

Solomon Elliott—written evidence (PSB0027)

House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital: Inquiry into the Future of Journalism

How can public policy improve media literacy, particularly among those who have a low level of digital literacy?

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Context

In homes across the country, younger audiences are watching news programmes on their televisions more than ever. It has taken a pandemic to make this happen. The Great Lockdown gives broadcasters a golden opportunity to develop their relationship with the audience of the present and future.

A week before prime minister Boris Johnson ordered a lockdown, BBC News Channel has recorded its [biggest weekly audience](#) since 2015. Newsrooms are rising to the challenge of educating, informing and subtly reminding viewers about the vitally important role journalism plays holding those in power to account.

By the end of March 2020, research commissioned by [Channel 4](#) found its Evening News programme doubled its audience aged 16-34 compared to the previous year.

82% of the same age group said they trusted TV channels for information on coronavirus. Compared to 63% for newspapers and only 41% for social media, where 64% stated they have read or seen misinformation about coronavirus.

Matt Salmon, director of sales of Channel 4, said: "People are increasingly looking to trusted brands for information, entertainment and more importantly as a source of connection and comfort as they navigate the new state of normal life they find themselves in."

What is driving the information disorder during the coronavirus lockdown?

While the country continues to make sense of this new reality, living in a nation of empty streets, parks and schools is made more difficult during this 'infodemic'. The rejection of science and facts by some means that misinformation is being used as a crutch to cope during this time of rapid adjustment.

Senseless witch hunts against [5G masts](#) are a consequence of [news illiteracy](#) and influential figures peddling misinformation. While the majority of misinformation comes from the general public, recent research by Oxford University's [Reuters Institute](#) found that posts containing false information from politicians and celebrities across the globe are responsible for 69% of social media engagement.

Solutions

How can we ensure young people and wider society are better prepared to cope with the false information that will accompany our next social crisis, let alone another pandemic?

Reform the curriculum

Currently, 98% of children cannot tell the difference between a real and false news story. The [Cairncross review](#) recommended in February 2019 that the government should “develop a media literacy strategy, working with Ofcom and other key stakeholders to identify gaps in provision and opportunities for more collaborative working.”

We must go further than this. **Media literacy must be made a ‘core’ compulsory subject within the national curriculum.**

Media, film and TV GCSE [entries fell](#) by 12% in 2019. Media Studies is an optional GCSE and schoolchildren in England are taught media literacy indirectly. In [citizenship](#), pupils explore the role of a free press and the [computing curriculum](#) teaches practical digital safety skills. This is a good start. Media literacy must become an [EBacc](#) subject alongside English language and literature, maths, the sciences, geography, history and languages.

Young people from all backgrounds should be given a formal chance to critically evaluate information online. As a secondary school teacher, I founded [The Student View](#) in 2016, a charity working with Google, the *Financial Times* and ITN, which trains underserved teenagers as local news reporters in 20 towns and cities across the UK.

Our country should be judged by how many people are able to confidently spot misinformation.

Programme-makers need to take more risks

Refreshing the news output for young and diverse audiences is just as important as improving the national curriculum. [The Young Audiences Content Fund](#) offers news broadcasters the chance to develop factual programming that promotes the value of media literacy. Such programmes would act as a much needed educational resource particularly for secondary school teachers, who teach an age group frustratingly underserved by news broadcasters.

To date, most broadcasters have adopted a digital-first approach for Gen Z. ITV’s [The Rundown](#) has had some promising, early results. In the short term, programme-makers should schedule their news podcasts and social media news services for their TV channels.

With TV news more trusted than any other current affairs source, the coronavirus lockdown offers a once in a generation opportunity to attract new viewers from the 16-34 audience.

This ‘captive audience’ will not be around forever.

April 2020