

National Literacy Trust – written evidence (DAD0065)

1. (Question 3) What role should every stage of education play in helping to create a healthy, active, digitally literate democracy?

1.1. We believe that education should play a large role in helping to create a healthy, active and digitally literate democracy, particularly through the teaching of critical literacy skills. We refer here to critical literacy as the approach of teaching literacy that encourages readers to be active participants in the reading process¹. We believe that it is increasingly important that children develop effective critical literacy skills in school to enable them to navigate the digital age.

1.2. In 2018 we ran the [Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills in Schools](#) Commission through the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy. This report identified close links between an individual's literacy skills and their ability to engage with democracy as an active and informed citizen. As Anna Bassi, Editor of the Week Junior said *'it's obvious that one of the most powerful weapons in the battle against fake news is literacy: children need to read widely.'* Literacy skills are important in helping to create a healthy, active, digitally literate democracy, but the development of critical literacy skills is needed to enable pupils to further challenge what they read.

1.3. Research suggests that critical literacy is taught most effectively through a whole-school, cross-curricular approach² that encourages readers to be active participants in the reading process, rather than passive absorbers of information and enabling them to make informed choices as a creators, curators and communicators of content. We are confident that many of the skills required to navigate online texts are already included within several programmes of study and we are therefore not advocating for a curriculum change. However, more could be done to ensure that teachers make explicit links between these skills and their application in a digital context. For example: in maths looking at ways that statistics can be used to present the same information in different ways; in history assessing the reliability of source material in contemporary situations; in English considering authorial intention in relation to fake news; in PSHE (personal, social, health and economic) education exploring the impact of social media posts on wellbeing and mental health (linking to the new statutory health and relationships education guidance).

1.4. The 2018 commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills in Schools also recommended that the teaching of critical

¹All Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy: Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills in Schools 2018 <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/fake-news-and-critical-literacy-final-report/>

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literacy relevant for the digital age should be included within Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD), equipping teachers with the relevant subject knowledge and enabling them to be confident to embed it across the curriculum. It noted that the assessment framework should be updated to position critical literacy skills more explicitly, reflecting the changing digital landscape and the threats posed by fake news, especially within the Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 frameworks. We strongly supported the former Education Minister's announcement around including media literacy in the English, Citizenship and Computing curriculum and would welcome clarification on this point.

1.5. NewsWise is a cross-curricular news literacy project for 9-11 year olds in the UK, run by the Guardian Foundation, National Literacy Trust and the PSHE Association, and funded by Google. The project aims to strengthen children's critical thinking skills before they start using social media, and aims to deepen children and young people's understanding of why and how the news is produced, with sessions on selecting facts, checking sources and news analysis to develop children's skills of informed questioning and verification. To date, 540 teachers have received face to face training from the NewsWise team and 2,476 children have participated in workshops. Children who completed the NewsWise programme were 35% more likely to say they would check if news came from a source they trusted (48% pre, 70% post)³. It is therefore clear that it is possible to equip children with the critical literacy skills they need before they are active on social media. For more information on the project please see the submission to this inquiry from NewsWise.

2. (Question 9) To what extent do you think that there are those who are using social media to attempt to undermine trust in the democratic process and in democratic institutions; and what might be the best ways to combat this and strengthen faith in democracy?

2.1. As part of the Fake News and Teaching of Critical Literacy in Schools Commission 2018, we established that fake news is a serious problem for children and young people, threatening their wellbeing, trust in journalism and democracy itself. Further to this, in our Family News Literacy Survey we found that most adults agree '*fake news is a problem when you have to decide who to vote for*'. It also showed that adults with lower levels of education and lower socio-economic status stand to benefit most from increased support and confidence in news literacy.

2.2. There are a number of ways to combat this. The National Literacy Trust convenes and chairs the News Literacy Network, a group of organisations delivering activities which aim to improve news literacy. Through collaborative working the Network seeks to empower and equip news consumers of all ages with the confidence, knowledge and skills to engage critically with news and current affairs. One of the aims of the

³ NewsWise evaluation report 2018-19,
https://uploads.guim.co.uk/2019/07/18/NewsWise_evaluation_report_2018-19.pdf

network is to establish best practice principles for delivering news literacy interventions based on evidence of what works.

- 2.3. We would strongly advise that adults and children should be empowered to navigate the media. By developing critical literacy skills, people are empowered to navigate online texts and share information responsibly and this also improves their trust in mainstream media. It is important that children develop effective critical literacy skills to enable them to navigate the digital age. The NewsWise project aims to create a generation of news literate children within five years. This includes a broad range of attitudes, behaviours and skills.
- 2.4. Having taken part in the workshops, there was a significant increase in the percentage of children who showed increased skills and confidence in questioning the news stories they came across. Children were more likely to say they would make a range of checks to determine if a news story was trustworthy having taken part in a NewsWise workshop. The team have developed and piloted 'family workshops' for parents and their children which we are now delivering in some of the most financially disadvantaged areas in the country. Adults also need support to navigate online texts, yet they are unlikely to self-select for initiatives of interventions aimed at developing their skills of identifying disinformation. In our family workshops, adults and children work together as a team to solve clues and identify fake news, untrustworthy sources, sort fakes from rumours, and understand how fake photos and clickbait headlines are created. We would like to see the government amplifying what is already happening in this area through increased prioritisation of the issue and recognition of what works.

3. (Question 10) What might be the best ways of reducing the effects of misinformation on social media platforms?

- 3.1. Literacy skills, and critical literacy skills in particular, have an increasingly important role to play in helping to reduce the effects of misinformation on social media platforms. It is also in the interests of social media organisations to ensure that their users have a positive experience of using their product, including better awareness of fake news. Karim Palant, UK Public Policy Manager at Facebook, stated *"Getting this right is potentially one of the most empowering things about getting platforms like ours to have a sustainable, safe and...positive impact on young people."*
- 3.2. Children and young people today are growing up in a globalised world and are processing information from a wider variety of sources than ever before. It is every child's right to be able to acquire the critical literacy skills they need to navigate the potential pitfalls when consuming news, particularly when using online sources and social media. The Fake News and Teaching of Critical Literacy in Schools Commission 2018 brought to light the significant role social media is playing in defining and driving the way young people experience the news. This is why critical literacy skills are so important, as they have the potential to provide a

strong foundation for identifying misinformation by supporting a deeper consideration of text and by teaching readers to consider not only what a text says (or doesn't), but who said it, why, and indeed how and where. Pennycook and Rand (2019b) suggest that the promotion of initiatives that encourage analytic thinking and critical analysis of online news content may be most effective in mitigating the impact of misinformation⁴. The NewsWise programme was created as a response to calls for children's news literacy to be better supported in a digital age and supports children's critical literacy skills through engagement with the news. After the programme children showed a deeper understanding of how news stories are created, with the percentage aware of the need for fact-checking increasing from 61.5% to 75.6%, an increase of 22.9%. This helps them to question what they see on social media, and therefore reduce the sharing of misinformation.

3.3. However, the strengthening of the teaching of critical literacy in schools should take place within the context of appropriate action by the digital industry⁵. Teachers who responded to the Fake News and Critical Literacy Commission, indicated that the media should play its part in supporting the development of children's critical literacy skills and pupils who submitted written evidence also felt that they could benefit from workshops run by specialist educators such as people with digital or journalistic background. Facebook submitted some written evidence to the Commission where they highlighted some of the ways they are working to limit the spread of fake news. There is also a role for the regulator in reducing misinformation on social media. We welcome the development of a media literacy strategy and we are well placed to support Ofcom and/or the new regulator in this process. We would also encourage the regulator to support the existing education and awareness activities.

⁴All Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy: Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills in Schools 2018 <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/fake-news-and-critical-literacy-final-report/>

⁵ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2017/10/11/anne-longfield-childrens-commissioner-for-england-responds-to-governments-green-paper-on-internet-safety/>