector, we can understand what is important. We have commissioned the Charities Aid Foundation to do some work with their specialist knowledge, to help us understand the state of funding at the moment. We will be publishing that in due course, as a contribution to what would help address the funding questions that you rightly say are being raised by the industry. Beyond that, it is a question for the Government.

**Q245 Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Someone certainly needs to fund it. Let me finish with a couple of questions on the progress that you have made in considering how you can use other regulatory levers to encourage platform activity in this area. First, I am interested whether you are setting standards for enforcement, so that it is clear to the platforms at what point you would enforce, particularly around media literacy.

Secondly, on transparency reporting, I am interested in whether what the Online Safety Act includes in terms of transparency and independent researchers having access to platform activity is something that you will deploy in service of meeting media literacy aims.

**Kate Davies:** We published enforcement guidance which is across the Online Safety Act as a whole at the back end of last year. It sets out for services the kinds of things we would go through. We do not tend to jump straight to enforcement unless it is a particularly egregious situation, but we would work through a risk assessment. Have they done the right thing? We would then work through the level of issues. Can we secure changes without enforcement, or do we move to enforcement, et cetera? Then we have a whole range of tools at our disposal.

Where we have talked about that there are, in effect, media literacy measures in the codes, that is exactly the approach we would take. Where we have said that there is a measure, we will look at whether a service is doing it, or are they doing something that secures the same outcome? When it comes to the statement of recommendations, that is not enforceable; it is guidance, much like the one for the protection of women and girls. We think we can still drive considerable progress through that route, but it is not enforceable in the same way.

Q246 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Can you say something about transparency reporting?

**Kate Davies:** We have the ability to undertake transparency reporting. We are planning to set out more on that this year. It is for categorised services specifically. We have a fair amount of discretion on the kinds of things that we can look at in those transparency reports.

**Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Would you look at the media literacy by design, and the sorts of things that Ed talked about, in your transparency reporting?

**Ed Leighton:** Yes, setting out the statement of recommendations in the summer<sup>2</sup> is an important next step in taking our best practice into clear recommendations for what platforms and broadcasters can do to contribute to media literacy outcomes, and we will be monitoring how that is then put into practice in both those sectors.

Q247 **The Chair:** We would like to know, as we have been teasing out information about your role, the annual spend on media literacy by Ofcom. I do not know if you have got that figure with you, but if you do not, can you let us know what is Ofcom's annual spend on the distinct matter of media literacy? I know it shades into other things like digital inclusion.

**Ed Leighton:** Certainly. Our non-staff spend in this financial year will be £1.62 million. On top of that, we have a team of researchers and

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<sup>2</sup> Note by the witness: The witness would like to clarify that the statement of recommendations is expected to be published in the autumn.

strategy, policy and media literacy experts who contribute to that, but that is the non-staff spend figure.

**The Chair:** Would you give us a complete figure? Thank you. We have overrun a little bit, but thank you very much.