

Media literacy

A NEW LEASE OF LIFE FOR AN OLD POLICY

Increasingly, the media mediate between public and government, business and consumers, teachers and pupils, even among family members (Livingstone, 2009a). As work, education, commerce, social relations and leisure rely ever more on the media for their everyday functioning, attention is growing to the ways in which the public could be enabled to undertake an effective, critical and creative engagement with the media and, thereby, the wider world. The convergence and diversification in media and communications technologies and services open up new opportunities for individuals, and yet these same changes also expose individuals to new risks. Given the pace, complexity and globalised nature of technological change, many argue for a flexible co- or self-regulatory regime, central to which is the devolution of risk management to individuals, albeit often couched in the discourse of ‘empowerment’ and ‘consumer choice’. Indeed, from a citizen and consumer perspective, the same changes that spur the shift in regulatory burden from the state or firm to the individual are also those that increase the potential harms that individuals must work to avoid. In the new regulatory regime, individuals are expected to inform themselves, make their own choices in a complex technological environment and bear the cost of any mismanagement of personal risk. They may also become, more positively, more responsible for creating their own opportunities.

The expectation that ordinary people can and will become informed decision-makers, competent in maximising their opportunities and minimising their risks, is widely promoted in terms of ‘literacy’. Each sector of society, it seems, has its own literacy – health literacy, financial literacy, environmental literacy, and also, media literacy. Each sector, too, is moving away from a reliance on the supposedly benevolent state authorities who traditionally have determined what is ‘good’ for people and from what they should be protected. Instead we are witnessing an emphasis on consumer education (often at point of sale), transparency in information provision (such as educational or hospital league tables ranking outcomes) and privatised customer care services (from helpdesks, call centres and insurance schemes). The parallel provision of mechanisms for independent oversight, accountability and redress is more variable and, following the UK’s 2010 so-called ‘bonfire of the quangos’,¹ ever less certain in the future.

In relation to media and communications policy, the argument for media literacy runs as follows. We are witnessing the emergence of a complex consumer landscape that promises more opportunity and choice, whether or not delivered in practice, and simultaneously affords more risk if poor decisions are made. To navigate this landscape, the public must become literate in the specific knowledge requirements of each sector. In a subsequent discursive twist, literacy is linked to citizenship: for instance, in the media and communications sector, there is growing emphasis not only on media literacy but also on ‘digital citizenship’, for people must not only navigate, evaluate and select from a digital array of information, but they also act, connect and participate in a digitally mediated society, and this invites a rethinking of the familiar rights and responsibilities long associated with citizenship.

¹ In the Public Bodies Bill (House of Lords, 2010), one of the early acts of the Coalition government was to close, cut or redirect the activities of a large number of quasi-autonomous bodies (‘quangos’) working to promote and protect the public or consumer interest in diverse sectors.

Although ‘media literacy’ has become widely spoken about by multiple stakeholders from industry to civil society and from government ministers to global content providers, the term is far from recently invented. Given a growing de- (or re-) regulatory shift in the media and communications sector, media literacy has become a shorthand way of pointing to the array of policies and initiatives designed to bridge the gap between what people know about and what they may need to know about media in an increasingly liberalised and globalised environment. Does that make its promotion simply a neoliberal policy for media markets, or can media literacy have some wider and more positive implications for citizens?

Of course, media literacy has long referred to the public’s knowledge of and competence in relation to media, drawing on a field of study and a diverse arena for educational and community initiatives spanning print literacy, film literacy, advertising literacy and visual literacy, among others. Media education has been taught in schools in many countries for some decades, sometimes as part of a protectionist agenda (teaching children to critique and be wary, the better to defend themselves against mass culture), sometimes as part of a creative agenda (teaching children to appreciate the cultural forms and genres, the better to extend their aesthetic and critical understanding), and more recently as part of an empowerment agenda (teaching children to use the technical tools of self-expression, the better to participate in modern society). The value of media literacy is also recognised by critical scholars and civil society advocates as part of a wider citizenship agenda, as a form of participation and inclusion, as a means of overcoming disadvantage, a means of community empowerment or, more tactically, as a preferable alternative to technical or regulatory content restrictions.

Moreover, the history of media literacy has not been without contestation. Indeed, there is a lively legacy of struggle over definitions, methods and purposes (Bazalgette, 2001; Buckingham, 1998; Hobbs, 1998). Hobbs (2008) observes that the convergence of media and information technologies acts to make *more* rather than *less* evident the long-standing differences among advocates of the different approaches.² In the late 1990s, ‘the “great debates” in media literacy centred on the tensions between *protectionist* educators concerned about the toxicity of media’s cultural environment and others who emphasized student *empowerment*’ (Hobbs, 2008: 437, emphasis added). Today, although the theme of protection persists among child psychologists, parenting groups and some content regulators,³ most academic and policy commentators emphasise empowerment over protection, prioritising a view of the media as affording an expressive, cultural and participatory opportunity which brings significant benefits to those able to ‘read’ its codes and conventions and to use its tools and technologies.

Thus, although the mass media’s power to (mis)represent the world to its audiences continues, there is increasing interest not only in their representational role but also in their mediating one. Once, everyday knowledge could be partitioned into distinct spheres relevant to school, work or home. Now it is converging in ways that challenge publics and public policy. The task of information search, for instance, once addressed by providing access to

² Hobbs (2008) distinguishes between media literacy, information literacy, critical literacy and media management (broadly, a public health approach to counteract media-induced harms).

³ Here the view is of media as substantially if not fundamentally harmful, necessitating defensive responses (critical, cognitive, social) on the part of individual recipients if they are to discriminate among contents and so stave off any ill-effects of exposure. With widespread access to diverse and at times extreme forms of online content, debates are once again rife over whether matters of harm and offence are best addressed through education or regulation.

public libraries (and associated experts) now intersects with teaching people to manage a computer interface (previously a rather specialised skill for the few). This task is undertaken in private at home (necessitating home-school or informal learning/lifelong programmes to reach into the home), and it must contend with a vastly expanded array of possible search results not pre-filtered according to editorial standards, commercial agendas or political biases. Take another example: the activity of creating communication was once taught to children in school as a matter of curricula knowledge (reading and writing) and regarded as sufficient for a lifetime. But today's adults must continually learn to communicate in new ways, though they are unlikely to return to school to do so and cannot be reliably reached in other ways – hence the haphazard reach of adult media literacy campaigns and the unequal take-up of e-government initiatives to submit online tax forms or blog with political candidates.

What people know about media has become significant, not only in terms of the benefit of such knowledge to them as individuals. This knowledge is being discursively and materially embedded in the principles, funding and practices of the private, public and third sector organisations that shape the media and communications environment. Furthermore, positively promoting this knowledge has become a policy priority. In a fast-changing digital environment, it can no longer be assumed that formal childhood education plus adult experience of the world is sufficient to provide the skills and knowledge for a flexible, engaged, participatory and competitive society. The world, put simply, is changing too fast, and so policy makers concerned with public and private sector innovation require adults to be encouraged, if they are not already motivated, to commit to a process of continual learning and updating of their skills and competences.

A PUZZLING TASK FOR THE NEW REGULATOR

Section 11 of the Communications Act 2003 accorded Ofcom a particular and, in the history of media regulation, an unprecedented, responsibility to 'promote media literacy' among the general public, and the consequences are being widely watched by governments around the world. Given rapid convergence across digital platforms, the focus of media literacy is widening to include not only the knowledge of audiences of audiovisual media but public engagement with a burgeoning range of information and communication technology (ICT). It was incorporated into the New Labour government's *Digital Britain* agenda, with the appointment of a Minister for Digital Inclusion and a Champion for Digital Inclusion, the review and development of schools' media education curriculum, and a greater requirement placed on broadcasters and content providers to educate the public in the emerging conventions of digital representation, persuasion and meaning creation.⁴

When first instituted, the requirement placed on Ofcom to promote media literacy was unclear to many within and beyond the regulator. As Ofcom's then Communications Director, Matt Peacock, put it in 2005:⁵ 'It's a very diffuse concept. It's really hard to nail it

⁴ For example, the UK's National Plan for Digital Participation, a strategic, state-led, multi-stakeholder initiative, designed 'to ensure that everyone who wants to be online can get online, do more online and benefit from the advantages of being online' (2010: para. 6), was launched by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills in March 2010. This included multiple references to literacy, including a definition of 'digital media literacy' as 'the ability to use, understand and create digital media and communication' (BIS and DCMS, 2010).

⁵ Author interview with Matt Peacock, Communications Director, Ofcom, 13/07/05. This is not to say that Peacock did not think media literacy is important. As he went on to say: 'It's actually about the thing that separates what we have now, which is the ability to prevent a very powerful, the most powerful medium in

down.’ Not only was the concept difficult to explain to the public, the requirement to promote media literacy was also said to be unwelcome to the regulator, perhaps because it is an unachievable task. Can a population really become truly media literate? How much media literacy is enough? Complicating matters further, EC rules prevent the charging of the telecommunication companies for any activity beyond the basic cost of regulation also restricted the regulator. Thus initially, a half a million pounds per year were provided separately as a grant-in-aid to Ofcom by the DCMS, an amount that Ofcom subsequently added to significantly (from income derived from broadcasters) as media literacy ascended in Ofcom’s ranking of its priorities.⁶ Whatever the early history, since 2003 media literacy has been a visible strand of the regulator’s activities, and with some success, for a period at least.

It is striking that statements about media literacy by Ofcom and many other organisations, begin with matters of definition, given their surprisingly casual regard for, say, the distinction between citizen and consumer or self-regulation and co-regulation. At first, it seemed that for Ofcom, the government departments to which it is responsible⁷ and the stakeholders with which it engages, the simpler the definition the better. Perhaps to ward off the ridicule of the press, in a 2002 parliamentary debate MP Kim Howells summarised media literacy in layman’s language simply as a policy designed ‘to help everyone manage the new media environment more safely’. Unsurprisingly, in the days when the Communications Act was being formulated, the nature of media literacy had been little debated outside academia and educational circles. The term hardly tripped off the tongue and in early policy discussions eyebrows were often raised when it was introduced. Moreover, Section 11 of the Act did not define media literacy, seemingly leaving it to the regulator to shed light on its meaning. However, the Act did state that media literacy should, to paraphrase a little,

... bring about or encourage others to bring about ...

- (1) a better public understanding of the nature and characteristics of material published by means of the electronic media;
- (2) a better public awareness and understanding of the processes by which such material is selected, or made available, for publication by such means;
- (3) the development of a better public awareness of the available systems by which access to material published by means of the electronic media is or can be regulated;
- (4) the development of a better public awareness of the available systems by which persons to whom such material is made available may control what is received and of the uses to which such systems may be put; and

history, from tipping what can sometimes be very fragile ... you know, into chaos. But they’re separated by 60 years of learned behaviour and regulation rules and the rest of it.’

⁶ Thanks to Robin Blake for clarification of this point.

⁷ The Department for Culture, Media and Sport plus the Department for Trade and Industry, later renamed the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform and, then, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

(5) the development and use of technologies and systems for regulating access to such material, and for facilitating control over what material is received, that are both effective and easy to use.⁸

According to the Act, media literacy encompasses understanding the nature of content and the selections that publication entails, plus awareness and the provision of effective tools by which to manage personal access to content. A protectionist agenda drives such a conception of media literacy, contrasting with the ambitions generally held for print literacy, namely, that people should both be able to read effectively and critically – whether to complete their tax form, to critique an election manifesto or to appreciate Shakespeare – and to write creatively so as to participate fully in society.

However, as befits an institution operating in the public sphere, Ofcom's first action in 2004 was to hold a public consultation on the definition of media literacy, receiving 94 responses from industry, public bodies, academics and diverse others. Ofcom's initial ideas (as set out in the consultation document) were rather unambitious:

So media literacy is a range of skills including the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and produce communications in a variety of forms. Or put simply, the ability to operate the technology to find what you are looking for, to understand that material, to have an opinion about it and where necessary to respond to it. With these skills people will be able to exercise greater choice and be able better to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive materials. (Ofcom, 2004b: 4)

In the first sentence, Ofcom restates the simple yet effective definition framed by the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy a decade earlier (Aufderheide, 1993) and widely adopted since – the ability 'to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms' (Livingstone, 2003: 3). However, the restatement waters this down considerably. Ability becomes 'a range of skills' (a translation that enables quantitative evaluation of policy effectiveness). Access (which could include complex navigational competences) is reduced to 'operate the technology'. Communicating is qualified as 'responding' to an externally initiated message and only 'where necessary'. Last, the purposes of media literacy are radically scaled back to centre on consumer choice and protection from harm. However, the many consultation responses received urged a more ambitious approach, and although the definition that emerged combined 'analyse and evaluate' into 'understand', it nonetheless captured the importance of the critical and creative dimensions of media literacy more effectively than the Act. Ofcom (2004c) thus concluded that 'media literacy is the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts'.⁹

Also consistent with the new regulatory regime, Ofcom then commissioned an academic literature review on theory and evidence for media literacy among adults (Livingstone et al., 2005) and children (Buckingham, 2005). There followed a series of 'audits' – repeated

⁸ Section 11 of the Act also specifies that 'references to the publication of anything by means of the electronic media are references to its being – 1. broadcast so as to be available for reception by members of the public or of a section of the public; or 2. distributed by means of an electronic communications network to members of the public or of a section of the public'.

⁹ Since then, the website has replaced 'access' with 'use' in order to emphasise the cultural and cognitive dimensions of access rather than hardware issues.

national surveys to assess the extent of adult and child media literacy – made available on their website. Compared with the previous dearth of media literacy-related research or activities, especially regarding adults, and compared with the low esteem in which children's media education was often held, Ofcom's actions brought a welcome prominence to the media literacy agenda. Most positively, in its review of its media literacy work from 2004 to 2008, Ofcom (2008d) moved away from the protectionist logic of the Act to support the empowerment approach, stating that:

Ofcom's work to promote media literacy is intended:

to give people the opportunity and motivation to develop competence and confidence to participate in digital society; and

to inform and empower people to manage their own media activity (both consumption and creation).

The contrast with the definition of media literacy from the DCMS – which has funded Ofcom's media literacy work from the outset – is interesting, for this offers possibly the least ambitious expectations of the public:

Media literacy is the ability to use a range of media and be able to understand the information received. At a higher level, it includes the ability to question, analyse and evaluate that information. (DCMS, n.d.)

Here the complexity of the digital network society is reduced to a one-way information resource; only two of Ofcom's three elements (access/use and understand/evaluate, but not create or communicate) are included, and only those (unspecified) who attain a 'higher level' are expected to gain the necessary critical literacy to judge the authenticity or trustworthiness of information obtained.¹⁰ All are reduced to passive mass audiences, in short, and those at the lower level will also remain uncritical audiences. At a time when commercial influences over content are increasing (via product placement, advertising, sponsorship, advergames, marketing to children, etc.), political influences over content are diversifying, and public input into content is threatened, such low expectations for public levels of media literacy stand out.

However, the promotion of media literacy is an international trend, and it is by no means for the UK alone to define it. In the USA, the Federal Communications Commission recognised lack of digital literacy, along with economic disadvantage, as a barrier to the adoption of new technologies, making the promotion of literacy in the digital age as important to national economic competitiveness as print literacy was to the industrial age (Horrigon, 2010; see also Clyburn, 2010). Internationally, UNESCO published a Media Education Kit (January 2007) and is developing information literacy indicators for cross-national evaluations (Frau-Meigs, 2007; Frau-Meigs and Torrent, 2009). Mention of digital, information or internet literacy has begun to appear at the Internet Governance Forum, with a dynamic coalition on media and information literacy formally established in 2009, as well as in the more or less developed activities of many countries (e.g. ACMA, 2009; Media

¹⁰ In fact, this definition from DCMS represents a summary of that provided by Ofcom in its 2006 Adult Media Literacy Audit (Ofcom, 2006b: 7). However, in subsequent statements, including its Adult Media Literacy Audit 2008, there is no explicit assumption that critique can be postponed for 'advanced' use, and the more inclusive definition (access, understand and create) is employed.

Awareness Network, 2010). Now instantiated in Europe's 2010 Digital Agenda (European Commission, 2010), the argument that everyone must become literate in new media in the information society also took some establishing in Europe.

DEFINITIONAL DIVERSITY IN EUROPE

Media, especially new digital technologies, involve more Europeans in a world of sharing, interaction and creation. ... However, people who cannot use new media like social networks or digital TV will find it hard to interact with and take part in the world around them. We must make sure everyone is media literate so nobody is left out. Citizens are being talked to all the time, but can they talk back? If they can use the media in a competent and creative way we would take a step towards a new generation of democratic participation. (Viviane Reding, European Commission Information Society and Media Commissioner, European Commission, 2009)

Media literacy came to prominence as part of the Lisbon Agenda, the European strategy for a globally competitive information society adopted in 2000 and re-launched in 2005 with the aim of getting European citizens and businesses online by 2010. Sceptical voices suggest that the Lisbon Agenda has failed,¹¹ but it is noteworthy that, given considerable contestation among public, private and civil society actors, 'media literacy' emerged as a useful point of consensus – or, it may be argued, compromise between consumer protection (and market restriction) and empowerment (and market liberalisation). For its critics, the concept is sufficiently vague and open in its talk of empowerment to please everyone while hardly tying any down to particular, expensive or restrictive requirements. For its advocates, media literacy is the only sensible way forward for a converged media environment in which a skilled workforce, a competitive market and an empowered citizenry are all crucial.

Building on the work of the High Level Expert Group on Media Literacy, the European Commission conducted a public consultation on the definition of media literacy and the means of implementing policy to advance it, in autumn 2006 (European Commission, n.d.). The definition proposed in that consultation questionnaire bore a notable resemblance to that of Ofcom (and the earlier USA's National Leadership Conference) but downplayed the element of creating messages, positioning communication as a personal rather than a collective or civic matter:

... the ability to access, analyse and evaluate the power of images, sounds and messages which we are now being confronted with on a daily basis and are an important part of our contemporary culture, as well as to communicate competently in media available on a personal basis.

However, revealing the potential of public consultation processes to widen public debate, the conclusion fairly drawn from the 106 formal responses received from 26 countries was the importance of adding 'the ability to create and communicate messages as it is considered essential in enabling people to make effective use of media in the exercise of their democratic rights and civic responsibilities' (European Commission, 2007).¹² It was then written into the

¹¹ As Wyplosz (2010) argues, one reason for the failure was that 'peer pressure turned into mutual congratulations'. The European Community does not agree that the agenda has failed, unsurprisingly (see Commission of the European Communities, 2009).

¹² In its decision, the Commission cites the contributions of a number of media scholars as well as the 'best practice' evinced by Ofcom.

Audiovisual Media Services Directive (European Parliament and the Council, 2007), notable since the regulatory framework it replaced contained no reference to media literacy. The Television without Frontiers Directive (European Commission, 1989) addresses consumer matters, especially for children, through top-down rule making:

Member States shall take appropriate measures to ensure that television broadcasts by broadcasters under their jurisdiction do not include any programmes which might seriously impair the physical, mental or moral development of minors, in particular programmes that involve pornography or gratuitous violence. (Article 22)

Although this Article survives intact (as Article 27) in the Audiovisual Media Services Directive,¹³ the revised Directive also refers to media literacy, particularly in its treatment of converged and future audiovisual services (European Parliament and the Council, 2010). Nonetheless, media literacy was defined rather narrowly, certainly by comparison with Ofcom's statement on Strategy and Priorities for the Promotion of Media Literacy which included critical and creative literacies (e.g. Ofcom, 2004b, para. 14):

Media literacy refers to skills, knowledge and understanding that allow consumers to use media effectively and safely. Media-literate people will be able to exercise informed choices, understand the nature of content and services and take advantage of the full range of opportunities offered by new communications technologies. They will be better able to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive material. (European Parliament and the Council, 2007, para. 37)

As the same paragraph continues, as regards the internet, it is responsible (protectionist) rather than emancipatory (or empowerment) uses that are of concern:

Internet training aimed at children from a very early age, including sessions open to parents, or organisation of national campaigns aimed at citizens, involving all communications media, to provide information on using the internet responsibly.

Critics might observe that, notwithstanding the mention of 'citizens', media literacy here seems individualised, prioritising consumers and consumer choice over citizens and citizens' rights, and prioritising protection over participation. This significantly protectionist conception contrasts with the empowerment focus advocated by UNESCO, which states that:

Empowerment of people through information and media literacy is an important prerequisite for fostering equitable access to information and knowledge, and building inclusive knowledge societies. Information and media literacy enables people to interpret and make informed judgments as users of information and media, as well as to become skilful creators and producers of information and media messages in their own right. (UNESCO, n.d.)

Interestingly, more recent pronouncements from the European Commission have taken an increasingly wide approach, possibly influenced by the European Media Literacy Charter (Bachmair and Bazalgette, 2007), the Council of Europe's human rights-focused Recommendation on Empowering Children in the New Information and Communications Environment (2006) and related initiatives. The European Commission's Recommendation

¹³ Approved by the European Commission in 2007 with the expectation of being incorporated into the laws of member states by 2009.

(20/8/09) on ‘media literacy in the digital environment for a more competitive audiovisual and content industry and an inclusive knowledge society’ (Europa, 2009a) reiterates Ofcom’s definition (and that of the USA’s National Leadership Conference before it):

Media literacy relates to the ability to access the media, to understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media content and to create communications in a variety of contexts. (Europa, 2009a: para. 11)

But in explaining why media literacy matters, an ambitious set of purposes are outlined, going significantly beyond the definitions of both Ofcom and the Audiovisual Media Services Directive and combining public and private sector interests, emphasising:

The ability of European citizens to make informed and diversified choices as media consumers would contribute to the competitiveness of the European audiovisual and content industry (para. 10).

How these contribute to ‘the objectives set for the European Union at the Lisbon European Council and in the i2010 initiative in particular regarding a more competitive knowledge economy, while contributing to a more inclusive information society (para. 6).¹⁴

This includes ‘enhancing awareness in the European audiovisual heritage and cultural identities and increasing knowledge and interest in audiovisual heritage and recent European cultural works (para. 14).

Further, it ‘is a matter of inclusion and citizenship in today’s information society. It is a fundamental skill not only for young people but also for adults and elderly people, parents, teachers and media professionals. ... Media literacy is today regarded as one of the key pre-requisites for an active and full citizenship in order to prevent and diminish risks of exclusion from community life (para. 15).

Thus media literacy enables ‘the expression of diverse opinions and ideas, in different languages, representing different groups, in and across societies [and so] has a positive impact on the values of diversity, tolerance, transparency, equity and dialogue (para. 16).

And, most grandly, ‘Democracy depends on the active participation of citizens to the life of their community and media literacy would provide the skills they need to make sense of the daily flow of information disseminated through new communication technologies (para. 17).

These wider ambitions are, we suggest, coming to the fore not only in Europe but also in Britain, challenging the narrow endorsement of media literacy as the ‘sweetener’ for consumer advocates of an otherwise neoliberal and deregulatory policy.

MEDIA LITERACY AS A NEOLIBERAL POLICY

Today our viewers and listeners are far more empowered. Digital television, the internet and increasingly broadband is putting more choice in the hands of the user.

¹⁴ Upcoming challenges for Digital Europe were raised in a public consultation launched by the Commission in October 2009, initiating the new European ICT strategy that the Commission presented in 2010 as part of the next wave of the Lisbon Agenda.

As a regulator, we will reflect that, welcome and encourage it. There can no longer be a place for a regulator ... determining what people 'ought' to have. (Carter, 2003b)

Although it is possible to state an ambitious policy in simple terms, promoting media literacy is no simple undertaking. However, the political payoff is substantial: in so far as media-literate public is attainable, it may become defensible to support a policy of market deregulation, cutting the bureaucratic 'red tape' of consumer protection, content labelling, customer redress, child safety, data privacy protection and platform-specific content regulation.

As viewed by Ofcom's first Chief Executive, Stephen Carter, the value of media literacy was that it permitted the regulator to roll back interventionist market regulation, encouraging voluntary stakeholder collaboration in the interests of consumer choice. Such a neoliberal policy was held to be important to protect the UK's creative industry in relation to broadcasting, as evident in Britain's attempts to reduce the regulatory strictures built into the Audiovisual Media Services Directive. It was also held to be vital in relation to the internet for reasons not only of freeing the market, but also for practical reasons – the global internet is certainly hard to regulate at a national level (Livingstone, 2011). As the UK's then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Tessa Jowell, stated: 'if people can take greater personal responsibility for what they watch and listen to, that will in itself lessen the need for regulatory intervention' (*The Daily Mail*, 21/1/2004, p. 23). Ofcom concurred: Robin Foster, Ofcom's Partner for Strategy and Market Developments in 2005, said: 'We will have to learn to rely more on markets than ever before. And we need to rely more on individual consumers and on companies exercising responsibility in those markets, with increasing emphasis on self-regulation and co-regulation.'¹⁵

Reliance on individuals means that they must become more responsible, and more informed. In its public consultation on media literacy, Ofcom (2004b: 5) stated: 'With increasing complexity of technology and wider media choice people will have to take more responsibility for what they and their children see and hear on screen and online. ... We will all become gatekeepers for content coming into our homes.' In its response to the 2006 European Commission consultation on media literacy, Ofcom stated that 'Media literacy is increasingly becoming a fundamental component of European and national regulatory policy agendas in the communications sector, especially as developments in the creation and distribution of content challenge current approaches to regulation in this area'. Media literacy, one may conclude, is being co-opted by a neoliberal politics for reasons quite distinct from those for which academics and educators have long advocated it. For the particular challenge of managing online content too, media literacy shows a viable way forward:

The independent regulator, Ofcom, does not regulate content on the internet, but does have a statutory duty to promote media literacy under the Communications Act 2003. In pursuit of that duty, Ofcom has been working to raise people's awareness of how to use web browsers, electronic programme guides and other tools in order to navigate safely and effectively. (David Lammy, Minister for Culture, Media and Sport, in Hansard, 2007)

¹⁵ Author interview with Robin Foster, Partner, Strategy and Market Developments, Ofcom, 09/06/05.

In short, it can be argued that media literacy has risen to prominence on the policy agenda because increasing consumer knowledge and awareness advances the goal of economic competition by legitimating the reduction of top-down regulatory intervention in a converging and globalising media market (e.g. by relaxing restrictions on product placement) while simultaneously sustaining a promise (little evaluated in outcome) of ‘empowerment’ to the public.

A newly responsible, self-regulating audience is, it appears, being called for in these proclamations (Ouellette and Hay, 2008), a key new player (albeit more spoken for than heard) in the emerging multi-stakeholder regime regulating twenty-first-century media and communications policy. This implied audience represents a vital component of efforts to reduce state regulation and to increase industry self-regulation (e.g. through the promotion of codes of conduct, editorial principles, technical solutions for the user, access controls, notice and take down procedures, etc.). The costs for the individual in this regime shift are little articulated, although Ofcom’s 2006 European Commission consultation response (Ofcom, 2006c: 4) does acknowledge that, ‘these schemes rely for their effectiveness on consumers actively taking measures to protect themselves and their families’. But if they do not – if people do not become dutiful and sensible consumers – it is unclear who bears the responsibility for any adverse consequences. It seems likely, from previous research on knowledge gaps, the digital divide and cycles of disadvantage that the burden of risk will fall most heavily on those least able to bear it. As Beck (1986/2005) argues, the adverse risk consequences of deregulation, surely including those of digital illiteracy, fall unevenly.

That media literacy offers a rationale for deregulation may be demonstrated by widening the lens to encompass other forms of literacy. It is not just media literacy that has risen up the policy agenda. A search of the UK press revealed references to print literacy, financial literacy, scientific literacy, ICT/computer literacy, emotional literacy, spatial literacy, Gaelic literacy, political literacy, technical literacy, film literacy, media literacy, Catalan literacy and theological literacy; a little further searching added ethical literacy, environmental literacy, information literacy, health literacy and critical literacy. Often, an explicit link is made between individual responsibility and market liberalisation (Livingstone, 2008a). It seems that literacy policies enable the broader shift from direct control by government to governance through ‘action at a distance’ (Rose, 1990). Countering this with a call for more government or regulation may not seem a promising alternative. However, one critical response could be to resist minimal or reductive definitions of (media) literacy, as the more readily people are shown to have sufficient media literacy (if this can be specified), the more readily deregulation is legitimated. Moreover, the more ambitious the definition, the more public (or commercial) resources must be devoted to ensuring all segments of the population meet that definition (since a policy that embeds inequality or penalises the already vulnerable will always lack credibility).

THE POLITICS OF MEDIA LITERACY

Looking back over decades, research and policy regarding media literacy can be characterised by three main features. First, except to those involved, it has been marginal even in relation to media production and regulation, let alone in wider societal debates regarding employment, inclusion or democracy. Second, it has been focused primarily on the needs of children and young people and, since these are best addressed in school, media literacy has been closely tied to media education, the latter providing the means of implementing the aspirations of the former. Third, it has never transcended a fundamental polarisation between the protectionists (who regard media literacy as a defence against the

harms of the media) and the empowerment advocates (who regard media as a domain for creative self-expression, communal action and cultural heritage).

Today, none of these three features defines the agenda, though the legacy of each persists. First, media literacy is prominent in the speeches of ministers, included in a wide array of national and international policy statements concerning the economy, democracy and 'the information society'. Most significantly, media literacy is not regarded solely as a tool by which to understand the media themselves but, as with print literacy before it, as a tool with which to engage the world at large. Second, while children and young people are still important to media literacy policy and practice, Ofcom has devoted considerable resources to promoting the media literacy of the population more generally. Moreover, children's discursive position has shifted from that of the vulnerable in need of protection to that of the pioneer, the digital native leading the way into the future (Helsper and Eynon, 2010). Furthermore, although supporting children and ensuring equality of opportunity remains a priority for many governments, the new challenge is to include the entire adult population, especially groups such as older people and people on a low income, within the scope of media literacy activities.

Third, the polarisation between protection and empowerment no longer maps on to the political division between right and left, or in terms of communication theory, onto Lazarsfeld's (1941) distinction between administrative (using knowledge to support established interests) and critical (i.e. independent of established interests) scholarship. Critical and administrative agendas have converged on prioritising an empowerment discourse, at times leaving it ambiguous as to just why media literacy is being advocated. For example, a charity-funded centre to encourage diasporic communities to use the internet may intend to further a social democratic agenda and yet be co-opted by a neoliberal government promoting competitive workforce skills or a 'self-help' ethos. The adoption of critical ambitions by administrative discourses makes these lines hard to draw. On the other hand, the enthusiastic adoption of the language of digital literacy or digital participation by community activists working with disadvantaged or minority ethnic young people has surely attracted new attention and funding sources to some long-marginalised initiatives. And, in the face of government or regulator advocacy for a minimal, functional definition of media literacy, critical scholars are proving successful in countering with more ambitious expectations for informed and participatory citizens, expectations which it is discursively hard for a government to disavow (e.g. Bazalgette, 2001; Buckingham, 2007; Hobbs, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Kress, 2003; Snyder, 2007).

For government policies on media literacy, the already widespread array of bottom-up and community initiatives represents a fortunate basis on which to build. But this means that critical researchers and third sector bodies must ask whether their co-option in this manner represents an equally fortunate chance for increased funding and visibility or, instead, a risk that their agendas will become distorted while, inadvertently, they may find themselves supporting a deregulatory policy that, in turn, individualises risk (Beck, 1986/2005). This risk leads some political economists of communication apparently to refuse support for media literacy. For example, McChesney (1996: para.5) regards media literacy as distracting cultural critics from questions of power, for what matters more than what people do with the technology is 'who will control the technology and for what purpose?', hence the absence of media or digital literacy from McChesney's Media Reform Movement's public interest agenda (Freepress, 2009). Since emancipatory purposes are now claimed on all sides, and

activities developed for one purpose are readily re-described in the interests of another,¹⁶ we would still ask: can this work both ways, so that the undoubted increase in public and private sector resources and effort mobilised by media and digital literacy policy can be harnessed to achieve outcomes on the critical agenda?

FROM MEDIA LITERACY TO DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

The necessary education, skills and media literacy programmes to allow everyone in society to benefit from the digital revolution will be a central part of the Digital Britain work and key to our success. (DCMS and BERR, 2009: 5)

Nothing stands still in the discourses of either policy or academia. Along with the emergence of discourses of digital natives, digital inclusion and *Digital Britain*, it seemed – at least for the remainder of the New Labour government, that digital literacy was overtaking media literacy, and that digital participation was overtaking both. Long-standing ambivalence about literacy (as a difficult term, and as elitist in so far as it stigmatises its polar opposite as ‘illiterate’) encourages an alternative – participation and, additionally, citizenship (as in the phrase, ‘digital citizenship’). Both these alternative terms are simultaneously ordinary and yet ambitious: they are in everyday use, inclusive rather than exclusive, and yet exciting – democracy’s very hopes rest on the participation of its citizens. At a European level, Commissioner Reding marked this discursive transition, from media literacy to digital participation, in a speech in August 2009:

We must make sure everyone is media literate so nobody is left out. Citizens are being talked to all the time, but can they talk back? If they can use the media in a competent and creative way we would take a step towards a new generation of democratic participation. (Quoted in Europa, 2009b)

And in her first speech as European Commissioner for the Digital Agenda, Neelie Kroes put digital literacy as second of three key points (along with high-speed internet access for all and the removal of barriers to demand) for the period 2010–15 in her plan to ‘keep Europe at the forefront of twenty-first century economic and social developments’ (Kroes, 2010).¹⁷ In the USA also, the discourse was changing. Launching the National Digital Literacy Programme as part of the National Broadband Plan, Federal Communications Commissioner Mignon Clyburn’s speech (Clyburn, 2010) opened by stressing the importance of the market agenda of widespread broadband adoption, within which digital literacy – identified as a barrier – was defined rather narrowly as an individual and instrumental skill: ‘Many Americans lack the basic understanding of how to locate trustworthy content, how to protect personal information, and how to safely interact online’ (Clyburn, 2010: 2). Yet throughout her talk and, especially, by the end, imperatives of inclusion and democratic participation came to the fore (as guided by the ambitions of the print literacy agenda): ‘Nothing can open more doors

¹⁶ The protectionist agenda, by contrast, remains less open to flexible reinterpretation; indeed, it remains hotly contested between market liberal (and libertarian) versus conservative (or communitarian) perspectives. Perhaps because of this history of controversy, the protectionist interests behind media literacy policy often remain unstated, marginalised by the excited rhetoric of new opportunities for citizen empowerment. Nonetheless, they have not disappeared, re-emerging when the media literacy agenda is spelt out, even though – revealing a dilemma within the right-wing agenda – they conflict with the deregulatory push behind national and international efforts to liberalise markets.

¹⁷ However, in so far as media literacy is dealt with under the rubric of ‘education’, it is subject to the subsidiarity principle, leaving its promotion to national governments rather than being actioned on a pan-European level.

for a person than literacy. But knowing how to read is no longer sufficient to be 'literate' in the 21st century. Basic literacy must be supplemented with digital literacy' (Clyburn, 2010: 4).

In the UK, the government's report on *Digital Britain* (BIS and DCMS, 2009), led by Lord Stephen Carter¹⁸ after he stepped down as Ofcom's CEO, made a key move away from media literacy by observing, with some validity, that media literacy is 'a technocratic and specialist term understood by policy makers but not really part of everyday language' (p. 40). The *Digital Britain* report argued that 'it is now vital to move away from media literacy as a discrete subject and term and to move towards a National Plan for Digital Participation' (BIS and DCMS, 2010: 40). Echoing early difficulties in defining media literacy, digital participation was then defined, unfortunately, in tautological terms as:

Increasing the reach, breadth and depth of digital technology use across all sections of society, to maximise digital participation and the economic and social benefits it can bring. (BIS and DCMS, 2010: 41)

Nonetheless, the proposal was to support 'the formation of a Consortium of Stakeholders, led by Ofcom, to drive Digital Participation. Funding will be made available of up to £12m over three years from the Universal Service provision announced in Budget 2009' (BIS and DCMS, 2010: 42), this representing a very considerable increase on Ofcom's original media literacy budget. Taken forward next in the *Digital Britain* White Paper, the national plan was proposed in March 2010, and built on the coincidence of interests in maximising use of the internet across government, industry and the public. For citizens, this interest is described as inhering in 'financial savings, access to formal and informal learning opportunities, employment potential, improved salary prospects and the many other advantages – economic, social and cultural' (BIS and DCMS, 2010: 5). But such instrumental purposes are supplemented by the recognition of the value to individuals of 'civic and democratic engagement activities, self-publishing and content creation, ... the growth of online communities of interest, cultural understanding and social capital, formal and informal learning opportunities and employment opportunities' (ibid.: 8).

However cynical one may be of government, this appears an acceptable list and arguably it now behoves academics to work to amplify it. After all, surely the grandest vision for media literacy would encompass, first, equality of opportunity in the knowledge society, which requires overcoming digital inequality and exclusion; second, active and informed participation in a revitalised democracy which requires critical engagement with the mediated public sphere; and third, self-actualisation for individuals and communities, achieved through enabling the lifelong learning, cultural expression and personal fulfilment that is everyone's right in a civilised society (Livingstone, 2003). Nonetheless it is disheartening that, when launched by the Digital Inclusion Minister, Stephen Timms, the emphasis was more on e-government (i.e. top-down electronic delivery of state objectives to individuals) than on participation by citizens:

Being online is crucial for participation in the 21st century society – the internet unlocks a wealth of information and services, giving people more choice in life and access to a range of education, health and financial opportunities. (BIS and DCMS, 2010: para. 6)

¹⁸ Lord Carter was appointed to the new post of Minister of Communications, Technology and Broadcasting on 3 October 2008.

This reading of the plan is reinforced by European developments. For example, at the same time as the above (spring 2010), the Internal Market and Consumer Protection Committee (IMCO) of the European Parliament called for a European Charter of users' rights and obligations in the information society. Further, the draft Opinion on the Digital Agenda (to replace the Lisbon i2010 Agenda from 2010) focused on matters of copyright, privacy and vulnerable users' rights in relation to digital content, also calling on the European Commission to 'promote digital literacy and work towards making as many government online services as possible available to consumers' (European Parliament, 2010). Again an official, top-down vision for consumers emerges, rather than a participatory, alternative or bottom-up vision of 'participation' for citizens.

FROM PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE

In fieldwork conducted at the end of 2008, Ofcom (2009a) reported that only 41 per cent of UK citizens had registered to vote, 26 per cent had signed a petition, 13 per cent had contacted a government department or local council, 7 per cent had contacted an MP or councillor and 2 per cent had taken part in a protest or demonstration in the past year. Having internet access at home makes all of these activities more likely, suggesting that digital participation, itself resting on digital literacy, can enhance wider civic participation. Encouragingly, Ofcom's Adult Media Literacy Audit conducted in 2006 and repeated in 2008 (Ofcom, 2006b, 2008d, 2009b) found media literacy to be increasing. Not only did basic access to digital media increase, but so too did use of online information sources (e.g. for health). Further, more people than before check on the reliability of a website and more are critical of the quality or trustworthiness of broadcast and online content. However, while only a minority lack the confidence to use creative tools on digital platforms, the majority still have not done this in practice.¹⁹ Interestingly, although young adults (so-called 'digital natives') had the greatest confidence and use of digital media, their critical knowledge of media funding sources was the lowest, and by comparison with their knowledge of the broadcast environment, people of all ages were unclear how online and mobile content is regulated.²⁰ Moreover, from the subsequent Media Literacy Audits conducted in 2010 and 2011, evidence of increasingly levels of media literacy is less clear, even suggesting a plateau has been reached (Livingstone and Wang, 2011).

Can media literacy for an entire population be achieved at the level hoped for? As with any other form of public education – from print literacy to health education or financial understanding or scientific knowledge – media literacy policy generally is under-resourced in its delivery and uneven in its implementation, while media literacy itself is unequal in its adoption by those of differential social status (and so risking exacerbating rather than reducing knowledge gaps), inconsistently translated by individuals into everyday practices (the traditional 'attitude-behaviour' problem), and, intriguingly, still unproven as a strategy for either empowerment or protection. At present, these difficulties are positioned by stakeholders on all sides as challenges – providing a rationale for increasing investment, especially by leveraging private sector and media industry input as well as that from the

¹⁹ Little change was observed in terms of the demographics of those reluctant to use the digital functions of various media – older people, women and those of lower socioeconomic status showed lower levels of awareness, interest and confidence.

²⁰ Similar findings hold in other countries – for example, in the USA even among so-called 'digital natives' there is considerable variation in digital skills (Hargittai, 2010).

public sector, and justifying a strategy that targets resources more on socially and/or digitally disadvantaged than advantaged groups.²¹

So, the challenge remains to identify what media literacy the public needs, across all segments of the population and all sectors of society, a challenge exacerbated by rapid technological and social change. Crucially, the next step – namely, instituting initiatives to address these needs – is extraordinarily expensive, highly contested and, as yet, largely unevaluated in terms of outcomes. To delimit its task, Ofcom's (2004c) Statement on *Strategies and Priorities for the Promotion of Media Literacy* originally stated:

We will work with stakeholders to help focus on the present and future media literacy needs of all members of society. There are many stakeholders who have a key role to play in the promotion of media literacy skills, knowledge and understanding in both adults and children. These include content producers, broadcasters, platform and network providers, educators, government departments, parents, children's charities and other organisations. Our principal role will be to provide leadership and leverage to promote media literacy. (Ofcom, 2004c: 2)

Leadership and leverage, while perhaps all that Ofcom could undertake, hardly met the agenda of expectations building up. Thus media literacy initiatives remained what the (Labour) government's *Digital Britain* report of 2009 described as: 'very fragmented', notwithstanding 'a large amount of resource being dedicated to this work. ... They lacked a higher strategic vision or indeed the appropriate aligning of the initiatives to ensure that they were being efficiently delivered and that they were complementing each other' (BIS and DCMS, 2009: 40). Furthermore, it is unclear that the subsequent vision of digital participation could offer an improvement, even had it been taken up by the Coalition government. Notably, *Digital Britain* advocated the affordances of digital media as a solution by which to right many wrongs in society, from civic apathy to a low-skilled workforce, conflicted communities, an impoverished underclass, a struggling education system and a decline in the competitive standing of UK plc. Yet while the ambitions of media literacy advocates were often substantial, the ambition of delivering all the above on £4 million per year was surely always unrealistic.

FROM INDIVIDUAL SKILLS TO SOCIAL CAPABILITIES

The Audiovisual Media Services Directive not only requires member states to improve media literacy among their national populations, but also to report every three years on the levels attained (Article 33). This has necessitated development of an assessment tool and associated indicators, as reported by the European Association for Viewers' Interests (2009). As with many policy statements in this field, their report begins with the definitional issues, notwithstanding the risk of 'paralysis by analysis' (2009: 6). Then, reflecting its authors' intellectual, critical and third sector expertise, it distinguishes individual competences from environmental factors, arguing that both are central to media literacy. While individual competences form the focus of all the above policy definitions, the inclusion of environmental factors (such as media education, media literacy policy, media industry, civil society, communication rights, availability of media, freedom of expression and degree of pluralism) fits with the critical analysis of media literacy not as an inert skill or the property

²¹ Though many resources – online and broadcast materials, education in schools, UK online centres – are open to all.

of an individual but rather as a social, contextualised capability (Garnham, 1999; Mansell, 2002).

First, literacy depends on legibility – one can only read, or contribute to, a ‘legible’ environment, with rules and conventions understood by users. As Woolgar (1996) and others have argued, technologies are also text, and the institutional purposes and culture, organisational norms and structures, and communicative design and intent are all embedded in the very construction of the interface, as, too, is an implicit conception of the user – what they know, don’t know, can and cannot do, take for granted or need to learn. The more impenetrable, opaque or ill-designed the text or interface – for example, if trust markers (e.g. source, date, funding, purpose) from the content, or if distinctions between types of content (public/sponsored, edited/unedited) are blurred – the more users struggle (Livingstone, 2008b). To point the finger at users for lacking literacy when it is the texts that are illegible is, surely, inappropriate.

Second, literacy depends on the social context. As Buckingham puts it, ‘literacy is a phenomenon that is only realized in and through social practices of various kinds, and it therefore takes different forms in different social and cultural contexts’ (2007: 44). Indeed, the environmental approach echoes the critique from New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2003; Kress, 2003; Snyder, 2007; Street, 1984) of purely ‘autonomous’ models of literacy, those which assume literacy skills can be defined independently of any context, as universal properties of individuals. Looking back over this chapter, such a critique helps us understand why media literacy – conceived as an individual skill – has proved so hard to define, since the imagined contexts of use, though generally unstated, are diverse. As should be equally clear, in seeking to omit, or include, such elements as critical evaluation or creative communication, such definitions are political – they rely on ideological assumptions about how people ought to act in the world, including in and through a mediated world. Should that be receptive or productive, acquiescent or critical, individualised or collective?

Definitions, clearly, are far from neutral. Hence Street (2003) challenges the autonomous model with an alternative, ‘ideological model’ that ‘offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another’ (Street, 2003: 77), and for whom the normative goal is rather a media-literate society in which collective capabilities to use media technologies underpin critical judgements, inclusive participation and concerted action in the public interest. It is, Street argues, ‘not valid to suggest that “literacy” can be “given” neutrally and then its “social” effects only experienced afterwards’ (Street, 2003: 78). Indeed, literacy, as with all forms of knowledge, is:

... always embedded in social practices, such as those of a particular job market or a particular educational context and the effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on those particular contexts. Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always ‘ideological’, they are always rooted in a particular world-view and in a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others. (Street, 2003: 77–8)

In this chapter, we have sought to identify the particular worldview prioritised by contemporary media literacy policy, characterising it as driven primarily by a neoliberal desire to promote competitive markets and roll back regulation (Mansell, 2011); hence the focus on digital access, workplace skills and skills than reduce state costs, say, for e-government or e-health. Increasingly, however, we have also seen the very openness of the

conception of media literacy permit efforts to enhance some critical skills (especially if these facilitate individual protection against content harms or commercial messaging, in turn enabling reduced content regulation) and some participatory or creative skills as part of a wider shift towards digital participation. Whether the attention and resources to be devoted to digital participation and digital citizenship policies will really enhance levels of social inclusion and participation remains unclear, especially as a culture of severe financial restraint increasingly characterises public policy.

As Street also implies, it behoves us, last, to ask what kinds of literacy are being marginalised in current policy. Here there are many candidates – Watkins (2009) calls for recognition of young black men’s ‘literacy’ in relation to music, using lyric writing and rap music to counter – or at least express anger regarding – the marginalisation of their identity. Gee (2003) advocates games literacy to provide alternative routes to learning for those failed by the formal education system. Seiter (2005) challenges teachers to recognise the media-imbued knowledge with which children first enter school, only to have this knowledge scathingly rejected as invalid. At a grass-roots level, this critical or social approach to literacies, plural, is not without influence. Indeed, it is often exactly at the moment when top-down governmental initiatives must be translated into local practices (online centres, classrooms, communication activities) that a more diversified and contextualised approach to literacy is recognised as necessary. But at the level of national and international policy statements, the ‘autonomous’ model prevails.

This makes it all the more interesting, then, that the European Commission study proposing assessment criteria for member states so that they may meet the reporting obligation imposed on them by the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, does include environmental factors. The study finds (European Association for Viewers’ Interests, 2009: 78) that ‘there is a discernible correlation between media literacy levels in individuals and media policies and measures implemented by institutions’ and, further, that ‘many of the best performing countries are highly developed in terms of democracy, infrastructure, and social and economic welfare’. In other words, public provision in general supports environmental resources for media literacy and environmental resources in particular support individual skills. Empirically, as well as theoretically and ideologically, therefore, there is reason to broaden the focus on media literacy beyond that of individual skills. As the report concludes:

The relationship between an individual’s skills and Environmental Factors is two-way – a more favourable environmental context enhances individual media literacy levels, and the existence of media literate citizens compels the development of coordinated policies and actions. However, the role of individual inclination becomes determinant probably only after a certain threshold of support for the advancement of media literacy has been reached. (European Association for Viewers’ Interests, 2009: 78)²²

²² The study’s recommendations (pp. 13–14) are also noteworthy: ‘1. To identify critical understanding as the key factor in the development of policies for promoting media literacy. 2. To promote citizen engagement as an essential component of full and active European citizenship. 3. To encourage national governments and media regulatory authorities to include in their remits the monitoring and enhancement of media literacy; to promote intra- and international exchange of good practice. 4. To facilitate and extend access to ICT, with specific focus on the internet. 5. To promote public debate and awareness of media literacy. 6. To encourage the integration of media education in educational curricula both as specific goals and cross-curricular subjects. 7. To sustain the role of civil society organizations and related media literacy initiatives in order to foster a democratic culture and shared values. 8. To encourage an active involvement by the media industry, especially audiovisual media.’

CONCLUSION

Governments and regulators in other countries have observed Ofcom's forays into the field of media literacy with interest, for the Communications Act 2003 made media literacy a matter of media regulation instead of, as is more usual in countries where it is actively promoted, a matter for ministries of education to address as they think fit. Thus a critical gaze at Ofcom's practice was merited – especially given Ofcom's tendency to subordinate emancipatory to protectionist objectives on the one hand, and deregulatory objectives on the other. This chapter has traced how Ofcom's work on media literacy was shaped by its operating principles as a regulator. This included an emphasis on consultation, on the conduct of research into public attitudes and understanding, and on debate and engagement in relation to communication issues that affect the public. In the process, Ofcom has provided a forum for researchers across the academy, industry and third sector to debate media literacy issues, and it has conducted a substantial body of new and valuable empirical research.

However, Ofcom has paid more attention to the access and usage elements of its definition than to evaluation or creation, and it has tended to frame media literacy as a matter of overcoming individual barriers to access or choice in the media environment rather than that of enhancing individual or, especially, collective opportunities to use media platforms for creation, participation and critique. This is consistent with the expectations held of a largely economic regulator, as is Ofcom's evident preference for easily quantifiable measures of media literacy – for example, do people use the interactive functions on their digital television set, can they check the provenance and date of a website, or do they know who to complain to if content offends them? But it is disappointing for those who hoped for a more ambitious conceptions of media literacy; those who might ask, for example, whether the use of digital media means that more people are scrutinising government, that global misunderstandings are being renegotiated or that marginalised identities can now be expressed and valorised?

Public policy struggles face two tasks: one is to effect change for the better; the other – King Canute-like – is to hold back change for the worse. If, for the moment, one defines 'better' and 'worse' as perceived by actors themselves, one might conclude that, thus far, the emancipatory approach to media literacy has achieved moderate success in defining and extending policy definitions of media literacy and in critiquing, if not holding back, some of the most reductionist approaches. One may also conclude that, irrespective of the implicit political agenda, there is considerable value in the effort to research public understanding of the changing media environment or to develop initiatives to overcome barriers to equal adoption of new technologically mediated opportunities or to push commercial providers to collaborate on codes of conduct that deal fairly and transparently with their customers.²³

Although, as we have suggested, it seems that the British debate initially influenced the European one closely following on its heels, we now discern a reverse influence, with Britain's initially instrumentalist approach being reconceived in light of the wider European debate, itself shaped by diverse and critical stakeholders capitalising on the interpretative flexibility of the concept as well as the complex and at times conflicting forces driving it up

²³ In another example of critical approaches influencing state policy, we await the outcome of Buckingham's current project to develop progression criteria by which to assess children's media education in schools at different ages. While such concepts of targets, attainment, progression criteria and testing seem entirely opposed to the ethos of a social and contextual approach to media literacies, it is also the case that without these – without any means of evaluating or assessing whether resources and educational efforts to teach soft skills or learner-centred notions of literacy have been effectively expended – such resources will quickly cease.

the policy agenda. Thus we have traced how, in debates over media literacy, the emancipatory language of public empowerment was early employed, co-opted even, to advance a neoliberal agenda of market deregulation. From the insertion of media literacy into the UK's Communications Act, Europe's Audiovisual Media Services Directive and its Digital Agenda, it would seem naïve to interpret the broad political intent in any other way.

Where next for media literacy? Notwithstanding the signs, especially in Europe, that the media literacy agenda is widening to encompass positive, even emancipatory though perhaps over-ambitious objectives, these continue to run counter to the deregulatory objectives often expressed by public and private sector stakeholders. More concretely, however, the protectionist approach has done better – parents and teachers are now largely aware of online risks, many consumers use technical tools to control their access to potentially harmful or offensive contents, signposting commercial and offensive content is on the industry's agenda, self-regulatory content codes are being negotiated and some efforts are underway to extend digital literacy to the young, the poor and older people.²⁴ However, the UK's present Coalition government is harder to read. Explicit statements on media literacy are few and far between, and pronouncements on digital participation have been reframed, arguably watered down in terms of digital access and inclusion. Still more pessimistically, with major public sector cuts, and a renewed interest in deregulation, media literacy policy may be foundering, at best surviving as, merely, a means of overcoming the digital divide in the race to get online.²⁵ Will media literacy, as a plank of the Coalition's media policy, disappear as quickly as, in retrospect, it flourished in the UK under the New Labour government? At the time of writing, Ofcom's media literacy endeavour is being 'restructured', its scope significantly reduced, and its future is uncertain.

And yet the arguments for promoting media or digital literacy among the general population are as strong as ever, especially for children and the disadvantaged or marginalised, but also, given the pace of technological change and market complexity, for everyone.²⁶ Given this continued imperative that the public has a critical understanding of and a capacity to engage with a fast-changing media and communications environment, we resist the temptation to read any and all media literacy initiatives in terms of the onward march of a neoliberal or deregulatory agenda. Instead, we have argued that the definitional hiatus introduced by the rush to build media literacy into the new regulatory regime, even if initially conceived as a rationale for deregulation, has allowed for a widespread public debate from which a far more complex and ambitious solution is emerging. In short, what began –

²⁴ Moreover, there is a rising clamour for strengthened consumer protection, safety nets for the vulnerable, personal data and privacy regulations, new forms of content regulation, online advertising rules, rethinking of copyright and intellectual property laws – it being increasingly recognised that individual consumers cannot be expected to navigate such complexities, nor that it would meet human rights nor other civilised expectations that they should take on such burdens.

²⁵ As implied, for example, in Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries Ed Vaisey's speech on the subject of libraries in the digital age, July 2010. See http://www.culture.gov.uk/news/ministers_speeches/7223.aspx. However, the Digital Participation site has been taken offline, asking visitors to refer to Race Online 2012, which has a 'Manifesto for a Networked Nation' set forward by the Coalition government. See <http://raceonline2012.org/press-coverage> (including a press release from Cabinet Office).

²⁶ For example, the parallel initiative to promote financial literacy might also seem doomed but in early 2011 the news reported that 'Over 100 MPs [are] to fight for financial education in schools'. Possibly the costs to the nation of a financially illiterate public attract greater concern than the costs of a public struggling with the media environment. See <http://www.moneysavingexpert.com/news/family/2011/01/over-100-mps-to-fight-for-financial-education-in-schools> (31 January, 2011).

and what survives in some quarters – as a rather technocratic policy to ensure consumers have minimal skills to get online, press the ‘interactive’ button on their remote control or avoid getting exploited by phishing or phone scams, has grown into a policy that is, and could further, strengthen the infrastructure of democratic societies. Cynics might argue that media literacy became the policy window through which all kinds of interests were temporarily squeezed, but it is equally plausible to argue that the mediation of everything (Livingstone, 2009a) means that media literacy is indeed a prerequisite for doing anything, even though this vastly amplifies the challenges of delivery and evaluation.