

Good Things Foundation—written evidence (FOJ0019)

Communications and Digital Committee The Future of Journalism

Introduction

We welcome this inquiry into the future of journalism. The internet has transformed the media landscape and blurred the boundary between traditional media literacy and digital media literacy. The consumption of journalism has shifted online, and consequently, ensuring universal digital literacy is fundamental to the future of journalism.

Good Things Foundation is the UK's leading digital and social inclusion charity. Through the Online Centres Network, consisting of thousands of hyperlocal, grassroots organisations, Good Things Foundation takes a community and digital blended approach to ensure that no one is left behind in a digital world.

We have responded to the questions that are most relevant to our work:

2. How have digital technologies changed the consumption of journalism?

Digital technologies have radically changed the consumption of journalism. Moving to online distribution channels offers opportunities for newspapers, such as presenting breaking news in a more timely manner and cutting costs by moving away from the printing process.

While TV remains the most-used platform for news by UK adults, usage has decreased since last year.¹ At the same time, use of social media for news has risen - half of all people now use social media platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat for news.²

There is also evidence that UK adults are consuming news more actively via social media. For example, those who access news shared by news organisations, trending news or news stories from friends and family or other people they follow via Facebook or Twitter are more likely to make comments on the new posts they see compared to the previous year.³

In our view, there are several benefits to the changing media landscape. Higher engagement levels are healthy for both the production and consumption of journalism. The internet allows independent journalism to thrive, breaking down barriers to entry and levelling the playing field in the industry.

However, the trend also raises a number of concerns. Functions on digital platforms such as the ability to like and share content allows disinformation to spread rapidly. For example, claims that drinking bleach is an effective cure for coronavirus disseminated on social media, with potentially disastrous consequences. Disinformation is a threat to our democracy, social cohesion, and the future of journalism.

In the Online Harms White Paper 2019, the Government rightly recommended the need for a new regulatory framework to ensure the safety of UK citizens online. It is noted that for adults, there are insufficient resources covering online media literacy, and there is a need for further work to address issues such as the sharing of disinformation.⁴

¹ Ofcom, News Consumption in the UK: 2019, p.2

² Ofcom, News Consumption in the UK: 2019, p.2

³ Ofcom, News Consumption in the UK: 2019, p.2

We welcome the Government's commitment to press ahead with Online Harms legislation, and will soon be enshrining in law a statutory duty of care towards the users of online platforms. The Government has also announced it is 'minded' to hand regulatory responsibilities to Ofcom to enforce this duty of care. Provided that Ofcom has the resources and powers it needs for this new role, these measures will help to limit some of the negative aspects of online news consumption.

However, this only tackles one side of the issue, since regulation will never be able to stop disinformation altogether. Much like the way the broadcasting industry is currently regulated, it is likely that the regulatory authority will only be able to take action against companies who have failed in their duty to protect their users from harm after the harm has taken place.

In order to prevent the potential harms of disinformation, it is crucial that people are supported to gain the digital literacy skills that they need to be able to think critically about news content encountered online and to question the validity of news sources.

The media landscape has radically transformed, and the definition of media literacy must be updated accordingly to include digital media literacy. The ability to critically assess online news content is a crucial life skill in the digital age and should be viewed as a central component of digital literacy.

Yet there are 11.9 million people in the UK who do not have the Essential Digital Skills needed for everyday life in the UK.⁵ Nearly one in ten (8%) have zero digital skills.⁶

Those who lack digital skills are the most likely to be socially excluded too - 23% of people in socioeconomic group DE do not use the internet, compared to 6% of people in groups AB.⁷ Of the 4.1 million adults who have never been online, 71% have no more than a secondary level education and 47% are from a low-income household. People with a disability are more than twice as likely to be offline as those without one.⁸

The Oxford Internet Institute's 2019 report shows that the UK's digital divide is widening. There is a higher proportion of non-users below the median income (£28,400/year), whilst 40% of respondents in the lowest income category (less than £12,500/year) are digitally excluded.⁹ Without measures to support these people, there is a risk that an increasingly digital media will further entrench the digital divide.

Digital technologies have therefore radically changed the consumption of journalism, altering the definition of media literacy and making digital literacy essential. The overlap of digital and social exclusion also means that the potential harms arising from the online consumption of journalism are set to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, and divisions in our society are set to widen - our research shows that if nothing is done, 6.9 million people will remain digitally excluded by 2028.¹⁰

⁴ DCMS, Online Harms White Paper (2019)

⁵ Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index (2019), p.4

⁶ Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index (2019), p.19

⁷ Ofcom Adults' Media Use and Attitudes Report 2019, p.4

⁸ Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index (2019), pp.4-24

⁹ OxIS, Oxford Internet Survey (2019), pp.2-6

¹⁰ Cebr, The Economic Impact of Digital Inclusion in the UK (2018), p.7

3. How can public policy improve media literacy, particularly among those who have low levels of digital literacy?

Public policy can improve media literacy by making digital and social inclusion a priority. This includes investing heavily in digital skills and coordinating national efforts to maximise impact at scale. The Government has said it will be publishing its media literacy strategy in the summer, and digital literacy must be a central strand of the plan.

We welcome the fact that the Government has taken some responsibility for digital inclusion. This includes the Department for Education's role in constructing the Essential Digital Skills (EDS) Framework and establishing EDS as a free entitlement in English law, putting them on the same footing as literacy and numeracy, and making digital literacy a basic need for all adults.

Other digital inclusion activity undertaken by the Government includes the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Department for digital skills and digital inclusion, as well as working on media literacy to avoid Online Harms in partnership with the Home Office.

However, whilst it is better that too many departments hold responsibility than too few, there is a danger of public servants working in silos resulting in duplicated efforts on one hand and important policy falling down the gaps on the other. It is important that departments work together towards a common goal.

A major problem for policymakers is that many people who have low or no digital literacy skills are unlikely to engage with the formal education service. This means that although digital skills have been established as a free entitlement in English law, reaching the people who have the most to gain from the entitlement is a key challenge for the Government.

Working in partnership with the community sector is an effective way of reaching digitally and socially excluded people, supporting them to be able to engage with online journalism safely.

For the past five years Good Things Foundation has delivered the Government's biggest investment in digital inclusion, the Future Digital Inclusion programme (FDI). Funded by the Department for Education, the programme ensures that adults with no or low digital skills can improve their digital literacy.

Working with thousands of community partners across the country, we are able to reach people who are likely to be excluded from the formal education system. Through a blend of face-to-face support and our online learning platform, Learn My Way, we support people to access the benefits of the internet safely. This includes being supported to recognise disinformation and other sources of online harm.

Since 2014, working in communities across England the programme has helped over 1.3 million people gain essential digital skills, over 80% of whom face social exclusion, from poverty and unemployment to disability and homelessness.

The Government has committed £5bn to support the coverage of gigabit-capable broadband across the UK, which is welcome. However, if people lack digital skills they will be unable to take advantage of connectivity. We need investment in skills alongside the infrastructure to improve digital literacy and ensure everyone can benefit from the internet.

Improving digital literacy is not just the responsibility of Government - the public sector must work collaboratively with businesses and civil society organisations in supporting people to improve their digital skills.

By making digital inclusion a priority and supporting people to gain the confidence to continue learning and developing their digital skills, we can ensure a better future for both the production and consumption of journalism.

Conclusion

Journalism has become increasingly digital, and this trend will continue to gather pace. There are benefits to this trend, but it also poses problems such as the rise of disinformation and entrenching the digital divide.

Media literacy is now an essential element of digital literacy, and is a prerequisite for engaging with journalism in the digital age. Local grassroots organisations need to be supported so that they can act as local intermediaries to help people to get online and facilitate engagement with online journalism.

If digital exclusion persists then we will never have a fully inclusive society.

At Good Things Foundation, our vision is a world where everyone can benefit from digital. Since 2010, we've helped nearly 3 million people improve their lives through digital.

We would gladly offer our expertise and give evidence to the Committee by video call.

3 April 2020