

**Written evidence submission: Communications and digital committee media literacy inquiry**

*The Guardian Foundation*

The following submission will draw extensively from our experience teaching children and young people and evidence of impact from our programmes. At *The Guardian Foundation*, our team of media and educational experts have worked with over 180,000 young people in classrooms, community settings and in the newsroom over the past two decades. Our *NewsWise* programme generates curiosity and critical engagement with news, equipping children aged 7-11 with the skills and knowledge to make sense of the world. Our *Behind the Headlines* programme opens up the world of news for secondary and higher education aged students empowering them with the knowledge, skills and confidence to critically analyse news and develop resilience to fake news.

**1. What are the overall aims of delivering media literacy in the UK?**

a. How would you define media literacy? What would ‘good’ media literacy look like?

Being media literate is the ability to critically engage with news and online information as well as the skills and confidence to challenge information and act upon it responsibly. As a result of being media literate, people can become more engaged citizens, able to make informed decisions about their lives.

b. What are the risks and consequences of not achieving these aims?

The spread of false information poses a significant threat to democracy and societal cohesion. It is understood to be one of the [biggest global issues](#), second only to climate change and even a threat to public health. For example, areas with greater exposure to false information on COVID-19 had a [greater number of cases and deaths](#).

Without a universal understanding of the facts and how to verify them, society is more divided, less safe and less democratic. It is important that people are supported with the skills to engage critically with news and media and have the skills and confidence to challenge information and act upon it responsibly.

c. What indicators or evidence would demonstrate improvement?

Our existing evaluation framework and theory of change measures knowledge, skills and behaviour & attitudes. Here is a summary of some of the indicators we use to measure improved news and media literacy skills:

- People engage with trusted, quality sources and understand the value and impact of news in democratic society
- Increased civic engagement and feeling empowered to having their voice heard. For

example, interest in local, national or global issues, or an interest in making a difference in their community

- People understand how trustworthy journalism is researched, edited and produced and can critically engage with news
- People feel empowered to report on stories important to themselves and their community
- People are aware of journalistic best practices and understand how the news is produced
- People increasingly consider the extent to which news and content is trustworthy. For example, they have the ability to think critically about news stories (i.e. they can assess, analyse and evaluate them), they have the confidence to question authority (i.e. those creating media texts)
- People feel confident to discern and challenge mis/ disinformation and share credible news
- Educators have knowledge, skills and confidence to teach and engage young people in media literacy

## **2. How well are existing UK media literacy initiatives working, and how could they be enhanced?**

- a. How are responsibilities currently split between different stakeholders, such as the Government, industry, and civil society, and could improvements be made to these arrangements?

### *Government*

Media literacy support from the government has shown the potential impact of media literacy education but has been piecemeal rather than systemic:

- The **DfE**'s interim report on their curriculum review suggests that media literacy will be recognised on the curriculum in some way
- **DCMS**' Online Media Strategy (2021-24) was comprehensive and identified key components of media literacy. It also provided short term funding for third sector organisations to show efficacy and innovation in media literacy where needs had been identified
- The responsibility of this has since been taken over by **DSIT**, however the focus has tended to be on digital skills and literacy
- **Ofcom** has played an important role through media literacy research and by providing networks such as Making Sense of Media. It has also carried out small projects with the third sector and organisations working with people of all ages to carry out extensive research on best practices. As this is approached from a research perspective, it is not systemic, particularly as the curriculum is not part of their remit.

There are several networks already bringing the sector together, including Ofcom MSOM network; MILA; and the News Literacy Network. The government should **make use of these existing networks** where knowledge and experience is already concentrated.

Large-scale and long-term evaluation and assessment of the impact of media literacy interventions on people's skills is needed. The government is best placed to carry this out centrally to provide valuable insights for benchmarking and understanding what is effective.

### *Industry*

The most comprehensive initiatives are delivered by charities specialising in media literacy rather than the media or technology industries themselves. Examples include The Guardian Foundation, The Economist Educational Foundation and Common Sense Education.

The independence of charities allows them to design programmes that have the most impact possible, but reliance on external funding, which is currently very limited, makes it challenging to scale without the support of government and industry, which should be extended.

### *Civil society*

Digital inclusion initiatives are provided by community organisations, charities and libraries, but these tend to be focused on functional digital skills and often miss out the crucial critical thinking skills that must go alongside these. Our experience tells us that organisations providing frontline services (e.g. early-help groups) do recognise the importance of media literacy, but the demand for other urgent services (e.g. housing) means there is not capacity to also deliver media literacy interventions.

- b. Which other actors (including online platforms) have a role to play in improving media literacy in the UK?

Online platforms and social media should be compelled to fund media literacy programmes so that children, young people and adults can critically navigate the online world. There needs to be a stronger mandate from the government and regulatory bodies for tech platforms to fund independent and established media literacy initiatives.

Meta's decision to move away from fact-checking makes the need for media literacy skills more urgent and indicates that platforms like Meta are unlikely to engage with this area of work voluntarily.

Please see our answer to 5a for our views on Ofcom's role in ensuring tech platforms support media literacy.

- c. Are there examples of good practice on a local or regional level that could be scaled more widely across the UK?

The Guardian Foundation have a number of scalable and proven initiatives where current demand outstrips our available resources to deliver:

- *Classroom-based projects* - we go into classrooms and develop active critical digital engagement in targeted communities that need the most support, taking into account the concerns and needs of the locality.
- *Peer learning* - we train young people to teach their peers about fake news, enhancing and cascading media literacy knowledge, skills and confidence across different age ranges. We take a place-based approach, targeting areas with the most need and working closely with teachers and students to design workshops suited to the student population and local context. This ensures that skills are successfully embedded into schools and colleges.
- *Teacher training* generates long-term impact by embedding knowledge in schools and communities. We work with teacher networks, PSHE leads, and Literacy leads to promote our teacher training offering in localities and have seen the need and enthusiasm for support. With coordination and funding from central government, this could easily be scaled to all local authority areas in the country. Currently there is no one with specific responsibility for media literacy in education in schools - but there is already a model for expert leaders in other subject areas and this could be replicated.
- *SEND resources and training* - resources and teacher training that develop students' critical literacy skills and awareness of how online information and media impact their own behaviour, identity and wellbeing.
- *Family workshops* - engaging sessions in local communities for families to learn media literacy skills together. We have previously worked in libraries as a way to reach local communities.

- d. How will media literacy need to evolve over the next five years to keep up with changes in the media landscape and technological advancements?

Critical literacy will remain a core skill regardless of the medium via which people access information. That is why it is vital to teach critical skills alongside functional skills.

However, media literacy will need to keep pace and develop with technological innovation, particularly as AI presents a new way in which disinformation can be spread. Young people need to be equipped to navigate the ever changing media landscape and their teachers and parents will need training to support them:

- Media literacy should focus on where the needs are greatest
- Guidance, curricula and training should remain agile. For example, education settings must accept and embrace being experimental, even if this means adapting and learning as materials and learning are delivered
- Short, frequent training may work better than longer infrequent training because they can be adapted to reflect new developments

- Teach young people ‘digital character’ - how to make safe, responsible and ethical decisions online
- e. How does the UK’s approach to media literacy compare with that of other countries? What international best practice could be adopted or adapted here?

#### *Finland*

- There is a **systemic approach** that is built into all levels of society, which is currently lacking in the UK, where initiatives are more piecemeal and reactive to events.
- They recognise that the need for media literacy knowledge, skills and confidence **start at pre-school** and continues through life
- The Finish Government actively supports a range of **third sector** media literacy organisations and embed media literacy throughout the curriculum

#### *European Union (European digital media observatory)*

- The EDMO connects and coordinates the activities of 14 independent regional and national EDMO hubs across 28 countries
- The hubs themselves engage in detecting disinformation, organising media literacy activities, and analysing digital media ecosystems
- They employ a multidisciplinary approach to countering disinformation by integrating the expertise and collaborative efforts of fact-checkers, media literacy practitioners, researchers, and policy analysts across its network

#### *US*

The News Literacy project provides a district fellowship programme which provides grants to support district-wide news literacy education.

### **5. How adequately is the UK’s regulatory and legislative framework delivering media literacy?**

- a. What is your assessment of Ofcom’s media literacy strategy?

We are supportive of Ofcom’s media literacy strategy, particularly:

- Supporting media literacy education providers to carry out evaluation
- Working to ensure tech platforms’ funding of media literacy programmes
- Expanding training and learning opportunities, particularly targeting communities experiencing financial disadvantage, older adults, children, people with learning disabilities and/or cognitive impairment
- Building on their role as a media literacy convenor through the Making Sense of

Media Network, conferences and networking events.

The Guardian Foundation and those working in media literacy have benefited from their research and benchmarking through their annual research projects. In addition, they also look at issues that media literacy can address, such a recent report that showed around four in ten (44%) agree with the statement that the more a story is edited, the less likely it is to be true. Their project funding has also allowed organisations like ours to see what works and create models of media literacy education that could be scaled in the future.

However, in giving our comments on the strategy to Ofcom, we highlighted:

- The need for large scale longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of media literacy interventions on a greater portion of the population
- That Ofcom should demand transparency from tech platforms about their algorithms and how they target users
- Tech platforms' role in disseminating media including the degree of control they have over what people see in news feeds (e.g. Google Top Stories, Apple News) and on social media. Without this information, it is much more difficult to achieve goals such as:
  - Stopping mis and disinformation
  - Preventing harmful content and activity that disproportionately affects women and girls
  - Protection of personal information
- As explored in a previous question, there needs to be a stronger mandate for tech platforms to fund independent and established media literacy initiatives that work directly with young people and educators
- To ensure that these initiatives do not serve the interests of the platforms and are able to secure long-term impact, Ofcom or another government body should set up a significant and long term fund which platforms contribute to

b. What further action is needed from the Government, if any?

The government should instigate the funding and coordination of a cross-sector effort to secure the future of media literacy education from nursery to secondary education as well as adults and informal education. This should include civil society organisations and charities already working in this space, statutory bodies and tech platforms. There should be more emphasis on long term funding to ensure greater and sustained impact.

Previous funding initiatives from the government have proven successful. For example, previous funding from DSIT allowed The Guardian Foundation to pilot a peer learning model with an age group most prone to conspiracy theories and disinformation (14-18 year olds) in underserved communities in central England. During the 18 month project period:

- 807 students were trained as Media Literacy Ambassadors
- They went on to train 3,742 other young people

The project allowed for the collection of detailed [qualitative and quantitative data](#) from the participants, enabling the project to increase its impact and inform future project design. We continue to seek funding to continue and scale this project.

c. Are changes needed to legislation, for example the Online Safety Act 2023 or the Media Act 2024?

We were pleased to see that the Online Safety Act 2023 amended Ofcom's existing media literacy duties, which has included the publication of its 3-year media literacy strategies.

However, given the prevalence of mis and disinformation in society, we strongly recommend a more comprehensive, cross-governmental effort to tackle mis and disinformation through media literacy. As it stands, the only references to misinformation in the Online Safety Act are in relation to Ofcom.

## 6. What is the role of formal education in relation to media literacy?

a. How effectively is media literacy being taught in schools at present? How can critical thinking best be taught?

*Media literacy education should:*

- Encourage active participation e.g. students report their own news stories
- Be appropriate for the age-range
- Be authentic and relevant e.g. using real news stories
- Include support for educators - there should be formal training for teachers that is continually updated.

Our NewsWise programme provides an example of how news and media literacy can be taught in the classroom. The programme provides sequential learning for primary school students, moving through three main strands that make up news and media literacy:

- **Understanding and engaging with news and media** - instilling the understanding that news is vital for society as it helps us to understand the world in which we live and that news and media can also play a vital role in holding power to account
- **Critically navigating news and media** - the second strand of news and media literacy is all about learning to be a critical consumer of news and learning the skills to seek out reliable and trustworthy sources of information
- **Producing news and media** - providing young people with the opportunity to report real news stories themselves - this not only helps to further embed their understanding of news, but shows them that news is for them and about them and where they are from.



### *General thoughts on critical thinking*

There should be less of a focus on teaching and assessing how children and young people retain information taught to them, and more on how they can find, analyse and evaluate information for themselves and draw conclusions from it, in order to be informed, critical and active participants in society.

- b. What interventions are needed to support the delivery of media literacy education in schools, for example changes to the national curriculum and to teacher training?

Our key recommendation to the Department for Education's curriculum review was that news and media literacy should be recognised as a cross-cutting competency throughout the curriculum.

In addition to training and resources, having a framework in place to teach media literacy across different subjects gives part of the structure and support needed to equip educators with the skills and confidence needed to teach these essential skills.

At *The Guardian Foundation*, we suggest that a disciplinary literacy approach is the most effective way to embed news and media literacy skills across the curriculum without putting additional pressure on teachers. [Disciplinary literacy](#) is based on the idea that each subject affects how people read, write, think, and communicate. In the same way that news and media literacy must now be seen as an essential part of general literacy in the 21st century, so it follows that disciplinary news and media literacy is necessary in order for all subjects to properly prepare students for life beyond education in today's world.

This will involve addressing how subject-specific information is created, disseminated and interpreted, in order to help young people develop independent critical thinking skills, which allow them to be aware of and make informed decisions about how they interpret and act on information themselves.

- c. How should approaches to media literacy education vary according to age group?

The most effective way of reaching children and young people is at school. For younger children, the home learning environment is also important, so family learning can augment what children experience at school. [We have found](#) that teenagers respond well to delivering media literacy alongside their teacher and peers.

Our experience shows that relating learning to real life is extremely important and effective in engaging young people, including reluctant learners. In addition, making learning fun, and about active participation rather than focussing on danger and risk is an effective strategy. Approaches should reflect their own real experience of media and online information, using examples appropriate to their age, as well as their growing independence.



Our expertise is not in teaching adults and older people, however, our work with families shows that there is openness from parents to learning media literacy skills when put in the context of helping their children, and evaluation shows that taking part in family workshops also develops their own skills, so this can be a useful method.

Ideally, children should start developing media literacy skills in pre-school and build on these throughout their education. We have produced a [progression grid](#) to show the expected development across Key Stage 2.

d. What are the opportunities to engage children and young people in media literacy programmes outside formal education?

Schools and colleges are at the heart of our interventions because they have proven to be the most effective place to reach young people and teachers, are at the heart of our communities and offer opportunities in terms of embedding and scaling learning into the curriculum.

Our on-site education centre offers the chance for groups who meet our needs criteria (primarily for secondary schools and further education colleges) to take part in free workshops where they become immersed in the activity of a busy newsroom, develop journalism and media literacy knowledge and skills, learn outside of the classroom environment and meet news and media professionals.

Our family workshops in community settings such as schools and libraries have been proven to increase young people's media literacy and support families with [greater confidence in supporting their children's news literacy](#).

## **7. What are the barriers and challenges to teaching media literacy to adults?**

[DSIT's 2023 report](#) on cross-sectoral challenges to media literacy highlights a number of the key challenges which we find to be a barrier to scaling our work with children and young people:

- Funding challenges, including an emphasis on short-term, small-scale projects that made both comparative analyses of practice and scaling up initiatives more difficult.
- Making media literacy education feel relevant and engaging to adults
- Keeping up with technological changes and the tensions created by the role of platforms as the cause of many problems being addressed by media literacy, but also important funders of media literacy interventions.

a. How could these be overcome?

Adults should be reached in spaces and on platforms that they already use and efforts should be made to understand how different age groups behave differently online.

We have partnered with media fact checking organisation Maldita to create an interactive micro-learning programme for European citizens that speak Spanish, German, Dutch. Delivered on Whatsapp, learning covers critical thinking, fact-checking, and media consumption and deploying short length high impact audio-visual formats designed to improve levels of engagement, learning and knowledge retention.