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The UK's Curriculum and Assessment Review: An opportunity for media literacy?

The UK's education system has recently undergone an independent Curriculum and Assessment Review, which made recommendations to the government to ensure that the system remains fit for purpose. One of the Review's recommendations was to enhance media literacy teaching. LSE's Professor Lee Edwards reflects here on the position of media literacy in the Review, and what it will take to make a real difference to the status of media literacy in the country.

For many years, the UK Department for Education (DfE) has shown little interest in treating media literacy as a valued subject, leaving responsibility for it to those working largely outside the school system – the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and more recently, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), as well as communications regulator Ofcom. Because skills used in media literacy – for example, navigating and using digital media safely, evaluating content and interrogating sources – are present in the curriculum across various subjects, and because of the existence of optional Media Studies GCSE/A Level courses, the assumption seemed to be that it requires no additional attention.

The Review

When the government announced its **Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR)** earlier this year, it presented an opportunity – the first in many years – to explain to the DfE why media literacy is so critical, and how our current approach does not serve our young people well.

There are some important and welcome advances in the Review's final **report**. Media and digital literacy are two of the five top priority areas among young people and other stakeholders, the consultation found, and are recognised as particularly important in the review given young people spend increasing amounts of their lives online. A short section of the report is dedicated explicitly to media literacy, and the topic is flagged in a number of other subject areas (e.g. Science,

Computing, History) as a relevant, cross-cutting skill that teachers should be encouraged to highlight within their specialist subject areas. Media literacy will be integrated into a new compulsory Citizenship curriculum at primary school level (Key stages 1 and 2) from 2028. There will be better integration of digital literacy into a revised compulsory Computing curriculum, and enhanced media literacy skills in the English curriculum, where the range of texts and genres studied will expand.

Limitations

Whether these changes will constitute genuine progress, however, is open to question. The review is opaque about DfE's engagement – or intended engagement – with the work that has been done already on media literacy, which would have provided an extensive evidence base for curriculum change. The fact is perhaps best exemplified by the definition of media literacy used in the report: 'understanding and engaging critically with the messages conveyed through different media channels, including AI' (p. 9). Compare this to the definition that Ofcom – the body responsible for monitoring and overseeing the delivery of media literacy in the UK – uses in its three-year **Media Literacy Strategy**: "the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts' (p. 6). The gap is immediately apparent: the ability to *use* media effectively, and to *create* media content – both of which are essential to our **ability to flourish** in a media-saturated world – are absent in the CAR.

In its detail, the CAR follows the Online Safety Act in linking media literacy to the reduction of harm – particularly, to promoting good behaviour online (Relationship and Sex Education); understanding mis- and disinformation and critically evaluating content (Citizenship, English, History); and developing digital literacy skills that help people function online (Computing). These skills are of course important, but they exemplify the protectionist approach to media literacy that has been recognised **for nearly three decades** as a partial approach at best.

The review does not cite recent research on **digital literacy** or **digital skills** to support its recommendations – a particularly surprising omission given the emphasis on skills needed to navigate the digital environment. Nor does it mention the need for wider understanding of media production, the power of media industries, or of one's own critical and creative capacity as a media creator – the latter in particular being crucial for citizen-oriented activities such as engaging in public debates, reflective conversations with others, and developing more informed opinions about important social issues.

What comes next?

Realising the potential of the CAR's new recognition of media literacy will therefore need significant effort. Happily, a great deal of work on media literacy both in and out of schools has already been done. Academic research is **plentiful**, and in schools a range of organisations already support

delivery with extra-curricular programmes such as **Newswise**, funded by The Guardian Foundation, or the '**Be Internet...**' series funded by Google, with content tailored to different Key Stage levels. These and many other programmes have a long-standing presence in the mix of activities that count towards media literacy in schools, and many have been **evaluated**, so that what may or may not work for school-age populations can be better understood.

Other government departments have also conducted significant work on media literacy, as has Ofcom. DCMS/DSIT had its own three-year **Online Media Literacy Strategy**, which officially ended only in 2024, and funded both research and interventions as part of it. Ofcom conducts extensive media literacy work, has developed **a three-year strategy**, and continues investing in research and pilot schemes, all of which provide valuable foundational insights into how media literacy can be tailored effectively to the needs of different audiences, including in schools.

Perhaps most importantly, this year's **Inquiry on Media Literacy** by the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee offers a comprehensive overview of the media literacy landscape in the UK, and includes evidence from experts in countries that integrate media literacy into education in different ways. A pivotal recommendation was that media literacy be embedded across the national curriculum. If the DfE wishes to realise this recommendation – and the ambitions of the CAR – in practice, then drawing on the extensive existing knowledge and implementation of media literacy is essential.

The risks

However, if these connections are not made, then the review, while recognising media literacy's importance, will fail to convince on the degree to which is taken seriously, because it will do little in the long run to change the limited provision that already exists. Some risks are evidence in the CAR outcomes: media literacy remains fragmented across the same subject areas where it was previously housed. No additional support or underpinning for the topic is noted – for example, by making a version of media studies compulsory in lower key stages. It is not clear how opportunities for students' own media production will be created. And there is no recognition that critically evaluating media involves skills that go beyond understanding content, to comprehending the political economy of some of the most powerful and most influential industries that shape our lives.

Progressing the agenda

To avoid these risks becoming a reality, progressing the media literacy agenda set out in the CAR will need a vision for practice that is fully informed by the extensive, and high-quality, national and international work being done in the area. It will need strong leadership and coordination across government departments – something that has been lacking, according to our recent **stakeholder research**. Good media literacy policy is highly complex, and coordination across different actors is

essential if it is to be coherent. In Finland for example, overarching responsibility for media literacy sits with the country's **National Audiovisual Institute** – but they work closely with the **Ministry of Education and Culture** on delivery in schools. This ensures that best practices and pedagogical advances are more easily shared across the sector, and an overall **national direction** for media literacy is clear for all involved. It is perhaps no coincidence that Finland's careful coordination of media literacy provision is linked to **high levels of societal resilience**.

The curriculum and assessment review is a significant step in the right direction for the UK. It must not turn into a missed opportunity. The DfE must grasp the opportunities and insights that our existing sector, academic research, and the regulator, can offer. Only then will we be able to realise the value of media literacy not only as a support for young people's engagement and safety online, but also to ensure they are able to flourish in today's complex, mediated world.

This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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