# Dr Gianfranco Polizzi—written evidence (FEO0123)

**House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into Freedom of Expression Online**

**Executive summary**

- This written evidence is a response to the inquiry into freedom of expression online of the UK House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee. Concerned with digital citizenship education, it addresses the following questions: 1) *how should digital citizenship and etiquette be taught in schools?* and 2) *are there any international examples of approaches to digital citizenship and etiquette from which the UK can learn?*

- These questions are addressed here by focusing on the importance of taking an approach to digital citizenship education that is both competence- and virtue-based. Such an approach should rely more robustly on the provision of digital literacy education in synergy with virtue-based character education in relation to the use of digital technologies (i.e., the internet and social media). Relatedly, digital citizenship education is framed here not just as the teaching of how to use such technologies both wisely and responsibly, but also in terms of how digital skills and knowledge can be developed via formal education in order to facilitate participation in civic life (understood as both community and political life).

- After a section on the extent to which digital citizenship education in the UK is patchy and lacks a unified framework, the importance of taking both a competence and a virtue-based character approach to this form of education, in ways that overlap with citizenship education, is discussed in response to Q1 above. Promising examples of research and practice on both national and international levels are then discussed in response to Q2, before concluding with practical policy recommendations.

- This submission argues that **more efforts are needed to ensure that digital citizenship education is promoted in the UK in ways that rely more robustly on digital literacy education and on character education aimed at cultivating virtues such as compassion, honesty and wisdom in relation to how students use digital technologies**. Relatedly, it is argued that **this form of education needs to overlap more explicitly with citizenship education** with a view to encouraging students to use digital technologies not only in ways that are ethically sound, but also in the context of participating more actively in society.

- Along these lines, the practical policy recommendations of this submission are:

  - A unified framework is needed to promote and create a stronger ethos surrounding digital citizenship education in the UK. This should be done by taking more comprehensively both a competence and a virtue-based character approach based on the provision of digital literacy education as

well as character education, aimed at cultivating students' virtues online, in ways that overlap with citizenship education.

- The school curriculum needs to be revised in order to promote such an approach to digital citizenship education across different subjects. More specifically, it needs to ensure 1) that digital literacy is taught with more emphasis on the importance of understanding the broader digital environment; 2) that students are encouraged to cultivate and show online character virtues such as compassion, honesty and wisdom; and 3) that such an approach to digital citizenship contributes not only to students' wise and responsible use of digital technologies, but also to their participation in civic life.

- Schools and educators should be provided with adequate guidelines, resources and training. Meanwhile, civil society organisations working in areas related to digital citizenship education in the UK should be supported in producing their own educational resources.

**About the author**

1.  I (Gianfranco Polizzi) am a Research fellow in the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues in the School of Education at the University of Birmingham, where I research questions of character education in the digital age, with a focus on what we call *cyber-wisdom* (defined below) and digital citizenship education.

2.  Prior to joining the Jubilee Centre, I completed my PhD in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Fully funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), my doctoral research explored the intersection of digital literacy and civic engagement. My academic interests, which lie at the intersection of media studies and education studies, include digital literacy, digital resilience, cyber-wisdom, digital citizenship, and civic engagement.

3.  This written evidence is presented in a personal capacity, independently of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. It addresses the questions: 1) *how should digital citizenship and etiquette be taught in schools?* and 2) *are there any international examples of approaches to digital citizenship and etiquette from which the UK can learn?*

**Section 1: Digital citizenship education in the UK**

4.  Digital citizenship education is widely understood as the teaching of how to use digital technologies responsibly, particularly in the context of interacting with others and participating in society (Ribble, 2007). According to the OECD, the promotion of this form of education is perceived in many countries across the world, including the UK, as the most pressing global challenge of the digital age (Burns & Gottschalk, 2020). In the UK, digital citizenship education is patchy and lacks a unified framework. On the one hand, it is based on the provision of digital literacy education aimed at equipping students with the functional and critical skills and knowledge required to use digital technologies both safely and actively, in terms of

navigating as well as producing online content. On the other hand, not only is digital literacy embedded to a limited extent in the school curriculum (Polizzi, 2020a), but students' ethical and responsible use of digital technologies is largely promoted in ways that place little emphasis on the importance of cultivating character virtues such as compassion and honesty (Polizzi & Harrison, 2020).

5.  While different subjects in the school curriculum play a role in promoting valuable digital skills and knowledge, considerable gaps remain in terms of digital literacy education. Subjects like Computing, Citizenship, and Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education encourage students to develop, respectively, functional digital skills and knowledge, a critical understanding of media bias and misinformation in the context of democracy, and an understanding of how to use digital technologies (e.g., when interacting with others on social media) in ways that are mindful of users' mental health and socio-emotional wellbeing. The subjects mentioned above, however, place little emphasis on the importance of developing a critical understanding of the broader digital environment – that is, of how internet corporations operate and use algorithms that undermine users' privacy for commercial purposes, as well as of the internet's potentials and constraints for civic life (Polizzi & Taylor, 2019). Such understanding is essential in the context of using digital technologies to participate in society. The internet presents considerable opportunities for participation, activism and the sharing of public life, but also contributes to data tracking, surveillance, misinformation and the polarisation of public debate (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Ironically, even though a subject like Media Studies is ideal for equipping students with a critical understanding of the digital environment, it is only optional at GCSE and A-level, and is taken by less than 8% of students (Polizzi & Taylor, 2019).

6.  Regarding the extent to which students are encouraged to develop not just digital skills and knowledge but the ethical know-how required to use digital technologies both wisely and responsibly, not only are schools provided with limited guidance (e.g., DfE, 2019), but they often tend to act in reaction to the challenges that the internet presents, and not through a planned and reflective approach. Whether through assemblies, Citizenship, Computing or PSHE education, or through advice to parents, most schools adopt strategies that can be classified in terms of three prominent moral theories: 1) deontology (imposing rules and norms of appropriate behaviour online, commonly referred to as *netiquette*, e.g., in terms of screen time or social media use); 2) utilitarianism (encouraging students to think about the consequences of their online actions); and 3) virtue ethics (cultivating character virtues such as compassion, honesty and wisdom) (Harrison, 2021a). In practice, however, educators are neither conscious of, nor provided with opportunities to understand, the ways in which these moral theories might shape their own teaching practices, or which of these, if any, should be prioritised (Harrison & Polizzi, 2020).

7.  Indeed, teachers often lack adequate training in this area. Furthermore, while they have access to lesson plans and resources produced by numerous civil society organisations (e.g., Common Sense Media, Internet Matters, Childnet) that promote internet safety and digital citizenship

education, there is no clear understanding of which resources might work better than others (Polizzi & Taylor, 2019).

8. Finally, while digital citizenship is concerned in principle with using digital technologies to participate responsibly in society, in practice little in the ways in which it is promoted overlaps with citizenship education, which is primarily concerned with the teaching of civic literacy (the skills and knowledge required to understand the socio-political system and to participate in civic life). This is reflected in the extent to which digital citizenship education prioritises *de facto* students' ethical and responsible use of digital technologies over the extent to which such technologies may be used for civic purposes, from volunteering or sharing public life on social media to seeking political information or organising action online (Emejulu & McGregor, 2019).

**Section 2: Taking a competence and virtue-based character approach that overlaps with citizenship education**

9. This submission argues that, in order to promote digital citizenship education more robustly in the UK, **a competence and virtue-based character approach, one that overlaps more explicitly with citizenship education, is essential**. While many schools provide some elements of digital literacy and character education, the question is: how should these two be approached in order to promote digital citizenship education both more cohesively and more comprehensively?

10. In terms of digital literacy education, **students need to be better equipped with a critical understanding of the digital environment**. Such an understanding is crucial to their development as citizens who understand the context in which information circulates online and is subject to practices of data tracking, and who know how to navigate the potentials and constraints that the internet presents for civic life (Polizzi, 2020b). This means that, besides promoting both functional digital literacy and the critical ability to evaluate online information, more needs to be done in schools to develop students' understanding of how the internet is embedded in power structures, and of what this means in the context of participating in society.

11. At the same time, when it comes to cultivating students' ethical know-how in relation to using digital technologies, **more emphasis needs to be placed on prioritising a virtue-based character approach**, complemented by deontological and utilitarian strategies. It is not sufficient to rely exclusively on these two strategies. Not only are terms such as "etiquette" (or, in the context of using the internet, "netiquette") becoming obsolete, but they prescribe rules and norms of conduct that can be too abstract, oblivious to users' moral motivations, and in practice hard to monitor. Meanwhile, expecting children to reflect on the long-term repercussions of their temporally distant online actions is challenging; it might work in some instances but not in others. This is why more efforts are needed to cultivate in students what Harrison and colleagues from the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham refer to as *cyber-wisdom* – the ability to do the right thing at the right time,

when they are online (Harrison, 2016). Cyber-wisdom education aspires to equip students with an understanding of how to deploy multiple virtues (e.g., compassion, honesty) enabling them to navigate more autonomously both online opportunities (e.g., for learning, socialisation, participation) and online risks (e.g., online abuse, misinformation) (Harrison, 2021b; Harrison & Polizzi, 2021). Grounded in the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), cyber-wisdom is itself an intellectual virtue (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017). But it also functions as a meta-virtue that is crucial, especially when presented with moral dilemmas, to choosing the right course of action and to deploying different virtues depending on context. This may include, for example, deciding whether to be loyal to a friend or to report, in the name of honesty, something that they might have done online, including posting something offensive or spreading misinformation.

12. Finally, **such a competence and virtue-based character approach to digital citizenship education needs to be promoted more explicitly in tandem with citizenship education**. This means that a stronger ethos surrounding digital citizenship education is needed, and that citizenship education should go beyond the teaching of civic literacy in order to incorporate both digital literacy and cyber-wisdom education. Indeed, it is important that students learn not only how to use digital technologies wisely and responsibly, but also how to do so with a view to participating more actively in civic life.

**Section 3: Promising examples of research and practice**

13. Both international governmental bodies such as the Council of Europe (2019) and international organisations like Common Sense Media (James et al., 2019) have produced useful resources for the promotion of both a competence and a character approach to digital citizenship education. While the language of virtue could have been more prominent in their resources, these could be used as examples for developing curricula and lesson plans in the UK that take a more comprehensive approach to digital citizenship education. A strength of civil society organisations like Common Sense Media is that their work, as in the case of governmental bodies like the Council of Europe, is evidence-based, both in terms of drawing on new research and in terms of producing their own research. Their digital literacy resources, furthermore, do not consist exclusively of handouts, worksheets or multimedia content, which is often the case with these kinds of resources. Rather, they encourage students to use digital technologies in the classroom, asking them, for example, to evaluate online content by comparing websites and by running online searches in synergy with knowledge of what these technologies afford, and of their implications for society (Polizzi & Taylor, 2019). Meanwhile, while more needs to be done to equip students with a critical understanding of the digital environment, the Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) (2021) has developed, together with Shout Out UK, useful resources that promote more cohesively aspects of digital literacy along with civic literacy.

14. Finally, when it comes to the ethical dimension of digital citizenship education, a promising example of research and practice lies in the work

conducted by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. Affiliated with the School of Education at the University of Birmingham, the Jubilee Centre has been actively promoting and researching – as well as training teachers and providing useful resources in support of – character education, approached from a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethical perspective. Two recent surveys conducted by the Jubilee Centre show that most adolescents in England, as well as most parents in the UK, prioritise the importance of showing wisdom online over other virtues (Harrison & Polizzi, 2021). Not only are these findings promising insofar as wisdom represents a meta-virtue that is crucial to coordinating multiple virtues, depending on context, but they also set the scene for what the Jubilee Centre is currently developing: a school intervention aimed at encouraging secondary school students in England to cultivate cyber-wisdom (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2021). This school intervention, which will be delivered and evaluated starting from September 2021, promotes cyber-wisdom education in ways that overlap with digital citizenship education, as a viable option in the fight against online risks, and in support of children and young people's uptake of online opportunities.

## Conclusion: Recommendations for action

15. In line with the previous sections, this submission calls on the Government to:

    I.   Promote digital citizenship education in the UK by taking both a competence and a virtue-based character approach, relying more robustly on the provision of digital literacy and cyber-wisdom education, in ways that overlap more explicitly with citizenship education.

    II.  Develop a unified framework for promoting and creating a stronger ethos surrounding digital citizenship education, as approached in this submission.

    III. Revise the school curriculum to ensure that digital citizenship education, as approached here, is promoted across key subjects such as Computing, PSHE and Citizenship, while also making Media Studies a compulsory subject or, alternatively, while encouraging schools and educators to use Media Studies resources as part of different subjects.

    IV.  Ensure that digital literacy is promoted through the school curriculum in ways that incorporate not just functional digital literacy and the critical ability to evaluate online content, but also critical knowledge about the digital environment – that is, how internet corporations operate, along with the internet's potentials and constraints for civic life.

    V.   Ensure that, besides developing digital skills and knowledge, students are encouraged through the school curriculum to cultivate cyber-wisdom as a meta-virtue that coordinates the deployment of different virtues online such as compassion and honesty, depending on context,

and in tandem with rules-based and consequence-based educational strategies.

VI. Ensure that digital citizenship education, based on the provision of digital literacy and cyber-wisdom education, is promoted with a view to facilitating not only students' wise and responsible use of digital technologies, but also their participation in civic life.

VII. Provide guidelines and resources to support schools and educators in promoting digital citizenship education, as approached here, while also supporting civil society organisations in the UK to produce their own educational resources.

VIII. Provide educators with adequate training in terms both of digital literacy education and of cyber-wisdom education.

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