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Evaluation of NewsWise in Birmingham

Supporting children and families' news literacy

July 2024

Introduction

Developments in digital technology have democratised access to information and the means of publishing, radically altering who can create and share news. Evaluating the reliability of online media and news stories requires an increasingly complex set of skills, and there is a growing recognition of the need to strengthen resilience to mis- and disinformation. However, opportunities to critically engage with media within the school setting are limited, with implications for children's rights (Cannon et al., 2020). Research has also found that more than 1 in 2 (55.1%) parents would welcome more support to help their children understand the news (Picton, 2019).

The NewsWise programme in Birmingham

NewsWise, run by The Guardian Foundation, is an award-winning news-literacy programme aimed at children aged 7 to 11¹. It consists of a series of engaging workshops, lessons and family workshops using high-quality resources to support a range of media-literacy activities². The NewsWise programme in Birmingham aimed to support children in Years 5 and 6 (aged 9 to 11) and their families to:

- Better understand and navigate news, including increasing their ability to identify mis- and disinformation
- Develop their interest in news, including experiencing the news together
- Feel confident to speak up for themselves and others

Additionally, through teacher training, NewsWise aimed to increase teachers' skills and confidence when teaching critical media and news literacy.

The NewsWise programme aims to help children and families develop their interest in, and understanding of, news, including identifying mis- and disinformation

¹ <https://theguardianfoundation.org/programmes/newswise>

² These included questioning sources, distinguishing between fact and opinion, learning how online images can be manipulated and how information can be targeted, and managing wellbeing in relation to news and online information.

Outputs

Reaching 17 schools serving areas of disadvantage in Birmingham, the project ran between March 2022 and March 2024, with some schools supported to run the project over two academic years. 49 classes took part, 21 in the academic year 2022/23 and 28 in 2023/24, reaching a total of 1,503 children and 42 teachers over the delivery period. Each school received pre-project teacher training, workshops delivered by the NewsWise team, and virtual visits from local journalist volunteers alongside a cross-curricular news-literacy unit of work delivered by teachers in the classroom. As part of the project, pupils produced their own news reports about a subject important to their lives and communities. Each school also held a family workshop, run by the NewsWise team, per class taking part each year. Children and their adult family members took part in interactive activities together, building on the unit of work children undertook in class. The family workshops reached 436 family members (parents/carers, siblings or other relatives) over the course of the project.

Key findings

The project was evaluated by the National Literacy Trust. To help evaluate impact, children and teachers were asked to complete pre- and post-project training, and workshop and project surveys. In addition, families were invited to complete post-workshop feedback forms. The surveys received 1,256 responses from children and 32 responses from teachers. 197 feedback forms were received from family members.

Findings suggest that the intervention was successful in terms of reaching the objectives, including supporting children and families to better understand and navigate the news, which included identifying mis- and disinformation, increasing interest in news and helping children feel more confident to advocate for themselves and others.

Children's news literacy behaviours and confidence improved after taking part in NewsWise

Most children reported positive news literacy behaviours and confidence after taking part in NewsWise. For example:

- 4 in 5 (80.1%) pupils said that they stopped, thought and checked facts before deciding whether to believe a news story
- 4 in 5 (82.8%) agreed that they now felt more confident about spotting fake news

Teachers also reported improved news-literacy behaviour and confidence in pupils:

- In post-project surveys, all (12 of 12) teachers agreed that pupils had increased confidence in thinking critically about news stories, and increased understanding of aspects of news such as fact and opinion
- Most (11 of 12) teachers agreed that pupils had increased skills in thinking critically about news stories, and 10 of 12 agreed that pupils were more likely to use more than one source to check facts

Children were better able to identify mis- and disinformation

More children were able to identify news items correctly as 'real' or 'fake' in short pre- and post-project quizzes:

- **1 in 3** (33.4%) identified 2 of 3 news items correctly as either 'real' or 'fake' before taking part in NewsWise. This increased to nearly **1 in 2** (45.8%) after taking part, representing a 37% increase

The percentage of pupils able to identify two of three news items correctly as real or fake increased from 1 in 3 (33.4%) before to nearly 1 in 2 (45.8%) after the project.

Children's interest in news increased after taking part in NewsWise

- Children's self-reported interest in news increased between pre- and post-workshop time points. While 1 in 2 (49.5%) said they were 'very' or 'quite' interested in news before taking part, this increased to 4 in 5 (80.7%) immediately after the NewsWise workshop

- This increased interest in news appeared to be sustained over the course of the project, with a similar percentage of children (79.8%) saying they were interested in news at the post-project survey point

They gave me a different perspective of news because before these NewsWise lessons I never thought that news was interesting now I feel like I need to look at the news because there could be something really interesting that affects me.

(Pupil, Park Hill Primary School)

Children were more confident about advocating for themselves and others through writing their own news reports

After the NewsWise workshop:

- 3 in 5 (56.8%) children told us they felt more confident talking in front of their class, and 2 in 3 (63.8%) children said they felt more confident to report a news story

It was fun and entertaining to
write a full news story about
something that was going on in
our school

In addition, in the post-project teacher survey:

- All (12 of 12) teachers agreed pupils had increased their skills in writing and producing their own news reports
- 9 of 12 teachers agreed that the project had increased pupils' motivation to make a difference in their community
- 11 of 12 teachers felt it had increased pupils' engagement with local and regional issues

Teachers reported increased knowledge and confidence when teaching critical media and news literacy after taking part in NewsWise

- All (20 of 20) teachers completing a post-training and workshop survey said they would recommend the NewsWise workshop to other schools

- Almost all (18 of 20) teachers said their understanding of news literacy had improved
- Of 12 teachers responding to the post-project surveys, all (12 of 12) agreed that they now felt more confident about supporting pupils' news literacy

Families reported greater confidence in supporting their children's news literacy

Each school running a NewsWise project held a family workshop in which parents, carers or other family members were invited to an event to learn about news literacy together with their child. Findings from those completing a short feedback survey after taking part include:

- 3 in 5 (62.1%) parents felt 'very' or 'quite' confident about helping their child spot fake news before the NewsWise family workshop, but this increased to almost all (97.9%) after taking part
- Following the workshop, almost all parents agreed they knew more about how to check if news online could be trusted (97.3%). Comments included:

With the growth of social media and the instant access to the internet I think that fake news is becoming more of a problem. The workshop dealt with it in a really informative, fun and mature manner which is important to children at this age.

(Parent/ carer)

- In addition, all (9 of 9) teachers who chose to provide feedback on a family workshop agreed that including a family workshop had added value to the project, given families' strategies to safely explore news online with their children and increased families' awareness of targeted news
- Many children also commented on this aspect of the project:

Our parents got to come to the programme and do it with us – that was my favourite bit.

(Pupil, Dorrington Academy)

In summary, findings suggest that after taking part in the NewsWise programme in Birmingham, more children reported positive news-literacy behaviours and confidence, a higher percentage were able to identify real and fake news items correctly, and more were interested in news. In addition, teachers reported that pupils had increased skills in writing new reports and increased engagement with local and regional issues. Finally, family workshops received very positive feedback, with participants feeling more confident to support their children's

news literacy and more able to check if news online could be trusted. By including support and resources for both children and the adults supporting their learning, this approach shows great potential for improving media and news literacy across the community.

Method

To evaluate the impact of the project, participating schools were asked to complete pre- and post-project training, and workshop and project surveys. Families were also invited to complete post-workshop feedback forms.

Evaluation data was received from 16 schools: Bordesley Village Primary School, Colebourne Primary School, Cromwell Junior and Infant School, Dorrington Academy, Hawthorn Primary School, Marlborough Primary School, Maryvale School, Oaklands Primary School, Park Hill Primary School, St Chad’s Catholic Primary School, St Edward’s Primary School, St Matthew’s Primary School, Watermill Primary School, Welsh House Farm Community School, Wyndcliffe Primary School and Woodhouse Primary School.

A total of 1,256 survey responses were received from pupils, 32 from teachers and 197 from families (see Table 1 for a breakdown).

Table 1: Sample

Survey and time point	Number of responses	Number of schools
Pupil pre-project news quiz	737	14
Pupil post-workshop survey	292	10
Teacher post-training and workshop survey	20	14
Pupil post-project reflective survey	227	5
Teacher post-project survey	12	12
Family workshop feedback	197	14

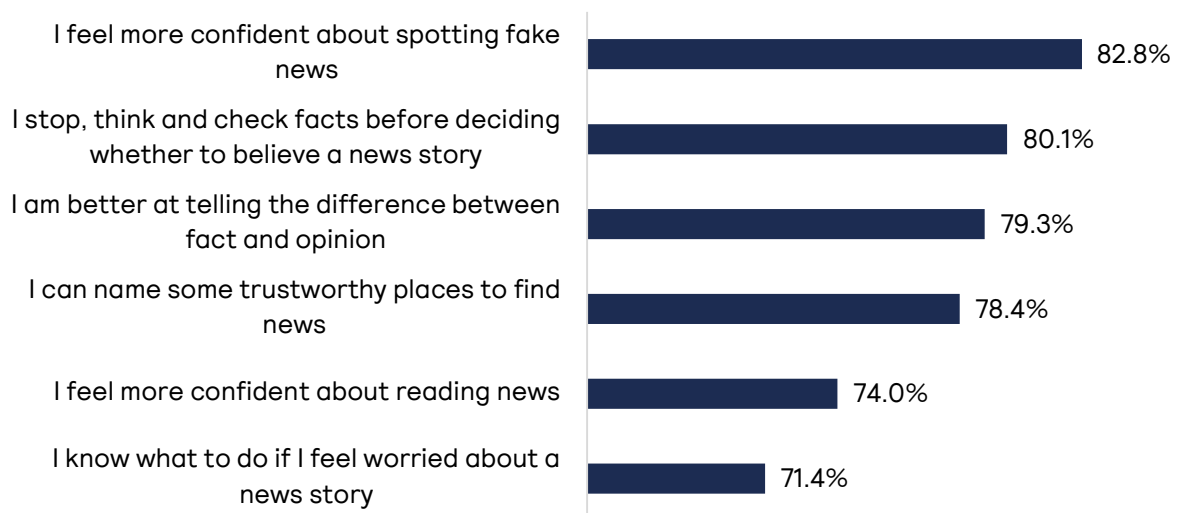
Findings in detail

Children’s news literacy behaviours and confidence improved after taking part in NewsWise

In post-project surveys, children were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements relating to learning about news literacy. Responses showed that most children reported positive news literacy attitudes and behaviours after taking part in NewsWise.

For example, as shown in Figure 1, 4 in 5 said that they felt more confident about spotting fake news (82.8%), that they stopped, thought and checked facts before deciding whether to believe a news story (80.1%), that they were better at telling the difference between fact and opinion (79.3%), and that they could name some trustworthy places to find news (78.4%). In addition, 3 in 4 (74.0%) felt more confident about reading news and 7 in 10 (71.4%) agreed that they knew what to do if they felt worried about a news story.

Figure 1: Children’s post-project agreement statements relating to news literacy



Children’s comments emphasised the value of learning new skills, tips and techniques and also learning about journalistic methods:

I liked it when they showed me the rules for Stop, Question, Check, Decide.

(Pupil, Bordesley Village Primary School)

One thing I liked about NewsWise lessons is the idea of how journalists find information and report it to the world.

(Pupil, Wyndcliffe Primary School)

[The journalist] was very kind and nice also she helped me so much to understand how to spot fake news or real news.

(Pupil, Dorrington Academy)

Teachers were also asked to share perceptions of the impact of the project on their pupils' news-literacy attitudes, behaviours, confidence and skills. In post-project surveys, all (12 of 12) teachers agreed that pupils now had increased confidence in thinking critically about news stories, and increased understanding of aspects of news such as fact and opinion. In addition, most (11 of 12) teachers felt that pupils had increased skills in thinking critically about news stories and agreed that pupils could name some trustworthy and untrustworthy sources of news. In addition, 10 of 12 observed that pupils were more likely to use more than one source to check facts. Teachers' comments on this theme included:

The activity on real and fake news was really useful and has made children question what they read on the internet. More children are learning not to blindly trust articles they find and instead question the trustworthiness.

(Teacher, Colebourne Primary School)

A child in my class was always quoting things they had seen online and sharing the stories with the class, these stories were often fake news. Since taking part in the NewsWise project ... the pupil is thinking now before sharing things ... and will often check with teaching staff to see if they think it is real or not.

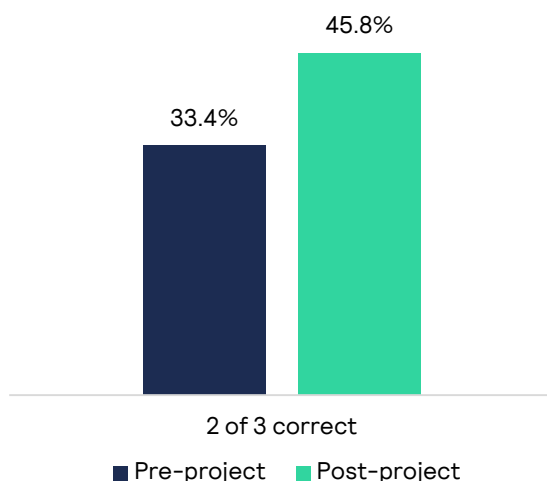
(Teacher, Birmingham Primary School)

Children were better able to identify mis- and disinformation

To measure any changes in children's ability to identify features of reliable and unreliable news stories, children were asked to complete a short news quiz consisting of three items that were either real or fake before and after taking part in NewsWise.

As shown in Figure 2, 1 in 3 (33.4%) were able to identify 2 of 3 news items correctly as either 'real' or 'fake' before taking part in the project. This increased to nearly 1 in 2 (45.8%) after taking part, representing a 37% increase.

Figure 2: Percentage of children able to identify 2 of 3 news stories as ‘real’ or ‘fake’

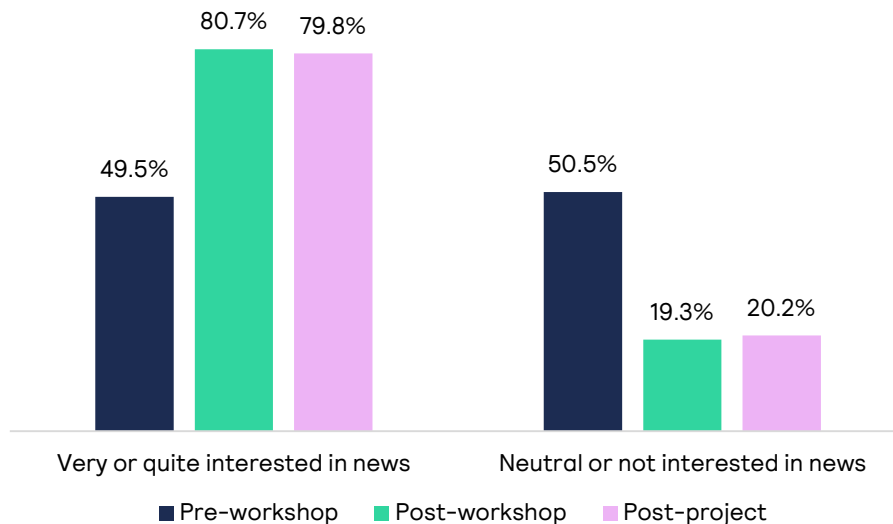


Children’s interest in news increased after taking part in NewsWise

Research suggests that stimulating ‘intrinsic news consumption motivation’ is an important first step in increasing news literacy in early adolescents ([Tamboer et al., 2022](#)). Surveys from participating children showed that their self-reported interest in news increased considerably between pre- and post-workshop time points.

As shown in Figure 3, 1 in 2 (49.5%) pupils said they were ‘very’ or ‘quite’ interested in news before taking part, rising to 4 in 5 (80.7%) following the NewsWise workshop. This increased level of interest was sustained at the post-project point following the unit of work when 4 in 5 (79.8%) again reported being interested in news. Conversely, the percentage who were neutral or ‘not at all’ interested in news decreased from 1 in 2 (50.5%) to 1 in 5 (19.3%) between the pre- and post-workshop point, with a similar percentage not interested (20.2%) in news at the post-project point.

Figure 3: Children’s pre- and post-workshop, and post-project, interest in news



Pupils' comments included:

They gave me a different perspective of news because before these NewsWise lessons I never thought that news was interesting now I feel like I need to look at the news because there could be something really interesting that affects me.
(Pupil, Park Hill Primary School)

I really enjoyed NewsWise because it was a very memorable event by seeing journalists from The Guardian.
(Pupil, Dorrington Academy)

Teachers were also asked about this aspect of the project and, in post-project surveys, most (11 of 12) agreed that the NewsWise project had increased pupils' engagement with news and journalism. Teachers' comments included:

The class enjoyed the project overall. They were engaged and contributed well. Some of them ask to watch Newsround now as well.
(Teacher, Wyndcliffe Primary School)

The journalist really helped to inspire the children, many of the children have said they would like a career in journalism in the future.
(Teachers, St Chad's Catholic Primary School)

Children were supported to advocate for themselves and others through writing their own news reports

Children were asked about any changes in confidence around speaking and listening and reporting news stories after taking part in NewsWise. After the NewsWise workshop, 3 in 5 (56.8%) told us they felt more confident talking in front of their class. In addition, after taking part in the NewsWise project, 2 in 3 (63.8%) children said they felt more confident to report a news story.

Children's comments included:

It was fun and entertaining to write a full news story about something that was going on in our school.

(Pupil, Dorrington Academy)

I enjoyed produc[ing] news stories during the time within school as it was fun to do with your parent/guardian as you could have a [nice] time with it!

(Pupil, Wyndcliffe Primary)

I have enjoyed reporting a news [story] about an Iraqi girl that went into a stadium dressed as a man.

(Pupil, Wyndcliffe Primary)

Teachers were also asked for their observations on children's advocacy and oracy skills. In the post-project survey, all (12 of 12) teachers felt that pupils had increased their skills in writing and producing their own news reports. In addition, 9 of 12 felt taking part in NewsWise had increased pupils' motivation to make a difference in their community, and 11 of 12 felt it had increased their engagement with local and regional issues.

Teachers reported that NewsWise helped support children to develop wider skills, including literacy, teamwork and communication

Almost all (19 of 20) teachers responding to the post-training and workshop survey agreed that the NewsWise workshop was relevant to the curriculum and that it had supported pupils' speaking and listening skills. 16 of 20 teachers felt it had engaged pupils who were usually more reluctant in the classroom.

In addition, in post-project surveys, 7 of 12 teachers felt that pupils had increased their reading skills having taken part in NewsWise, while 9 of 12 felt that children had increased their writing, speaking and listening skills. Finally, 9 in 12 felt that taking part in NewsWise had helped decrease pupils' anxiety about news stories.

Teachers' comments further highlighted the quality of the workshops and lesson plans and their impact on pupils' wider literacy learning:

The lessons identifying fake news were brilliant. The children not only loved the content of the lessons, but it greatly improved their proof reading, scanning and vocabulary in terms of key words that infer a fake story.

(Teacher, Dorrington Academy)

Many teachers also commented on the impact of NewsWise on children's critical thinking and speaking and listening skills:

By checking the breadth of reporting, children had to analyse other stories reporting on the same events and break down the content. This assisted children's ability to analyse texts and infer the intent behind them.

(Teacher, Dorrington Academy)

All children accessed the workshop and links to the oracy side were great!

(Teacher, Wyndcliffe Primary)

Researching and exploring sources to decide if it was fake news or not as it meant children had to apply what they learnt and think critically about sources.

(Teacher, Woodhouse Primary)

We often focus on just writing a report, but don't spend enough time unpicking their understanding of how they should read, interpret and respond to an article they may come across.

(Teacher, Cromwell Primary)

Participating in NewsWise increased teachers' knowledge and confidence when teaching critical media and news literacy

All (20 of 20) teachers completing a post-training and workshop survey said they would recommend the NewsWise workshop to other schools and that they would integrate the learning from the project into their teaching practice in the future. Almost all said they would share the learning from the project with colleagues (19 of 20) and that their understanding of news literacy had improved (18 of 20). Furthermore, of 12 teachers responding to the post-project surveys, all agreed that they now felt more confident about supporting pupils' news literacy.

Teachers' perspectives on the benefits of engaging with the NewsWise project for two years

We received survey responses from four schools who had taken part in the project for two consecutive years: Dorrington Academy, Park Hill Primary School, Watermill Primary and Wyndcliffe Primary. For teachers running the programme for a second year, the learning from the first clearly informed their subsequent practice. As one teacher said:

I have previously taught this unit in Year 6 so this time I knew how to approach each lesson more effectively.

(Teacher, Wyndcliffe Primary)

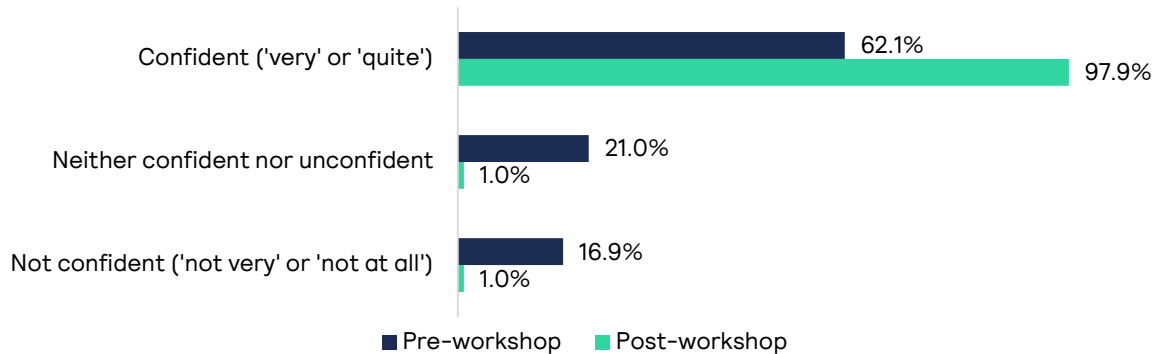
In feedback sessions with the project team, some schools also indicated that they would like to make NewsWise an annual project and that, after taking part more than once, it felt “incorporated into the [school] curriculum”.

Families reported greater confidence in supporting their children’s news literacy

The NewsWise project involved a family workshop in which children could invite parents, carers or other family members to an interactive event to learn about news literacy together. Family members were asked to complete a short feedback survey after taking part to evaluate any impact the event may have had on their knowledge and confidence around supporting their child’s news literacy, and 197 responded. Of those who chose to rate the workshop, 7 in 10 (70.8%) rated it ‘excellent’, 1 in 4 (24.5%) as ‘good’ and 4.7% as ‘okay’.

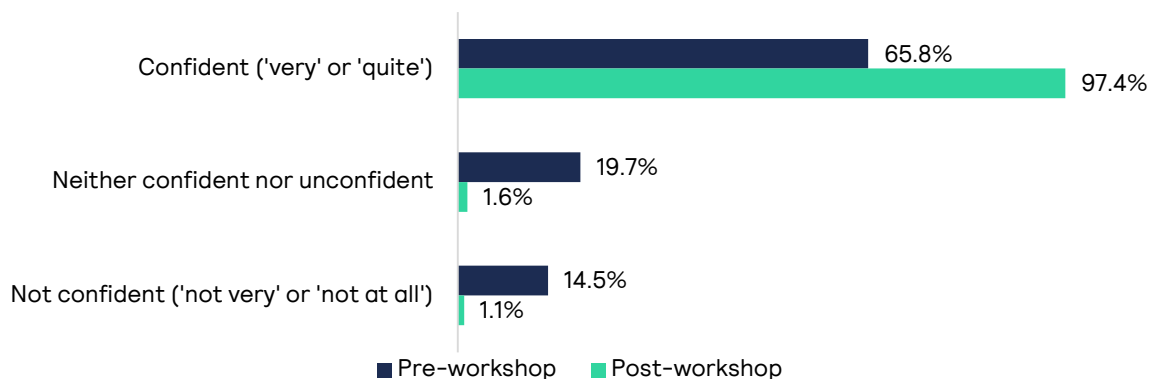
In terms of impact on confidence supporting their children’s news literacy, while 3 in 5 (62.1%) parents felt ‘very’ or ‘quite’ confident about helping their child spot fake news before the NewsWise family workshop, almost all (97.9%) said they felt confident after taking part (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: How confident do you feel about helping your child/ren to spot fake news?



At the same time, parents' and carers' confidence in their own abilities to identify mis- and disinformation also increased following the workshop, with 2 in 3 (65.8%) feeling confident about this before and almost all (97.4%) after the workshop (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: How confident do you feel about spotting fake news yourself?



In addition, almost all parents agreed that following the workshop they knew more about how to check if news (97.3%) and images online (97.4%) could be trusted, knew more about how news and information could be targeted (96.8%), and knew some good ways to help their child with their feelings about news stories (96.4%). Almost all parents chose to share further thoughts about the need for such workshops, the benefits for their children, and their views on the need for greater media literacy to be built into the school curriculum:

With the growth of social media and the instant access to the internet I think that fake news is becoming more of a problem. The workshop dealt with it in a really informative, fun and mature manner which is important to children at this age.

(Parent/carer)

Very good session which will stand the children in good stead for the future. It was good for the age group but needs to be put on subjects so that these fundamentals can be built on.

(Parent/carer)

Of the nine teachers who provided feedback about their experience of the family workshop, seven rated it 'excellent', one 'good' and one 'average'. All (9 of 9) agreed that including a family workshop had added value to the project, had helped their school engage parents and carers with children's learning, had supported pupils' wellbeing in relation to the news, had given families strategies to safely explore news online with their children, and had increased families' awareness of targeted news. Finally, some children's comments about the project in general also mentioned the family sessions:

Our parents got to come to the programme and do it with us – that was my favourite bit.

(Pupil, Dorrington Academy)

Summary and discussion

In recent years, regulatory changes such as the passing of the Online Safety Act represent significant progress in efforts to protect children and young people online. However, focusing on the most negative aspects of the digital world, while essential, is not sufficient for ensuring children develop the skills and confidence to navigate life online in a way that supports their learning, wellbeing, future employment and democracy itself.

The NewsWise programme has a long history of supporting children's news literacy (see, e.g., [Cole et al., 2022](#)) and recent research has indicated that, in doing so, the project could also support their civic engagement ([Harrison et al., 2024](#)). Focusing on Birmingham, which was identified as an area of literacy need by the National Literacy Trust³, this project was designed to support children's news literacy in school and at home by training teachers and involving parents through engaging interactive workshops.

³ 50% of wards in Birmingham rank in the top 10% of literacy need in England:
<https://literacytrust.org.uk/communities/birmingham/supporters/>

Findings from this evaluation suggest that the initial NewsWise workshop had a positive impact on children's interest in news, and that this was sustained over the course of the longer programme. Research has shown that stimulating 'intrinsic news consumption motivation' is an important first step in increasing news literacy in early adolescents (Tamboer et al., 2022). In addition, as shown in the short quizzes, the project appeared to increase children's ability to identify mis- and disinformation, and increased children's confidence to advocate for themselves and others through writing news reports. Teachers also noted improvements in children's engagement with local and regional issues, while feedback from family workshops emphasised the need for involving parents, as well as teachers, in supporting children's learning in this area.

Fake news is becoming more of a problem. The workshop dealt with it in a really informative, fun and mature manner, which is important to children at this age

Finally, while data relating to delivering the project over two years was limited, teachers' comments also suggested that they had increased confidence when running NewsWise in the classroom in a subsequent academic year. In summary, by including support and resources for both children and the adults supporting their learning, this approach shows great potential for improving media and news literacy across the community.

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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.

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