

media *policy brief 2*



Media literacy and the Communications Act **What has been achieved and what should be done?** **A 2013 update**

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Key messages

- Progress in digital skills has stalled. Despite growing broadband adoption and a range of media literacy initiatives, the evidence shows little improvement in adult or children's levels of knowledge over the past few years. This is especially the case for the crucial dimensions of critical and participatory literacy.
- Yet citizens and consumers must rely on their digital skills as never before. Rapid transformations in the digital media landscape have put increasing pressure on individuals to navigate highly complex technologies, risking digital exclusion, consumer detriment, low participation and growing inequality.
- Government support has been cut just when it is most needed. Industry support is also vital, but needs a national effort to maximise visibility and coordination. Carefully targeting the promotion and resourcing of media literacy for those most in need could make a real difference. The effective promotion of digital skills and media literacy across the population should be a priority for the upcoming Communications White Paper.

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Introduction: media literacy matters

[Media literacy is] ... the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts. (Ofcom, 2011b)¹

Work, education, civic participation, commerce, social relations and leisure all now rely on diverse networked and online media for their everyday functioning. This raises crucial questions about whether the public are able to engage effectively with and through the media. Convergence and diversification in media and communications technologies, platforms and services are opening up new and exciting opportunities across all spheres of life, yet these same changes are also exposing individuals to new risks of exclusion, misuse and abuse.

The media can no longer be relegated to the domain of leisure, to be used or not as a matter of individual choice. Today's media are infrastructural to modern life, underpinning work and family, public as well as private life, civic and personal activities. Everyone must use the media, whether they are able to or not. Society does not leave individuals to work out for themselves how to use the crucial medium of print, but media illiteracy is as problematic in the 21st century as print illiteracy was in the 20th.

Improving media literacy is not easy, and the tasks of defining and measuring media literacy have proved more difficult than initially anticipated. But defining and measuring media literacy is straightforward compared with the task of implementing policies for all citizens. Despite the existence of many enthusiastic and creative initiatives designed to enable media literacy, these are often unsustainable, expensive or difficult to implement on a large enough scale to really make a difference. And digital skills go out of date quickly.

Section 11 of the Communications Act 2003 gave Ofcom the duty to promote media literacy. This was a welcome development, closely watched around the world as a notable precedent. But after a decade of such activity, it is timely to ask if this has worked. Is the British public now sufficiently media literate to keep up with the fast pace of technological and market change? This policy brief updates our June 2011 report (Livingstone and Wang, 2011) that showed that the early gains in media literacy have tailed off. Another year's worth of data shows no improvement, as we document in what follows.

Yet now is hardly the time to reduce efforts to promote media literacy, as the media environment is becoming increasingly complex. More than ever, the risk is that persistent inequalities will exacerbate digital and social exclusion, leaving the UK without the media-savvy public needed to avoid consumer detriment and to support active citizenship.

In May 2011, the Secretary of State called for input into the upcoming Communications Act. Although the promised White Paper has been considerably delayed, the crucial question remains: should media literacy be in the new Act? This brief says yes, and it calls for a renewed effort to ensure everyone has the tools, skills, resources and opportunities to learn, engage and participate in society.

Updated evidence of stalled progress in media literacy

This report examines UK national survey findings from successive media literacy reports published by Ofcom for adult and child populations.² These findings derive from nationally representative surveys of 1,800–3,300 interviews conducted in home with adults aged 16+, and children aged 5–15.³

Many of Ofcom's findings focus on questions of access – revealing clear increases in access to and use of digital technologies and platforms. While access and functional skills are important, in this report we focus on the crucial dimensions of understanding and creating media, as these are too often neglected (or complacently assumed to grow as use grows).

Our findings are dependent on the particular measures employed by Ofcom. These are rather limited proxies for the complex dimensions of media literacy conceived by educators, researchers and many stakeholders. Nonetheless, they are sufficient for our present purpose. As will be seen, although year-to-year data show some fluctuations, overall a clear story emerges, based on the following indicators:

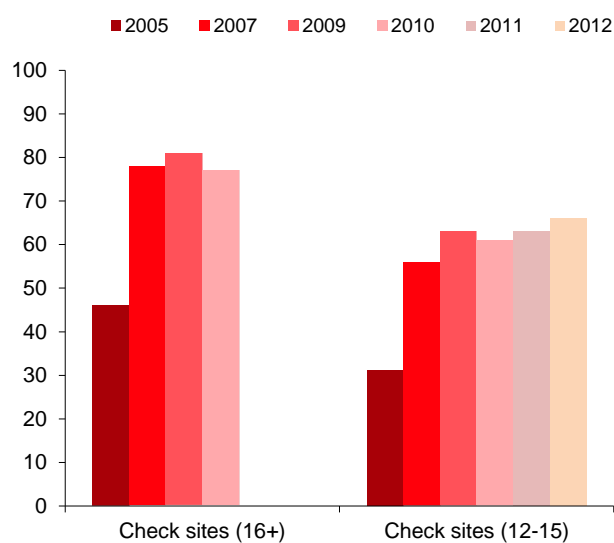
- Users who check reliability of new websites (Figure 1)
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We also note differences by age, gender and socio-economic status (SES). Full details can be found in the Ofcom reports cited.

Users who check reliability of new websites (Figure 1)⁴

Adults are learning, whether from direct experience or from being guided, to check the reliability of new websites. Such checks rose sharply between 2005 and 2007, but have not risen since.⁵ One fifth of adults and one third of teenagers did not check the reliability of websites they visited.

Those aged 55+ or from lower SES groups were the least likely to check website reliability, and fewer teenagers checked than adults.



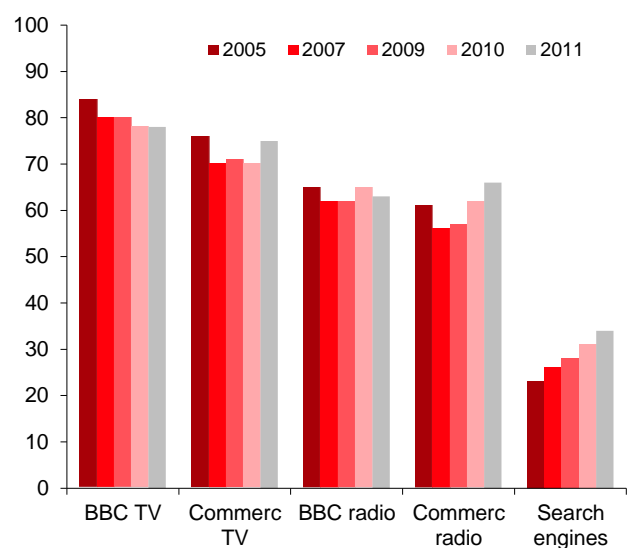
Rates of checking have not improved in recent years, despite growing internet usage. It seems the early gain in users evaluating website reliability has reached a plateau. Knowledge gaps remain, especially for the young, old and less privileged. The costs in terms of the risk of confusion or exploitation are not known.

Adult (16+) understanding of media funding sources (Figure 2)⁶

Understanding media funding aids evaluation of content.⁷ People generally knew how broadcast media were financed, but despite mass internet use, only a minority knew that search engines were funded by advertising.

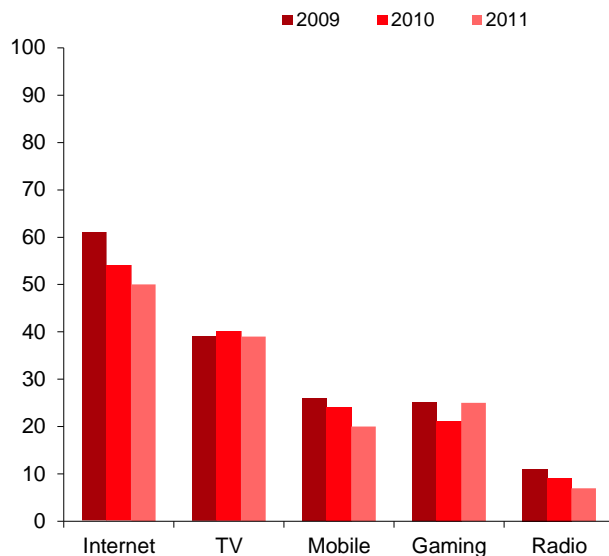
Although the internet has become a key source of information and news, knowledge of its funding has risen only slowly.

This is particularly low for young people, women, older and recent users. Without intervention, it seems unlikely that this vital aspect of critical literacy will improve.



Adult (16+) concerns about media platform (Figure 3)⁸

While users' concerns about media platforms slightly reduced from 2009 to 2011, users remained far more concerned about what is online than with other media platforms.



They were far more concerned about offensive or illegal content on the internet than about any other medium. Still, such concerns are slowly declining.

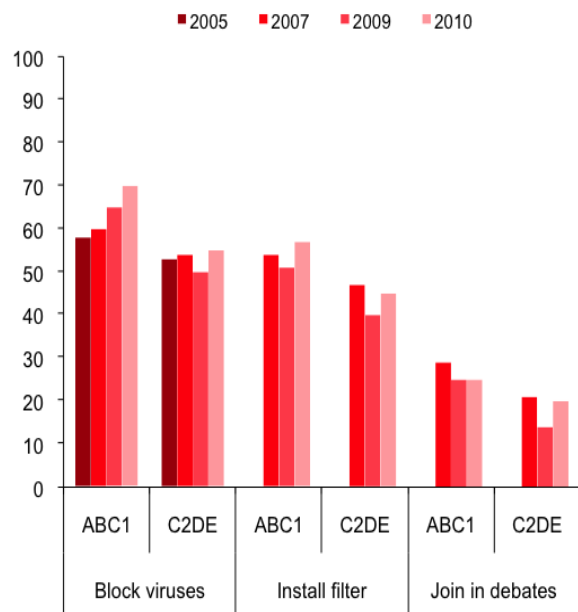
Public concern regarding media content indicates that there may be interest in gaining media literacy skills, particularly critical ones that will enable people to assess sources and types of content.

Digital skills among adults (Figure 4)⁹

Since 2005, there has been a slight increase in middle-class adults' ability to block viruses.

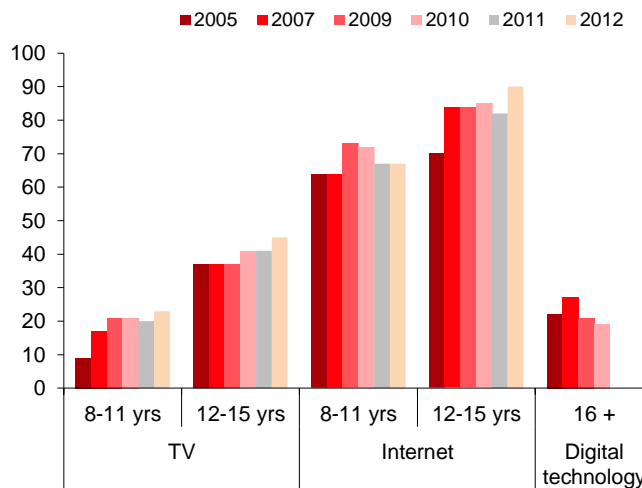
But otherwise, five years of internet safety promotion has produced little evident benefit in digital safety skills. Using digital skills to participate in public debate remains low overall. SES gaps persist.¹⁰

Greater efforts are needed than have been made so far to increase safety and participation overall and particularly to reach those who are not already among the media-savvy. Participation and safety skills are both vital in an inclusive society.



Adults and children’s receipt of formal lessons about media (Figure 5)¹¹

Many children are now taught about the internet at school. However, efforts are concentrated on 12–15 year olds, even though ever more primary school children are now online. For all children, learning about television lags behind that of the internet, though television too is a trusted source of information.



Adults have fewer opportunities than children to learn about digital technology, and this may explain why their learning has not risen over recent years. It is unclear how they can catch up.

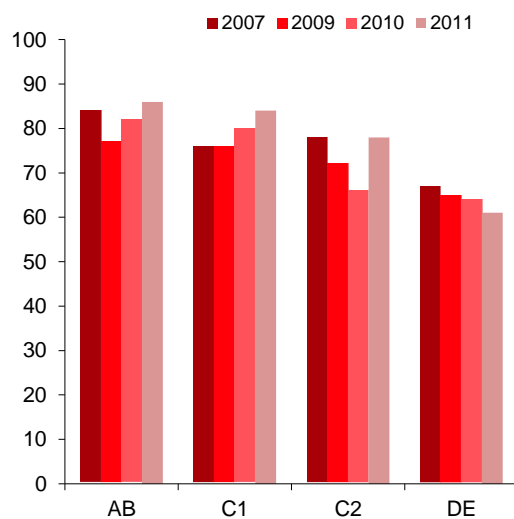
Greater efforts are needed to reach adults and young people not inside formal education.

Users who make any judgement about a website before entering personal information (Figure 6)¹²

Disclosing personal data in order to benefit from the variety of services offered through the internet is routine for 3 in 4 Europeans (Lusoli et al. 2012). While most UK adults are learning to make some form of judgement about a website before entering personal information, the rise is slow, increasing only slightly from 77% in 2007 to 79% in 2011.

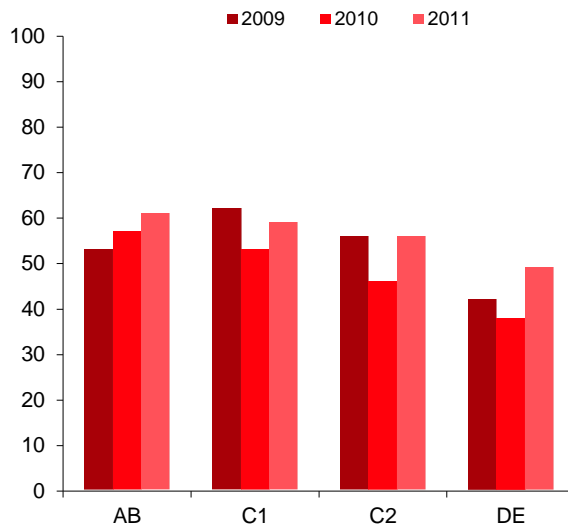
But, those from the lowest SES group, and the youngest adults aged 16–24, were the least likely to make any judgement, and this has barely improved over the years. If anything, the knowledge gap has increased.

Failure to protect privacy and security online can have severe consequences. This ability cannot be left to users for trial-and-error. Guidance and intervention are vital to improve users’ critical judgement.



Users' understanding of accuracy/bias in results listed by a search engine (Figure 7)¹³

Using search engines to look for information is a common activity. Yet in 2011, only 57% of adult users realised that not all search results were accurate or unbiased.



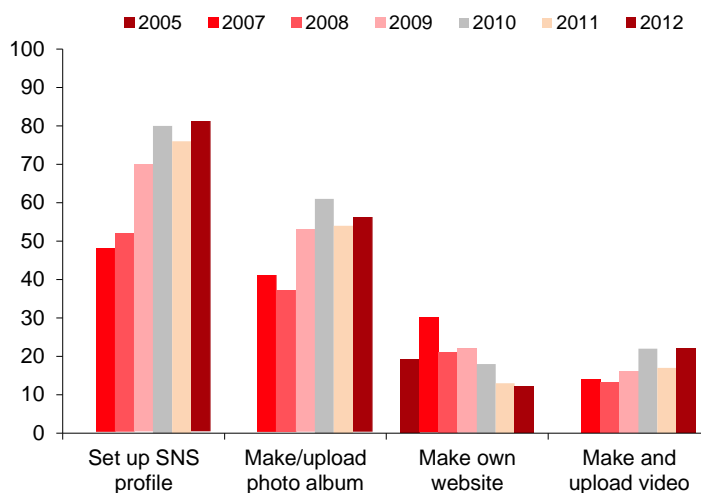
Notable differences existed among the four SES categories. While awareness among the AB group has improved steadily, the DE group still lags behind.

Understanding how search engines operate is key to finding the right information online. More efforts are needed to ensure that users – especially the less privileged and the young – can rightly employ search engines without being misinformed.

Children's (aged 12–15) communicative and creative uses (Figure 8)¹⁴

Among teens, making a website was slowly taking hold when it was replaced by the use of social network sites (SNS). Now, SNS and online photo albums make a limited form of content creation easy, and are continuing to rise in popularity.

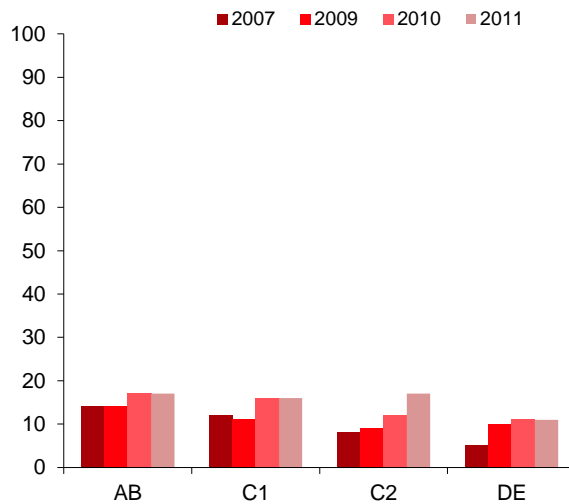
But, despite the ease of user-generated content sites such as YouTube, making and uploading a video was undertaken by few 12- to 15-year-olds. Labelling them 'digital natives' thus seems overstated.



Without improved design, guidance and/or motivation, children's use of the internet for creative purposes is likely to remain a minor pursuit.¹⁵ Efforts are needed to give children confidence and skills in content creation and sharing.

Adults' weekly civic/public use of the internet (Figure 9)¹⁶

The take-up of civic participation at least once a week among internet-using adults was one of the lowest of all, and there is little evidence of any increase since 2007.



But the early gap among the four SES categories has lessened, although the DE class still lag behind. If civic participation online is a goal, it seems clear that most adults, especially from lower SES groups, are missing out.

Without the chance to participate in or gain an adequate response from a public or political organisation, civic use of the internet is unlikely to spread.¹⁷

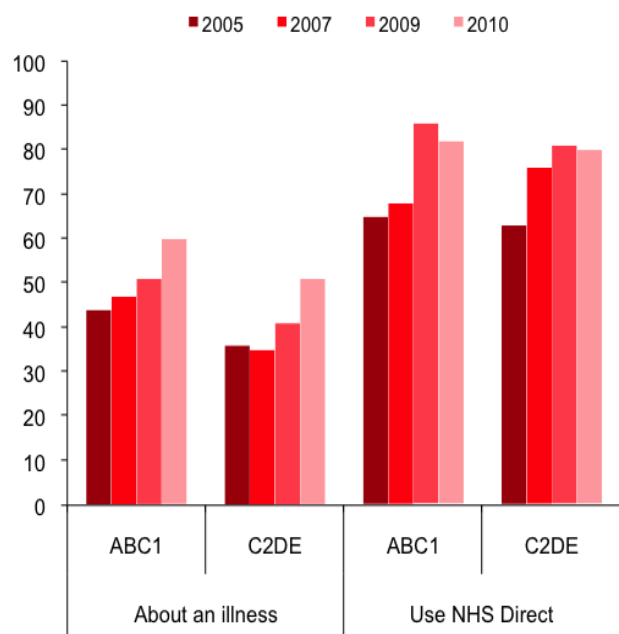
Adults' use of the internet for health information (Figure 10)¹⁸

There was a small increase in adults taking advantage of the internet to find general health-related information, rising from 64% in 2009 to 68% in 2010.

More promisingly, as shown in Figure 10, there was a steady rise in internet-using adults going online to gain specific information about an illness as and when needed. High SES adults are leading, but lower SES groups are catching up.

Among adults who did seek health information online (*left-hand bars*), most consulted public sites, for example, NHS Direct (*right-hand bars*).

Among these adults, there were no SES differences, pointing to the importance of motivation or need in stimulating internet use. More investigation into the reasons for the success of online services such as NHS Direct may benefit other online public services.



The wider context

The Communications Act 2003 placed a duty on Ofcom to promote media literacy. This was followed by a National Media Literacy Plan as part of the Digital Britain agenda, along with a Minister and a Champion for Digital Inclusion, and then, a National Plan for Digital Participation (BIS, 2010), with substantial funding promised. Few disagreed that:

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. (BERR and DCMS, 2009, p 5)

But since the Coalition government came to power, statements in support of media or digital literacy have been few and far between. Crucially, the Labour government's budget for the National Plan was cancelled, and Ofcom's activities in the field of media literacy have been substantially curtailed. Such statements of support as do exist focus mainly on access (the digital divide) and safety (especially for children). This leaves little attention to promoting the critical understanding and creative participation of all citizens with and through digital media.

If the UK is not to fall behind – in the skills and competences of its citizens and consumers, as well as in the usability, transparency and innovativeness of its digital media offer – a new policy direction is vital. This dismal situation stands in direct contrast both to the promise of previous efforts and to wider international initiatives:

- In Europe, support for media and digital literacy is growing. As part of the Lisbon Strategy and following calls from the European Parliament and the media and communications sector, the European Commission has worked to promote media literacy with a *Recommendation on media literacy in the digital environment to promote a more competitive audiovisual and content industry and an inclusive knowledge society* (EC(2009) 6464 final; European Commission, 2009).
- In its 2006 European Recommendation of Key Competences, the European Union included 'digital competence' as a key competence for lifelong learning (European Parliament and the Council, 2006; Ferrari, 2012). Then media literacy has been considered by the EU Commission to be 'an essential factor [in] active citizenship, democratic participation and social cohesion' in the Information Society (Ding, 2011, p. 8).
- June 2011 saw the European Commission's Digital Agenda call for e-skills (European Commission, 2010), building on the requirement in the *Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS) Directive 2007/65/EC* for a three-yearly reporting obligation regarding the level of media literacy in all member states (European Parliament and the Council, 2007).
- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concurs, identifying a range of key competencies essential for

full participation in society, including the critical ability to use knowledge, information and technologies interactively (PISA, 2005).

- In the US, Federal Communications Commissioner Mignon Clyburn, announcing a National Digital Literacy programme in 2010 (as part of the National Broadband Plan), said: 'Nothing can open more doors 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).

Since working out how to judge matters of information, identity, privacy, data and security bewilders lawyers and experts as well as ordinary people, it should be no surprise to find that many people will not simply 'pick it up as they go along'. This is not the place, however, to detail the widespread British and international research evidence in support of the imperative to raise media literacy levels across the population.

Suffice to note here a few recent reports documenting the citizen and consumer detriment that will result if the public lack sufficient media literacy to navigate, manage and participate in an increasingly complex and important digital environment:

- The 2012 BBC Media Literacy report shows that 16% of adult internet users (aged 15+) did not know where to start despite the desire to learn more about the internet, and 21% felt that their internet use was restricted due to lack of skills, thus pointing to the need for intervention.
- Inequalities will not be reduced by digital media use. Quite the contrary: gaps in media use exacerbate gaps in knowledge and participation. As the Go On UK campaign¹⁹ has shown, 16 million people aged 15 and over in the UK still lack the basic online skills of communication (finding things, sharing personal information and evaluating whether they can trust the online content or websites).
- Social class appears to be an important predictor of the quality and skills of internet use. As the policy brief *The emergence of a digital underclass* (Helsper, 2011) illustrates, unemployed internet users with lower education remain worse off in terms of quality of broadband access, frequency of use, perceived digital skills and breadth of use.
- The Hansard Society (2011) found that, although 40% of social class DE would like to learn more about the Parliament, they were the least likely to use the internet/email to source information about national political or parliamentary issues. With comparatively lower interest in politics, compounded by lower digital access and digital skills, the DEs represent a key 'hard to reach' group, and this is unlikely to change if inequalities in digital media use persist.
- Lusoli, Ward and Gibson (2006) found that those who take advantage of the internet to participate in politics are mainly those who are already active with other traditional methods of participation; simply adding the online channels is therefore not sufficient to ensure wider political engagement.

Conclusion: renewed government and industry support for media literacy is vital

In the early days, the public was ready and willing to be informed about new media challenges. Now they seem more wary, perhaps weary, and certainly confused. The evidence in this report shows little improvement in media literacy among the British public, especially in relation to critical understanding and participation. And there is persistent evidence of problematically low media literacy among disadvantaged groups.

It seems that early wins in raising media literacy have stalled. This may be because initial gains were easier to achieve, with a public willing to learn the basics of media literacy in the digital age. Or it could be because initial efforts – in time, money and new initiatives – really paid dividends, but that the failure to sustain and expand media literacy initiatives has had ill effects. If this is the case, then considering the lack of progress in relation to critical and participatory literacy, the cuts to media literacy initiatives under the Coalition government are particularly unfortunate.

Changing this situation will demand investment of resources along with high profile public policy support. After all, reaching the widest population with complex messages, updated knowledge, ‘just in time’ support and scaffolded learning opportunities is demanding and expensive. Our evidence also pinpoints specific groups for whom the careful targeting of limited resources and greater efforts could deliver particular benefits. In sum, the evidence supports the promotion of media literacy so as to raise digital skills in order to benefit:

- the whole population, since everyone is faced with rapid changes in digital choices, complexity and risk;
- disadvantaged populations in particular, for whom digital knowledge gaps compound prior disadvantage;
- the state, in relation to health, civic participation, e-government, e-commerce, creativity/innovation and workplace skills;
- all citizens, to empower civic engagement, critical information skills and creative expression.

The UK government aims to become ‘digital by default’ in the next two years, according to the government’s Digital Strategy report (Cabinet Office, 2012). Surely a national plan to enable everyone to gain not only the access but also the digital skills to survive and thrive in this environment is vital. While all stakeholders – industry, state, civil society, educators and citizens – must play their part, a coordinated approach is necessary if initiatives are not to miss their mark, duplicate effort or, worse, fail to address the very real problems that persist.

Without concerted action and sufficient resources, the UK will fall behind other countries, inequalities will grow and consumer and citizen detriment will surely follow. Including and resourcing the promotion of media literacy for all in the upcoming Communications Act would be a great advance.

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Further recent evidence may be found in our parallel policy dossier on media literacy; see <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/2011/05/05/dossier-media-literacy-and-the-uks-communication-act-2003/>

Notes

¹ This definition draws on the US National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy (Aufderheide, 1993; see also Livingstone, 2003): 'The ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms.'

² See Ofcom (2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012a, 2012b).

³ While some yearly comparison data are directly provided by Ofcom in the reports, other comparison data have been extracted from the datasets that Ofcom publishes with the reports.

⁴ Base for children (2005/07/09/10/11/12): children aged 12–15 who use the internet at home. Base for adults (2005): all internet-using adults; (2007/09/10): all internet-using adults who visit new websites. Questions for children: QC26Z (2005), QC19 (2007), QC16 (2009), NQC16B (2010, 2011), QC19 (2012: 'Thinking about the websites that you visit that you haven't visited before when you're looking for information online or if you're buying or selling things online. Which, if any, of these things would you check?'). Questions for adults: I13 (2005), IN16 (2007), IN16 (2009), NIN16 (2010: 'Thinking about when you visit a website you haven't been to before.... Which, if any, of these things would you say you regularly do?'). Source: Ofcom (2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). Note that Ofcom publishes reports a year after fieldwork is conducted, with the exception of Ofcom (2011c), which was published in the same year as the data was collected. So, for instance, question number NIN16 (2010) refers to data collected in 2010 published in the 2011 report.

⁵ This question was not asked again in the 2011 fieldwork with adults.

⁶ Base: all adults. Questions: T20/R17/I31 (2005), T8-T9/R5-R6/IN34-35 (2007), T5-T6/R4-R5/IN28-29 (2009/10), T3-T4/R2-R3/IN25-26 (2011: 'How would you say BBC TV programmes are mainly funded?/How would you say programmes are mainly funded on ITV, Channel 4 and Five?/How would you say BBC radio stations are mainly funded?/How would you say the other main radio stations are mainly funded?/How do you think search engine websites such as Google or Ask.com are mainly funded?'). Source: Ofcom (2006b, 2008b, 2010b, 2011b, 2012b).

⁷ Awareness of the economic aspects of media production helps one understand that media messages are constructed and shaped by various media institutional forces, and may have commercial, ideological and political implications (Aufderheide, 1993; Brown, 2001).

⁸ Base: adult users of each platform. Questions: IN30/T7/M4/G6/R6 (2009/10), IN27/T5/M3/G6/R4 (2011: 'Can you tell me if you have any concerns about what is on the internet/TV/mobile phones/gaming/radio?'). Source: Ofcom (2010b, 2011b, 2012b).

⁹ Base: all adults with internet at home (2005), all internet-using adults (2007/09/10). Questions: I24 (2005), IN7 (2007), IN8 (2009/10: 'I'm going to read out some different types of tasks associated with the internet, PCs or laptops, and for each one please say which of the options on the card applies to you.' The options are: Interested, can't do with confidence; Can do with confidence; Not interested). In 2007, the question item was 'join in debates about subjects that interest me through posting comments on websites'. In 2009 and 2010, the question was phrased slightly differently to be 'join in debates online or give your opinions on social or political issues' – emphasizing the civic/political aspect of such debates. Source: Ofcom (2006b, 2008b, 2010b, 2011b). This question was not asked again in the 2011 fieldwork.

¹⁰ The gap between those who are interested in blocking viruses and installing filters and those who are confident in their skills to do so is sizeable (20% and 18% respectively), suggesting an appetite for further cultivation of media literacy skills given support (Ofcom, 2011b).

¹¹ Base: all children aged 8–15 and all adults. Questions for children: QC57Z (2005), QC43 (2007), QC42/44 (2009/10) QC 41/42 (2011), QC 63/64/65/66 (2012: 'Do any of your lessons at school teach you about TV/about the internet?'). Questions for adults: Z16 (2005), Z6 (2007/09/10: 'Thinking about the types of things you might learn about TV, the internet, mobile phones and so on.... Which, if any, of these you have learned about through classes, training or any other type of formal learning?'). Source: Ofcom (2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012a). This question was not asked again in the 2011 fieldwork with adults.

¹² Base: adults who use the internet at home or elsewhere (2007/09/10/11). Questions: IN42 (2007), IN37 (2009/10), IN32 (2011: 'Could you tell me whether you would make a judgement about a website before entering these types of details?'). Source: Ofcom (2008b, 2010b, 2011b, 2012b).

¹³ Base: all adults who mostly use search engines to look for information on the internet (2009/10 Wave 1), all adults who ever use search engines (2010 Wave 2/2011). Questions: NIN46 (2009/10), IN40 (2011: 'When you use a search engine to find information, you enter a query in the search box and the search engine will then show some links to websites in the results pages. Which one of these is closest to your opinion about the level of accuracy or bias of the information detailed in the websites that appear in the results pages?'). Source: Ofcom (2010b, 2011b, 2012b).

¹⁴ Base: all children aged 12–15 who use the internet at home. Questions: QC49ZA (2005), QC42 (2007), QC18 (2009/10/11), QC21 (2012: 'I'd like to read out a number of things people might do. For each one, could you please tell me if you've done it, you'd be interested in doing it, or not interested?'). Source: Ofcom (2006a, 2008a, 2010a, 2011a, 2011c, 2012a).

¹⁵ Hargittai and Walejko's (2008) study shows that users' internet experiences and skills mediate whether they share content online. Correa (2010) shows that users' perceived competence (self-efficacy), intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are the most important predicting factors in content creation. When people feel competent about their skills, they are more likely to be motivated to create content online.

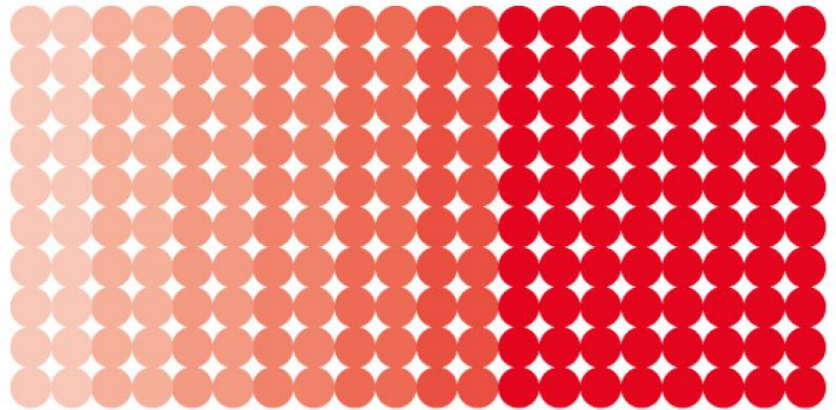
¹⁶ Base: all internet-using adults. Questions: IN14 (2007), IN13/14 (2009/10), IN14/15 (2011: 'Could you please tell me from this list the types of things you currently do using the internet, and how often you do each?'). Internet activities considered public/civic in 2007: Finding information about public services provided by local or national government; Looking at political/campaign/issues websites. In 2009/10: Finding information about public services provided by local or national government; Looking at political/campaign/issues websites; Completing government processes online. In 2011: Finding information online about public services provided by local or national government; Completing government processes online; Looking at political or campaign or issues websites; Signing an online petition; Contacting a local councillor or MP online. Source: Ofcom (2008b, 2010b, 2011b, 2012b).

¹⁷ Research shows that low political efficacy and low trust account for low participation – people must believe their contribution will be responded to (Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988; Kahne and Westheimer, 2006). Also, if political participation online is taught about as part of the media literacy education for young people, they are more likely to take part online (Kahne, Lee, and Feezell, 2012).

¹⁸ Base for 'about an illness': all internet-using adults. Base for 'public sites such as NHS Direct': those who use the internet to learn about an illness. Questions: I26/28 (2005), IN26/27 (2007), IN21/22 (2009), NIN21/IN22 (2010: 'Do you ever use the internet to find out more about an illness?/Which of the following types of websites do you tend to look at to find out more about an illness?'). Source: Ofcom (2006b, 2008b, 2010b, 2011b). These two specific questions were not asked again in the 2011 fieldwork with adults. Instead, the more general question 'Finding information about health-related issues' had been added since 2009.

¹⁸ Go On UK: www.go-on.co.uk/challenge/uk-snapshot





LSE *media policy project*



About The Media Policy Project aims to establish a deliberative relationship between policy makers, civil society actors, media professionals and relevant media research. We want policy makers to have timely access to the best policy-relevant research and better access to the views of civil society. We also hope to engage the policy community with research on the policy making process itself. We plan to examine how policy issues emerge on the agenda and how networked communications may aid stakeholder consultation.

Links Project blog: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/>
Twitter: <http://twitter.com/#!/LSEmediapolicy>
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