

Frances Yeoman and Kate Morris—written evidence (FOJ0068)

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

The Authors

The authors of this submission hold a British Academy/ Leverhulme research grant to support their research into news literacy initiatives operating in the UK, and are part of an Ofcom working group looking at evaluation of such initiatives. They are journalism educators and researchers who between them have over 25 years' experience working as news journalists on local and national newspapers, including The Times, The Independent and the i. Both teach news literacy as well as other academic subjects (e.g. journalism history and theory) and practical skills training as part of the journalism degree courses at Liverpool John Moores (where Frances Yeoman is a senior lecturer) and Goldsmiths, University of London (where Kate Morris is the journalism course convenor).

While we inevitably have views on many of the questions posed as suggestions by this committee, we have endeavoured to focus our evidence on the issue most closely linked to our research and expertise. We would be happy to assist further either on this point or on others under consideration by the committee.

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

We believe that critical media literacy should be part of the [national curriculum](#) as a distinct subject. This should be done in addition to the [instrumental digital literacy \(using computers etc.\)](#) and online safety that is already taught.

We are not the only voices from the fields of media and news literacy who are calling for this and in their [July 2018 interim report on Disinformation and "fake" news](#), the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) added their voice to the campaign.

They said that "digital literacy should be the fourth pillar of education, alongside reading, writing and maths" and called for the introduction of a social media levy to enable this. In their response to the interim report published in October 2018, [the government responded in the negative](#), saying:

"Digital literacy is already taught across the national school curriculum. It is covered in the computing curriculum, which also teaches pupils about e-safety. Furthermore, in the citizenship curriculum pupils are equipped to think critically, for example through media literacy so that they can distinguish fact from fiction as well as explore freedom of speech and the role and responsibility of the media in informing and shaping public opinion. In offering a broad and balanced curriculum, schools are free to address these areas when teaching on topics like media, advertising, and safe and judicious use of social media."

We believe that this approach does not do enough to meet the very real needs of young people today in regard to their media - and by extension news - literacy. We are not alone in this. More than half (53.5%) of teachers [surveyed by the National Literacy Trust](#) in 2018 said that the national curriculum does not equip children with the literacy skills they need to identify fake news.¹

We acknowledge that some elements of media literacy, such as the role of a free press in a democracy and the teaching of skills to research and interrogate evidence are indeed touched upon by the citizenship curriculum. However, we would welcome evidence on how widely or comprehensively this is in fact being taught within what is a broad and, for most pupils, non-examined subject. Similarly, the RSE and Health Education Statutory Guidance only states that by the end of school pupils *should* (our italics) know how data is generated, collected and used online and how to be a “discerning consumer of information online”. We would question whether a piecemeal approach to news and media literacy, which scatters various aspects of the subject throughout the curriculum rather than cohering it as a discrete and obligatory subject or programme of work, risks creating a situation whereby core critical media literacy competencies risk falling through the cracks. We would also question whether most school pupils possess the meta-cognitive abilities needed to apply the knowledge gathered from this diffused approach to their own media consumption.

The research that exists on this front shows that what young people require is something that responds to new concerns, arising out of our ever-changing digital information ecosystem that has transformed how audiences consume media in the 21st century.

There are no reliable measures to gauge how media, or news, literate UK schoolchildren are. However, a growing body of evidence is suggesting that the ability of young people in general critically to evaluate online information, including news, is extremely poor. [Stanford History Education Group \(2019\)](#) evaluated the online reasoning skills of 3,446 US high school students from eight to 12th grade (aged 12-17) between June 2018 and May 2019. They described the results they found as “troubling”. Two-thirds of students failed to tell the difference between a piece of news and an advertisement, while 96 per cent did not consider why ties between a climate change website and the fossil fuel industry might be troubling. Overall, the group wrote, students struggled on all of the tasks.

As to what we know about young people’s news literacy levels in 2019 in the UK, the picture is confusing. Several surveys have raised concern about the ability of school children in the UK to spot mis- and dis-information. The [Commission on Fake News and Critical Literacy in Schools](#) reported in 2017 that only two per cent of children and young people in the UK have the critical literacy skills to tell whether a news story is real or fake (2017).

In 2018, Ofcom research found that 69 per cent of 12-15 year-olds who visited websites or apps they had not used before ‘ever’ (as opposed to regularly) considered whether they trusted the information on these sites or apps to be true or accurate. A quarter did not. Half of 12 to 15 year-olds in the same survey who used social media for news said it was difficult to tell whether news on social media was accurate, suggesting that respondents at least had some awareness of the challenges they faced.

While these surveys shed some light on the UK context, it must be emphasised that they examine different age groups to those in the US, and crucially, unlike Stanford, are based on self-reported behaviours rather than independently assessed skills. Further, neither survey established what the young people understood news to be, before asking them how much of it they read or watched.

It remains to be seen whether the Coronavirus pandemic generates a substantial or lasting shift in news diets. However, studies predating the crisis that examined actual

¹ We would argue that the term ‘fake news’ is unhelpful and outdated in 2020, and would prefer that educational initiatives and policy-makers talked in terms such as mis-, dis- and mal-information, as per taxonomies created by First Draft and others (<https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/fake-news-complicated/>)

(rather than self-reported) news consumption behaviours, including a further study by [Ofcom](#) and work by [Cardiff University](#), suggest that people over-report news consumption and consume very little of what might be deemed 'hard' or 'public interest' news relating to the functioning of a democratic society.

[The Reuters Institute](#) published a report by consultants Flamingo in 2019 into how young people (aged 18-35) engage with the news and identified that young audiences see news as "what you should know (to an extent), but also what is useful to know, what is interesting to know, and what is fun to know". It also found that the role of news for their respondents was apparently "primarily individualistic", again cutting across notions of public interest journalism.

As the truism goes, the public interest is not the same as "what the public is interested in". Martin Moore and Gordon Ramsay of the Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power at King's College London made a strong case for differentiation between the two - and for providing support for "public interest news and information" rather than journalism (even of high quality) per se, in their [submission to the Cairncross Review](#). They wrote:

"There could be a dearth of high-quality film reviews, consumer product reviews or travelogues. Yet if this was the case, there is no evidence to suggest that this would threaten community cohesion, undermine public accountability and jeopardise democratic legitimacy. By contrast, there is evidence that a dearth of public-interest news and information, especially reporting of public authorities, can have dire democratic consequences."

Some question this normative position that some news is more important than others to society, or that it is possible to define what constitutes "public interest" journalism or indeed a professional journalist in the age of citizen publishers. However, the recent inclusion of "journalists and broadcasters who are providing public service broadcasting" in the recent list of key workers vital to the Covid-19 response suggests that this remains an important distinction. The question is whether audiences and particularly young people are able to make such a distinction or understand why they should.

Ofcom's more recent research into attitudes towards the BBC's news output, from [October 2019](#), identified a similar trend. It found that young people felt the BBC's news coverage was "lacking opinion" and "too dry". In order for them to engage with news, personalities were required. "Younger and less engaged BBC TV news audiences felt journalists such as Stacey Dooley or Reggie Yates brought news/current affairs topics to life and helped improve 'relatability'".

[A companion report](#) that tracked the news consumption of 24 people aged between 17-64 in the summer of 2019 noted that the rise of mobile phone use alongside personalised news feeds meant that people were now able to "engage with the news they want". It is also worth noting that the 24 participants struggled to define "current affairs" and over-reported their news consumption, with news being defined loosely for the purpose of the exercise - from scrolling past a headline about a celebrity to reading an article in its entirety on the Guardian app.

What this picture suggests is that young audiences - in this choice-driven digital environment - are losing touch with public interest news at a fast rate. It should not be forgotten that the next generation of journalists are growing up as part of this cohort. Our ongoing research indicates that there are concerns among journalism lecturers about their incoming cohorts on issues such as objectivity, engagement with serious news content and the separation of opinion and fact within journalistic content. +This is precisely the area where the practice of media, or news literacy - as a pedagogical subject - is seeking to make a difference.

One of the key planks of the [media literacy approach we support](#) – initiated by the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy in the US long before concerns about so-called fake news became mainstream – is an attempt to educate audiences not only on how to critically analyse news texts, but to understand why well-researched, sourced, and fact-checked news matters to functioning democracies. The Center states that one of their four key values underpinning their approach is this: “Appreciation of the power of reliable information and the importance of a free flow of information in a democratic society.”

It is noteworthy that 12 years after establishing the Center and having attracted millions of dollars in grant funding to teach news literacy to university students, Howard Schneider, the founding Dean of Stony Brook’s journalism school, [left at the end of 2018](#) to focus full-time on bringing news literacy into school curricula in New York and across the USA. He said at the time:

“Many people want a ‘quick fix’ to the problem of ‘fake news,’ something as simple as the tech companies tweaking their algorithms. But the real solution requires transformative change, the realization that every student in America needs to be inoculated with a dose of News Literacy before they leave middle school.”

In short, understanding why they need to know information, as well as where it came from, is a vital skill that children need to be taught. Falling engagement with public interest news (cf Ofcom, Reuters Institute) is compounded by extremely low levels of trust in the UK’s media. [Recent research by the Reuters Institute](#) shows that public trust in the news in the UK has steadily fallen from 51% in 2015 to 40% in 2019. We contend that if schoolchildren were better able to understand the information they were encountering online, they would have a stronger appreciation of sites that published information they could trust.

There is some work being done by charities, media organisations and others to generate news literacy projects that offer workshops in schools or digital resources to teachers. These include NewsWise, run by the Guardian Foundation and National Literacy Trust, and some are brought together under the informal umbrella of the [News Literacy Network](#). We are currently working on a research project to map and cohere what is a fragmented national picture in terms of the scale, nature and focus of this work. DCMS has [engaged consultants to map online media literacy projects](#) and review evidence of online media literacy initiatives; this mapping appears to date to have focussed on a self-reported survey of project leads. We are as yet unclear as to whether work in schools is covered by this ‘online’ remit. We would also contend that media and news literacy must extend beyond the (albeit crucial) online space to consider the news media in broadcast, print and other forms.

As we have [written elsewhere](#), many existing news media initiatives “are limited in scope and scale, reliant on external funding and in most cases not subject to any independent evaluation or benchmarking”. Often, because of limited resources or the pressures associated with allocating school time to a non-curriculum subject, they are based around a one-off workshop or short-term scheme of work. The evidence from a [meta-analysis by Full Fact](#), by contrast, suggests that more sustained interventions yield more positive effects. Only a small minority of the UK’s pupils have had access to any of these schemes, and school involvement in them is often reliant on an individual pro-active teacher, awareness of the availability of external provision and in some cases, budget. There is also a question about how long the funding for them from external providers (such as Google’s backing of NewsWise) will last.

While the expansion of the news literacy sector in the last few years is to be welcomed, it is at nothing like the scale required to deliver improved media literacy in a

comprehensive or sustained way. The Cairncross Review questioned whether collaboration between news literacy projects could be encouraged as part of a governmental media literacy strategy. We would argue that while greater collaboration would be welcome, this should not replace action from government itself, in the form of prioritising a critical understanding of news media and its democratic role as a public good worthy of educational time in its own right.

We would also question whether it is sustainable or appropriate for the big tech platforms, who themselves are held partly responsible in some quarters for not doing enough to combat mis- and dis-information online (cf DCMS Misinformation and Fake news interim report) to continue in their current role as the primary funders of many of this country's most prominent news literacy education initiatives.

There are likewise problems associated with news publishers running their own news literacy programmes. As the [media literacy expert Professor David Buckingham puts it](#): "Some critics would see these initiatives as akin to fast food companies teaching children about nutrition, or oil giants teaching about the environment. Indeed, there is a long history of companies using schools as venues for corporate propaganda, under the guise of 'giving something back'."

To avoid these conflicts we argue that the solution is clear: to introduce a form of critical digital information literacy into the national curriculum that will ensure young people have the tools to step back and ask themselves a set of basic questions about what they are reading online and the role of news in their lives and their society.

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