

Evaluation of *Behind
the Headlines*
Media Literacy
Ambassador
project:
Executive Summary

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Working with

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Introduction

Advances in digital technology have changed how media and news are created and experienced. Alongside this, there has been a growing recognition of the need to strengthen resilience to mis- and disinformation, acknowledging their potential to threaten democracy and children and young people's wellbeing. As their cognitive capacities are still developing, teenagers may have greater susceptibility to mis- and disinformation than older age groups (see, e.g., [Jolley et al., 2022](#)) and need support to develop skills to engage effectively with the media ([Cannon et al., 2022](#)).

Behind the Headlines aims to empower young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to critically analyse news and develop resilience to mis- and disinformation.

The Behind the Headlines Media Literacy Ambassador project

The Behind the Headlines Media Literacy Ambassador project, run by the Guardian Foundation, aims to empower young people aged 14 to 18 with the knowledge, skills and confidence to critically analyse media and news and recognise mis- and disinformation. Targeted in schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage in the Midlands, Greater Manchester, and West and South Yorkshire, the project combines direct and peer-to-peer-based learning to support young people's media literacy. Commissioned by the Department of Science, Innovation & Technology (DSIT) Media Literacy Programme, it addresses the key skills and knowledge outlined in Principle 3 on the DSIT Online Media Strategy: 'Users should understand how different content is created and be able to critically analyse content they consume.'

Participating schools receive professionally delivered workshops, teacher training, high-quality resources and ongoing virtual support to train students as 'Media Literacy Ambassadors' (MLAs), who then co-design and co-deliver media literacy sessions to fellow students. This approach aims to maximise the reach of the project, consolidate students' learning by supporting them to teach others about

media and news literacy, and increase the relevance of sessions to young people by involving their peers.

This evaluation of the project was conducted by the National Literacy Trust. The report focuses on data from 28 schools that took part in the project during 2023 and 2024 and includes findings from quizzes, surveys, youth panels and interviews with teachers, and reflections on what has been learned and how this might inform others working to support media and news literacy in young people.

Key findings

1: The Media Literacy Ambassador project improved media and news literacy skills in the young people it worked with.

More participating than non-participating students were able to identify reliable and unreliable news stories correctly after taking part.

To assess whether the project helped students to better identify features of reliable and unreliable news, students were asked to identify three news items as either real or fake before and after a media literacy workshop. Based on matched¹ samples of participating (n = 364) and non-participating (n = 87) students:

- The percentage of participating students able to identify two of three items correctly as real or fake increased from **2 in 5** (39.9%) before to **7 in 10** (68.5%) after the workshop, an increase of 28.6 percentage points (pp).

The percentage of students able to identify two of three news items correctly as real or fake increased from **2 in 5** (40%) before to **7 in 10** (69%) after the project.

- In a smaller comparison group, the percentage of non-participating students able to identify two of three items correctly also increased (from 37.9% to 56.3%). However, the percentage-point increase (18.4pp) was 10.2pp lower than that observed in the participating group.

¹ Students were matched by initials and birth month

2: The peer-to-peer model supported reach, consolidated learning and provided engaging and relevant sessions when co-delivered to students.

Media Literacy Ambassadors (MLAs) reported stronger media and news literacy skills after co-delivering sessions to peers.

Participating students were trained as Media Literacy Ambassadors and co-designed and co-delivered media literacy sessions to fellow students.

- Most MLAs felt that co-delivering sessions had reinforced their earlier learning. 9 in 10 (90.3%) felt more confident about recognising mis- and disinformation and 9 in 10 (88.0%) felt that they had increased skills in thinking critically about news stories. In addition, 3 in 4 MLAs felt they had increased their presentation (76.7%) and communication skills (75.2%).

Students receiving sessions by MLAs found them engaging and reported positive outcomes in relation to media and news literacy knowledge and confidence.

- Co-delivered to students found sessions engaging and relevant, with comments including: “Really immersive, activities were great, had fun while learning”.
- Students were typically in younger age groups and had lower starting and ending points in relation to outcomes linked with media literacy knowledge and behaviour. However, percentage-point increases were broadly similar to those seen in MLA students involved in the initial workshops.
- Teachers’ comments highlighted student engagement in the co-delivered sessions, as well as the wider confidence, teamwork and leadership benefits:

The students have loved being part of the project. They have built their confidence [and] become more critical in their consumption of news. They feel proud to be part of the project.

Overall, findings suggest that co-delivered workshops were effective in supporting students to learn techniques for evaluating the reliability of news and had a positive impact on media and news literacy attitudes and confidence.

3: Qualitative data provided insights into areas for improvement and suggested the MLA programme was a sustainable approach to supporting young people’s media and news literacy.

Teacher surveys and interviews highlighted that the project complemented the curriculum, ensured sessions were relevant, increased reach and offered a sustainable approach to supporting media and news literacy.

- Of teachers answering questions about the MLA approach, almost all believed the peer-supported approach to be effective in reaching and engaging students (18 of 21) and said they would like to use the approach to support media and news literacy projects in their school in future (19 of 22).
- Teacher interviews provided further insight into experiences of the project, with comments including: “It’s good for the students they’re engaging with because they understand the way that they consume information and news more. They’ve rolled out to a lot more students rather than one teacher delivering it. We reached about 150 students.”

I would say this is, probably, in my 15 years of teaching, the most positive thing I’ve seen in terms of student impact.

The project was also delivered successfully to four groups of students with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) in three settings and detailed findings are provided in the full version of this report².

Following the first year of delivery (2022-23), 4 schools were revisited in 2023-24 and received refresher training. Initial findings suggested the project can have a powerful longer-term impact on students’ engagement with media and news. Comments from students included:

I am more open to news and media because I trust that now I can fact-check sources and news. I used to avoid most news altogether because I didn’t know what was true and what wasn’t.

² Picton (2024) The Behind the Headlines Media Literacy Ambassador Project, London: National Literacy Trust

Recommendations to others supporting young people's media and news literacy

The *Behind the Headlines* Media Literacy Ambassadors project has provided valuable insights into the effective provision of media literacy support for young people. To build on the findings above, recommendations to secondary schools and other organisations seeking to improve media and news literacy include:

1. Findings appear to indicate that the Media Literacy Ambassador approach could be an effective way to support media literacy.

- Involving young people in supporting their peers can have a variety of positive impacts for students and those they co-deliver to, including embedding learning and increasing relevance and engagement.
- An initial workshop is essential for providing a strong foundation for later delivery, and students need training and support throughout to ensure co-delivered sessions are effective.
- High-quality expert-produced resources are welcomed by busy teachers.

2. The peer-to-peer model supports greater reach, embeds learning and has a positive impact on transferable skills, particularly for less-confident students.

- Teachers reported students delivering sessions across year groups, schools and campuses, sometimes reaching hundreds of their peers across a project year and ensuring students across the school had the opportunity to increase their media and news literacy skills and knowledge.
- Having to teach other students helped to embed learning in the MLA group.
- Perhaps surprisingly, teachers often reported a positive impact on their least confident or engaged students, particularly in relation to developing teamwork and communication skills.

3. Project design and evaluation should involve input from teachers and centre young people's voices.

- Efforts to understand and elevate the perspectives of those participating in the intervention resulted in more effective and relevant delivery. Teacher panels provided invaluable information about the feasibility of the project while insights from youth panels provided context on young people's media environments and suggestions for improvements to delivery and evaluation.
- This valuable input was recognised and enabled by providing cover costs for teachers and vouchers for students.

Summary

Policymakers, media organisations, schools and families all have a role to play in empowering young people to become engaged and responsible media and news creators and consumers. As noted by one of the young people taking part in this project, feeling unsure about what can and can't be trusted in the media can lead to disengagement and avoidance of news. To ensure a functioning democracy, this must be countered by efforts to raise young people's media and news literacy skills and confidence. The evaluation of interventions that aim to help young people foster the critical skills needed to build resilience to mis- and disinformation can make a vital contribution to the evidence base in this area.

The *Behind the Headlines* Media Literacy Ambassador project was designed to teach secondary students effective skills and techniques to evaluate media and news, and to provide the wider context for critical engagement by also improving media and news literacy knowledge, behaviour and confidence. The involvement of teachers and young people underpinned the approach, which centred on training students to co-deliver media literacy sessions to their peers. As well as facilitating greater reach, this model appeared to consolidate learning in students trained as Media Literacy Ambassadors (MLAs).

Findings from this evaluation indicated that when compared with students in a comparison group, more participating students were able to identify news items correctly as real or fake in post-tests. This suggests the project was effective in helping students identify the features of reliable and unreliable news. Furthermore, students in both the MLA group and in the groups that they co-delivered media literacy sessions to reported greater critical engagement with media and news. Finally, and notably, the model allowed Media Literacy Ambassadors to share their learning widely across other classes and year groups, with many reaching hundreds of fellow students over the course of the project. In doing so, as well as reaching fellow students in an engaging and relevant way, MLAs not only consolidated their own learning, but also developed greater confidence and transferable skills in communication, teamwork and leadership.

These findings suggest that the Guardian Foundation's *Behind the Headlines* Media Literacy Ambassador programme has the potential to provide an innovative, engaging and effective model for supporting young people navigating media and news in the digital age. We hope this evaluation will contribute to the evidence base relating to effective approaches that empower engaged, confident and critical interactions with media and news in the digital age.

Acknowledgements

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About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories. Visit www.literacytrust.org.uk to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

About The Guardian Foundation

Our purpose is to promote global press freedom and access to liberal journalism, and to build a world where people have access to reliable information from a diverse range of sources, strengthening their ability to hold power to account.

We work directly with journalists, news organisations, audiences and educators in schools and across communities to improve news and media literacy, facilitate opportunities for people from underrepresented backgrounds to use their voice and agency, and foster the viability of fact-based news organisations. Together, our programmes create impact and enable change.

Our award-winning *Behind the Headlines* programme empowers young people to understand, critically analyse, engage with and participate in the media. Over 150,000 young people have taken part in our programmes since 2002.

Visit theguardianfoundation.org to find out more, sign up to our newsletter for schools and follow us on LinkedIn and X.

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Involving young people in supporting each other's media and news literacy presents a promising approach to ensuring interventions are engaging and relevant, while supporting reach and reinforcing learning.

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