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

This call for evidence asks a range of important questions about the impact of regulation, tech platform behaviour, AI and the financial sustainability of news. All of these are important topics for consideration and the relatively narrow focus of the below is not intended to indicate that the author considers issues surrounding news literacy to be the only or even the most important piece of this puzzle. Rather it indicates the parameters within which I hope my research and experience might potentially be of some use or interest. I seek here only to signpost some points but would happily discuss any of the issues in this call further if that is of interest.

- News literacy education has risen in prominence in the years since 2016 (though is arguably now ebbing in profile somewhat) and has been cited as a potential solution to the myriad problems facing the industry, including some of those outlined in the call.¹
- The field has been mired in terminological debates about what news literacy actually is, and there is little firm agreement even among UK practitioners about the definition of news literacy, while others use terms including 'media and information literacy,' 'critical media literacy' and 'news appreciation'.² Ultimately, for the purposes of this call, news literacy broadly means critical thinking skills that allow people to evaluate information, coupled with some knowledge of the means by which news is produced and distributed.
- Notwithstanding the many discussions of the importance of news literacy to citizens seeking to navigate the online information ecosystem and delineate between reliable news and mis- or disinformation, and also to the rebuilding of trust in professional journalism, relatively little is actually done to promote it at scale. The News Literacy Network is a group of initiatives that deliver various forms of education such as classroom workshops and online resources, but despite the profile of these projects their scope and reach is small.³
- Many other projects exist in the UK that cover various elements of what might be called news literacy, though that term is not consistently used. DCMS research published in 2021 gave the figure of 170 media (as opposed to news) literacy initiatives then operating in the UK.⁴ Since then,

¹ Kate Morris & Frances Yeoman (2023) Teaching Future Journalists the News: The Role of Journalism Educators in the News Literacy Movement, *Journalism Practice*, 17:7, 1573-1590, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2021.1992599](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1992599)

² Yeoman, F. (2023). The challenge of defining news literacy: Perceptions from the UK news literacy sector. *Journalism*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231211832>

³ Fran Yeoman & Kate Morris (2024) The Place of Media Organisations in the Drive for Post-pandemic News Literacy, *Journalism Practice*, 18:1, 158-180, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2023.2169186](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2023.2169186)

⁴ Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. 2021. Online Media Literacy Strategy.

some of these have ceased operation while Ofcom and others have funded new pilot projects.

- The government's position has primarily been to propose support for what the DCMS described as the "rich landscape of businesses, civil society and other organisations taking action" on media literacy.⁵ The Department for Education has previously rejected calls for digital literacy to become a 'fourth pillar' of the curriculum on the basis that core components of it were already taught in subjects such as history and IT.⁶
- However, we have not seen evidence of consistent, widespread teaching of news literacy in schools or through any other mechanism.
- In policy and regulatory circles, news literacy – whether people can differentiate, evaluate and utilise the news they access – is often included as part of wider reaching discussions about functional skills (such as the ability to use technology) and digital inclusion (access to said technology and data), with the result that it can become lost or sidelined. Metrics around digital inclusion in particular are often more concrete than those around critical thinking – e.g. the number of devices distributed under a social access scheme – and are arguably therefore more attractive to policymakers. Forthcoming research with Prof Simeon Yates has found that in some UK regions and nations, media literacy outreach is 'piggybacking' on more established digital inclusion networks and resources. It is notable that understanding of offline news media, including radio, television and print, is often excluded from conversations altogether.
- Various actors including big tech companies have stepped into the news literacy space, with varying motivations, budgets and time frames. The news media industry itself is involved in 19% of the 170 media literacy projects identified by DCMS. Our own more narrow mapping of news literacy projects found that 15% were actively run by media organisations and 35% involved journalists in some capacity.
- Teachers and news literacy practitioners that we spoke to recognised some benefits in the involvement of journalists and media organisations in news literacy teaching, including the authenticity and expertise they were able to bring. However, they also highlighted several important challenges, including navigating the issue of problematic practices in some parts of the industry; the risk of news literacy principles becoming politicised by association with particular brands; and the question of the acceptable limits of industry involvement in education; who is an acceptable player in this space and who decides that?⁷

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1004233/DCMS_Media_Literacy_Report_Roll_Out_Accessible_PDF.pdf.

⁵ Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. 2021. Online Media Literacy Strategy.

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⁶ [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://publications.](chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomeds/2184/2184.pdf)

[parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomeds/2184/2184.pdf](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomeds/2184/2184.pdf)

⁷ Fran Yeoman & Kate Morris (2024) The Place of Media Organisations in the Drive for Post-pandemic News

- This research did not conclude with a recommendation to exclude industry from news literacy education but did suggest that “policymakers and school leaders should be mindful of such motivations when tempted to rely on industry-linked initiatives, which also face other challenges around sustainable funding and limited reach, to deliver news and media literacy education.”
- Our findings from this project and also from work done for Ofcom show the challenges that external providers of news literacy education from both industry and other sectors have in securing sustainable funding, classroom time, sustained engagement and the capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of their work. I have argued elsewhere that “if a critical understanding of the information ecosystem and journalism’s place within it is considered important to civic engagement and thus to democratic health, it cannot be left to any external actor to set the parameters of that learning, provide sustained funding or eke out classroom time. If a news literacy education is for the good of society, then society, whether through the school curriculum or other means, must find a means of making it available to all.”

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