

Dr Gianfranco Polizzi and Professor Tom Harrison—written evidence (FON0037)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee inquiry: The future of news: impartiality, trust, and technology

Executive summary

- This written evidence is a response to the inquiry into ‘the future of news: impartiality, trust and technology’ of the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee. Advocating for more robust news literacy education in the UK, this submission addresses the following questions: 1) *are there any actions the Government should take to address concerns around due impartiality, trust, and the influence of technology platforms?* and 2) *are changes needed to the way the Government addresses mis- and dis-information?*
- The call for evidence related to this submission is interested primarily in exploring the role and responsibilities of both the news industry and online platforms in ensuring that citizens in the UK live in a democratic society that is underpinned by a healthy news ecosystem. This issue relates to the ways in which news stories are produced, disseminated and shared within an information environment that is highly mediated by the business models of both news outlets and internet corporations such as Google and Facebook. **This submission is grounded in the recognition that, while it is essential to focus on the political economy of the broader digital and news environment, democracy, which functions on the basis of a well-informed citizenry, relies also on the ability of citizens to navigate such an environment in ways that are safe, critical and healthy.** This is not to place the onus on citizens. We live in an age in which issues of (dis)trust in, and the bias of, news outlets are made more complex by the speed at which mis- and dis-information have become increasingly rampant because of the structure of online platforms. It follows therefore that **the objective of facilitating a healthy news ecosystem cannot be promoted in isolation from the task of promoting news literacy education.** This is understood here as formal education that aims at equipping the younger generations with the skills, knowledge and attitudes they need, both now and in the future, to act as critical consumers of news.
- Drawing on promising findings from the evaluation of a UK news literacy programme called NewsWise, **this submission argues that, especially in a context in which it is unlikely to expect news outlets to be fully impartial, more needs to be done by the UK Government to promote news literacy education.**
- The practical recommendations of this submission are:
 - Efforts to promote a healthier news ecosystem, which relies on the role and responsibilities of both news outlets and online platforms,

should not be deployed in isolation from the task of promoting news literacy education more robustly across the UK.

- Just as important it is to recognise that news impartiality can be promoted only to some extent, it is as important not just to tackle the production and dissemination of mis- and dis-information but also to equip the younger generations with the news literacy skills they need in order to participate in society in the digital age.
- School programmes such as NewsWise can be used as examples of good practice with a view to embedding news literacy education more firmly into the school curriculum, and with an awareness of its implications for also developing pupils' civic engagement.
- NewsWise can be used an example of good practice to design and provide guidelines and resources aimed at supporting schools and educators in delivering news literacy education, while civil society organisations also need to be supported to produce their own educational resources.
- Educators need to be provided with adequate training in terms of how to deliver news literacy education and programmes such as NewsWise.

About the authors

1. Dr Gianfranco Polizzi and Professor Tom Harrison are the authors of this submission. Gianfranco Polizzi is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of Communication and Media at the University of Liverpool, where he researches questions of digital inequalities and digital literacy among different populations. Tom Harrison is Professor of Education in the School of Education, and in the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, at the University of Birmingham. His research interests include character education, digital citizenship and cyber-wisdom education.
2. Since March 2022, the authors of this submission have co-led the research evaluation (which has now come to an end) of the second iteration of NewsWise – a UNESCO-awarded UK cross-curricular news literacy programme for 9-11-year-olds run by the Guardian Foundation since 2018. Key findings from the evaluation of this programme are reported in this submission with a view to making a case for the importance of promoting news literacy education more robustly in the UK.
3. This written evidence is presented in a personal capacity, independently of the University of Liverpool and of the University of Birmingham.

Section 1 – Why news literacy education matters for democracy

4. Citizens' engagement with news is crucial to their participation in society in terms of keeping abreast of current events and socio-political issues. **Inasmuch as a healthy democracy relies on a well-informed citizenry that knows how to evaluate the validity of news, citizens need to possess what is commonly referred to as news literacy** – i.e., the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to engage with news, to evaluate news stories and understand the broader news ecosystem (Tully et al., 2022). However, we live in an age that is saturated with digital technologies, which present not just opportunities (e.g., for socialisation, learning, participation, employment) but also risks including, to name a few, issues of online abuse, privacy, and mis-/dis-information (OECD, 2019).
5. The internet amplifies both the extent to and the speed at which inaccurate or misleading information is produced and shared (Vaidhyathan, 2018), which is why news literacy overlaps with (critical) digital literacy – the ability to evaluate online content and understand the broader digital environment (Polizzi, 2020). What is more, the ways in which internet corporations such as Google and Facebook operate within such an environment have raised significant challenges to the news ecosystem. On the one hand, news outlets are increasingly competing and scrambling for online visibility, which is determined by algorithms designed to provide a personalised experience for users through displaying content based on their own individual interests and behaviour (Lawrence & Napoli, 2023). On the other hand, the amount of mis- and dis-information online not only makes it harder for users to navigate with confidence the news environment but also exacerbates a problem that predates the internet – i.e., citizens' distrust in both institutions and media outlets, which can undermine their participation in the political process (Nichols, 2017).
6. These issues are further complicated by the ways in which the news industry operates, as **we live in societies in which the concept of news impartiality is more normative than realistic**. Inevitably, even the most reputable outlets tend to have an ideological leaning, which is then reflected in the ways in which their news stories are framed (Doyle, 2018). It is hard to find unbiased news and, more importantly, the question of whether we, as a society, should expect the news to always be unbiased is contentious. Good, trustworthy journalism exists regardless of bias, and is based on fact-checking, ethical principles and editorial standards. In the UK, many consider the BBC to be the most objective media outlet, while most newsrooms have their own biases. Some have argued, nevertheless, that 'neutrality does not apply when universal values – such as peace, democracy, human rights, (gender and racial) equality, (social) progress, and national liberation – are at stake' (Carpentier, 2007, p. 152). According to this view, journalism is intrinsically ideological and has a responsibility to bring 'the dysfunctions of state and market to the attention of the citizenry' (Carpentier, 2007, p. 152).

7. This does not mean that no actions should be taken by the UK Government to address concerns around impartiality, (dis)trust, the influence of online platforms, and the problem of mis- and dis-information. But, **while it is essential to focus on the business models and practices of both news outlets and online platforms, the objective of facilitating a healthy news ecosystem cannot be promoted in isolation from the task of promoting news literacy education.** Formal education has the potential to reach most children in the UK. As they grow up, today's younger generations will be increasingly tasked with both the right and responsibility to act as citizens in a highly digitally mediated world. It is therefore essential that they develop long-life news literacy skills that can help them to better engage with the news in the digital age. Problematically, however, we know from recent research conducted by Ofcom (2023) that three in ten children aged 8-17 in the UK believe 'all or most of what they see on social media to be true', and many are often overconfident about their ability to identify fake content online (p. 3).
8. These findings suggest that **more robust news and digital literacy education is needed in the UK.** Indeed, the Online Media Literacy Strategy published by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS, 2021) states that a primary challenge to the promotion of media (and related forms of) literacy is the 'lack of sound evaluation data about which ... initiatives are effective' (DCMS, 2021). What is more, not only is news, media and digital literacy education not firmly embedded in the school curriculum, but its provision remains patchy across the UK and at the discretion of schools (Polizzi & Taylor, 2019).

Section 2 – NewsWise: A promising example of good practice

9. Growing research (e.g., Ashley et al. 2017; Martens & Hobbs, 2015) shows that school interventions based on delivering news and media or digital literacy programmes contribute to pupils' ability to evaluate news stories and information and, in turn, to their civic engagement, understood as involvement, and/or the intention to participate, in community and/or political life. While this body of work has focused primarily on adolescents in the United States, **the authors of this submission recently conducted a project to evaluate the effectiveness of NewsWise – a programme designed and delivered by the Guardian Foundation to increase primary school children's levels of news literacy in the UK.** Run by a research team from the University of Birmingham and the University of Liverpool in partnership with the Guardian Foundation, the National Literacy Trust and the PSHE Association, this project has now come to an end with promising results (Harrison et al., forthcoming).
10. NewsWise includes resources, lesson plans and classroom activities designed to encourage children to engage with the news, to appreciate the difference between facts and opinions, to understand terms such as bias and 'fake news', to learn about different strategies to spot misinformation, to learn about the consumption and production processes inherent in the news industry, and to write a news report (Guardian

Foundation, 2023). Based on a mixed method approach and robust methodology that included the development and validation of new measures, the project aimed to explore 1) UK 9-11-year-old pupils' levels of news literacy and civic engagement prior to the delivery of NewsWise, 2) whether the programme was effective in increasing pupils' levels of news literacy, and 3) whether an increase in their news literacy corresponded to an increase in their civic engagement (Harrison et al., forthcoming).

11. Baseline findings from the project suggest that **9–11-year-olds in the UK believe the news should be truthful and balanced. However, less than half know how to spot fake news and only three in ten are interested in the news.** Meanwhile, even though 9–11-year-olds in the UK have very positive attitudes towards civic engagement, only five in ten think that they will vote when they grow up, and only 35% talk about politics and social issues with their parents (Harrison et al., forthcoming). Promisingly, **NewsWise was found to improve 9-11-year-olds' ability to spot misinformation**, and this improvement sustained over time. What is more, **the programme**, which was well received by both pupils and teachers, **has the potential to develop pupils' civic engagement through their engagement with news.** Indeed, strong correlations were found between all dimensions of news literacy and of civic engagement among 9-11-year-olds, including, for example, between 1) their awareness of socio-political issues and motivation to follow the news, 2) such awareness and their self-reported ability to evaluate news stories, and 3) their participation in civic life (e.g., through community involvement and acts of service such as volunteering) and interest in the news (Harrison et al., forthcoming).
12. These findings have implications for future research and practice. More specifically, this projects' findings about the effectiveness of NewsWise can be used when designing new, and/or making revisions to current, news literacy programmes. At the same time, these findings suggest that the design and evaluation of future news literacy interventions for 9–11-year-olds should be developed in ways that are grounded in the recognition that there is a positive relationship between their development of news literacy and their civic engagement.

Conclusion: Recommendations for action

13. In line with the previous sections and the findings presented above from the evaluation of NewsWise, this submission calls on the Government to:
 - I. Ensure that efforts to promote a healthier news ecosystem, which relies on the role and responsibilities of both news outlets and online platforms, are not deployed in isolation from the task of promoting news literacy education more robustly across the UK.
 - II. Consider that, just as important it is to recognise that news impartiality can be promoted only to some extent, it is as important not just to tackle the production and dissemination of mis- and dis-

information but also to equip the younger generations with the news literacy skills they need in the digital age.

- III. Ensure that school programmes such as NewsWise are used as examples of good practice with a view to embedding news literacy education more firmly into the school curriculum, and with an awareness of its implications for also developing pupils' civic engagement.
- IV. Draw on NewsWise as an example of good practice to provide guidelines and resources aimed at supporting schools and educators in delivering news literacy education, while also supporting civil society organisations in the UK to produce their own educational resources.
- V. Ensure that educators are provided with adequate training in terms of how to deliver news literacy education and programmes such as NewsWise.

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