ASSESSING THE MEDIA LITERACY OF UK ADULTS

A REVIEW OF THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE

Produced for:
Broadcasting Standards Commission
Independent Television Commission
NIACE

By Sonia Livingstone, with Nancy Thumim

March 2003

broadcasting standards commission

Independent Television Commission

PUTTING VIEWERS FIRST

niace
promoting adult learning

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Executive summary

Researching media literacy

- The *Government's 2002 Communications Bill (Draft)* promises for the first time to 'promote media literacy' among the population of the UK, improving public awareness and understanding of contents and services provided through electronic media.

- In order to establish the present level of media literacy among the UK population, and in order to set the benchmark against which future initiatives or interventions designed to 'secure increased public awareness and understanding' can be assessed, this review of the academic literature asks: *How media literate is the adult population in the UK?*

- *Definitions of media literac*y abound, though consensus is less forthcoming. This review adopts a working definition, first examining the question of access as a prerequisite to developing media literacy skills, and then reviewing research on media literacy in terms of three stages: (1) technical competencies; (2) critical reception practices; and (3) content production.

- It should be noted from the outset that this review identified *little empirical research* on adult media literacy funded and conducted in the UK. Hence, it draws on diverse sources that more-or-less indirectly reveal the nature and extent of adult media literacy. These sources largely concentrate on audiovisual media and on computer-based media/internet.

- It should be noted that there is little consensus over the appropriate means to *measure* media literacy, making it difficult to assess the level and the spread of skills.

Review findings

- *Access* to media is a prerequisite to literacy. Adults may gain media literacy informally, through direct use of the media at home or work and/or they may participate in formal education programmes. Domestic access to information and communication technologies is growing rapidly, enhancing informal learning opportunities. There are clear indications that the public is highly motivated to acquire media literacy skills, with formal provision at present lagging behind demand.

- Insofar as the conditions of access are sources of social and economic *inequalities*, media literacy is also likely to be stratified. Indeed, insofar as demand for formal training is unequal increasing educational provision may increase rather than undermine knowledge gaps/the digital divide.

(1) Technical competencies

- *Audiovisual media:* As innovations reach the mass market, audience skills are acquired incrementally, in a context of public confidence in its understanding of the skills required; little research has focused yet on the latest innovations.

- *Information and communication technologies:* For most adults, skill acquisition is less an incremental than an all-at-once experience, often occurring in a context of uncertainty and ignorance. It seems that levels of actual skill vary widely across the population, with many anxious about failing to get to grips with the technology, and many also making use of only a small proportion of the contents and services available online.

(2) Critical reception practices

- *Audiovisual media:* A large body of research paints an uneven picture here, suggesting that the public is well able to select and account for their media choices, showing a complex understanding of television genres, of the fact/fiction distinction and of the place of commercial messages. On the other hand, the public seems much less equipped to comprehend or critique the news; it appears to be inconsistent in its critical evaluation of much audiovisual content, and it may have only a poor grasp of the economic and regulatory contexts which shape the audiovisual contents they view.

- *Information and communication technologies:* Most research thus far has centred on categories of use, and technical skills, so that little is known of adults' critical response to and use of computer and, especially, online content. It seems likely that without specific interventions, many will continue to under-use, and to misunderstand or misuse, internet content.

(3) Content production:

- *Audiovisual media:* Although arguably experience of production may provide an effective means of improving media literacy, little research has explored this, and nor is it likely many adults have experience of content production.

- *Information and communication technologies:* Little research has explored what proportion of the population actually possesses the skills to create content, although it seems that many are unaware that such production is even possible.

Conclusions

- Some lessons about media literacy can be learned from research on older audiovisual media and extended to newer information technologies, including the observations, first, that it cannot always be determined which of several interpretations of content are more literate than another and, second, that adults use their knowledge and understanding in inconsistent and uneven ways: both observations make the unambiguous assessment of adult media literacy complicated.

- Notwithstanding the strong claims of children for media literacy education, addressing the needs of adults is also crucial. Little research on adults' awareness and understanding of the new and changing media and information environment has been conducted, so much remains to be discovered and understood, this being crucial as increasing responsibility for accessing content is being devolved to the public.

- This review has found adult media literacy to be uneven across the population and unevenly exercised across different media and media genres. In some respects, the public is indeed media-savvy, in other respects, levels of literacy are lower. Generalisations across media are difficult in this fast-changing media and information environment.

- In relation to the media literacy expectations specified for Ofcom at the time of writing, it would seem that the public has a better understanding of audiovisual content and the 'old' media than it has of the issues surrounding other newer forms of electronic communication;

- may have only a weak understanding of the way in which content is selected;

- may have little understanding of the potential mechanisms by which access to material is, or can be, externally regulated; and

- may have little understanding of the way in which self-regulatory measures might work.

Clearly, a well-defined vision - of the key dimensions of consumers' skills and abilities, of the minimum and desired levels of literacy required, of the population sectors which risk being left out, of the most appropriate means of both promoting and evaluating media literacy – must be debated and agreed if media literacy are to reach satisfactory levels across the whole population.

Literature review

Approaching the question

The context

The Government's 2002 Communications Bill, now in draft form (May 2002) promises for the first time to 'promote media literacy' among the population of the UK. It will also establish, during autumn 2003, a single regulator (Ofcom) to replace the five existing regulators of television and radio, one of whose many responsibilities will be to improve the level of media literacy among the public. Specifically, the Draft Communications Bill sets out, in Clause 10 of the Functions of Ofcom, the 'Function of Promoting Media Literacy', including six discrete dimensions of media literacy as applied to all electronic media, both broadcast to the public and published on any electronic communications network. As the Explanatory Notes to the Draft Bill state:

> *'This clause provides that it shall be a function of Ofcom to secure increased public awareness and understanding of material published by electronic media, the purposes for which such material is selected or made available for publication, the available systems by which access to such published material is or can be regulated, and the available systems by which persons to whom such material is available may control what is received.'* (paragraph 30)

No more is said regarding the interpretation of 'public awareness and understanding', and it remains to be seen how broadly or narrowly this phrase will be interpreted. Particularly of concern is whether the definition of media literacy includes a critical understanding on the part of the public, or merely the skills required to make consumer choices.[1]

As part of the activities in preparation for Ofcom's Action Team to promote media literacy, the Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission have undertaken a review of existing knowledge and provision in the domain of media literacy. This review includes a mapping of media literacy in provision in UK schools, as well as the present report – a review of the academic literature that assesses the media literacy of the adult population in the UK.

The question

Notwithstanding widespread public speculation and assertion that 'the public has become media-savvy' in recent years, it remains unclear how far rigorous evidence supports or qualifies this claim. In order, therefore, to establish the present level of media literacy among the UK population, and in order to set the benchmark against which future initiatives or interventions designed to 'secure increased public awareness and understanding' can be assessed, this review addresses a single question:

1 An example of the latter is the 'White Paper' produced by the Bertelsmann Foundation's *21st Century Literacy Summit* (www.21stcenturyliteracy.org), focusing on transparency and efficiency in providing information, together with the population's skills for effective use – 'the ability to use computer hardware and software; the ability to use the internet; visual literacy' (p.18-19).

How media literate is the adult population in the UK?
This question focuses specifically on empirical evidence for the levels of media literacy within the population, including the identification of gaps or inequalities in literacy. It does not, however, focus on the many conceptual debates over the meaning or nature of 'media literacy', valuable though these debates are (see bibliography). Further, although most research, and most educational initiatives, have addressed children as the target population, this report is concerned solely with the adult population, about whom much less is generally known.

The scope of the literature review

The report adopts a broad conception of media literacy, in recognition of the fact that different projects or publications work with varied, though generally overlapping, definitions of media literacy. It concentrates on the academic literature, rather than that produced by commercial or government bodies. Hence, a thorough search of online and offline academic resources and publications was conducted at the British Library of the Political and Economic Sciences at LSE during April 2002.

The report takes a broad approach in terms of the disciplines which have been searched for relevant literature, encompassing media studies, education, psychology, information science, cultural studies, and so forth. It sets out to address all 'electronic media', although as will be apparent from the body of the report, the majority of the research conducted in relation to media literacy concerns only broadcasting and, latterly, the internet. Lastly, this review primarily focuses on recent research conducted in the UK, referring only to an older or international literature when such research has proved particularly influential or informative for the UK situation.[2]

Defining media literacy

While issues of definition are not the primary focus of this report, a working definition of media literacy is a prerequisite for scoping the literature review.

DCMS

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has recently produced a 'Media Literacy Statement' (2001) in support of a general statement of policy on media literacy and critical viewing skills. This statement lays the primary emphasis on *'the ability to think critically about viewing – ie to understand why one likes or dislikes certain programmes or genres and relate such preferences to moral and intellectual reference points; and, having done so, to take greater responsibility for viewing choices and the use of electronic media'.*
Illustrative skills include the ability to:

2 It should be noted that research on the question of media literacy in other countries is also limited. Furthermore, international research is not always relevant. Campaigns for media literacy in the USA for example, are a response to a very different media content and history. Even where countries have similar media systems to the UK, such contextual differences mean that findings may not be applicable. In short, international research findings are a useful source of comparison and can suggest directions for UK research, but they do not explain the UK situation.

- distinguish fact from fiction, including the ability to identify differing degrees and genres of realism
- understand the mechanisms of production and distribution which result in propaganda
- distinguish reportage from advocacy, weigh evidentiary standards, recognise and assess commercial messages in programmes and advertising
- recognise the economic, cultural and presentational imperatives in news management
- explain and justify media choices in order to inform choice and sustain appropriate degrees of critical distance

In addition to these 'content-based' skills, the DCMS statement adds a requirement for technical competence in terms of navigation skills for the new electronic media landscape.

Ofcom

In specifying Ofcom's function of promoting media literacy, the draft Communications Bill sets out a similar list of expectations, placing greater emphasis on the public understanding of the institutional and economic aspects of the media environment. Defining the task of Ofcom in terms of improving the current level of media literacy among the UK population, and extending its coverage to include all 'electronic media', the draft bill requires that Ofcom should seek to secure a better public awareness and understanding of:

- the nature and characteristics of materials published by the electronic media
- the processes by which materials are selected and made available
- the available systems by which access to material is or can be regulated
- the available systems by which the public may control what is received

BSC/ITC/NIACE

In its paper, *'Media Literacy: Next Steps'*, the BSC/ITC/NIACE working group offers a working definition which defines media literacy as follows:

> *'Media literacy exists when the user not only has access to a full range of electronic media, but is able to comprehend the choices available and evaluate them'*
> (BSC (01) 33)

The Academy

Undoubtedly, input from the academy has guided the above formulations of media literacy.[3] However, it is worth noting that within the academy:

- The nature of media literacy remains contested, particularly as we move into a new media environment. Specifically, the literacy requirements of the internet are not yet established; nor is the relation between the literacy requirements of familiar and new media well understood: does the internet simply extend, or more radically transform, both print and audiovisual literacies?

3 See Buckingham (1993), Feilitzen and Carlsson (1999), Christ and Potter (1998), Kintgen et al (1988), Kubey (1997), Livingstone (2002), Masterman (1985), Snyder (1998), and Tyner (1998).

- The debate remains open over whether media literacy is conceived as primarily protective (providing the skills by which the public can protect or distance itself from the manipulations or harms of the media) or empowering (providing the skills by which the public can maximise the benefits or opportunities of the media) – clearly a combination of these is required but the two should not be confused.
- The lesson from research on both print and computer-based media (though this is less stressed in relation to television literacy) is that literacy should not be thought of as a property of individuals but rather as an emergent property of the relation between people and technologies; the failure to comprehend, for example, may be as much a result of poor interface design as of poor education.
- Most researchers would go beyond the 'reception-orientation' of the DCMS and Ofcom definitions to argue that the public should have the skills also to produce content, firstly because a better understanding of professional content results from the experience of production, and secondly because production skills are increasingly important for cultural expression, citizenship participation and for developing a skilled, creative and hi-tech workforce.

A working definition

In order to proceed, and based on the above, this review first examines the question of access as a prerequisite to developing media literacy skills, and then reviews research on media literacy in terms of three stages:[4]

- Technical competencies
- Critical reception practices
- Content production

A paucity of research

In the context of these lively debates regarding, and strong expressions of support for, media literacy, it is undoubtedly both curious and disappointing that little empirical research on adult media literacy has been funded or conducted in the UK. The vast majority of UK-based research specifically addressing media literacy has focused on:

- developing and debating a definition of media literacy in order to inform the long standing campaign to ensure its place in the school curriculum;
- identifying those formal and informal media education curricula and resources which are currently in existence.

4 These four stages are very similar to the four competencies identified by the Alliance for a Media Literate America (www.nmec.org/index.html) when they specify the ability to ACCESS, ANALYZE, EVALUATE and COMMUNICATE as crucial for active citizenship in the 21st century.

Crucially, there is only a very limited body of empirical research that specifically asks the question: '*How media literate is the adult population in the UK?*' Indeed, our systematic search for academic publications that directly measure or evaluate, in rigorous quantitative terms, the level of media literacy in the adult population revealed little or no empirical research.

Consequently, the present review explores research from a range of perspectives that indirectly or implicitly addresses the question of media literacy, in order to build a picture of the current level of media literacy in the adult population of the UK. It also seeks to identify clearly the gaps in knowledge in order to aid development of the research agenda.

Measuring media literacy

The present focus on assessment or evaluation inevitably raises the question of measurement, and undoubtedly, the measurement of media literacy in the adult population remains a challenge.

In the literature reviewed here a number of practical problems are evident. Different research foci, methodologies and samples are employed, making it difficult to draw comparisons. The majority of work is based on small samples and tends to focus on particular aspects of media literacy, making it difficult to produce a general picture. Lastly, because research has not specifically set out to discover how literate people are, the authors rarely attempt any estimates of scale: hence there are no claims of the kind that, for example, 75% of people are literate in respect of x but only 30% are literate in respect of y; rather, it is only by combing through some rather varied pieces of research, that we can begin to identify evidence for or against certain dimensions of media literacy.

Looking to the future, we can observe that several models of assessing 'public awareness and understanding' are well-established.

- The first is the educational model: if children (and a small number of adults in further/higher education) are assessed through tests and exams for their media literacy, following delivery of a formal curriculum, adults in the population at large could be assessed using similar tests and their knowledge graded according to the levels of the National Curriculum.

- The second model is that of the public understanding of science, a sizeable research programme used specifically to evaluate adults' knowledge of science.

- Thirdly, measurement of print literacy among the adult population has a long history (with the most recent OECD figures showing "between one-quarter and three-quarters of adults fail to attain literacy level 3, considered by experts as a suitable minimum level skill for coping with the demands of modern life and work"; OECD, 2000).

- Fourth, public communication to improve health-related practices (e.g. the safe sex campaign, the anti-smoking campaign) seek to evaluate public knowledge and understanding following a particular campaign.

However, none of these, or other models, have been employed yet to evaluate adult media literacy. Nonetheless, each clearly represents a candidate model for future attempts to evaluate adult media literacy, when assessing the success of Ofcom's duty under Clause 10 of the Draft Communications Bill.

Access as a prerequisite to media literacy

Access is a prerequisite to literacy, for media literacy can only be developed once people have access to the media in question. Access levels vary considerably for different media, and the *quality* as well as the quantity of access, directly affects the level of literacy attainable. The focus on children tends to centre on incorporating media literacy education into the formal school curriculum. By contrast, it is not at present obvious how adults can acquire media literacy.

At present, adults may either gain media literacy informally, through direct use of the media at home or work, and/or they may gain media literacy through formal education programmes.

Informal learning

- Print media are ubiquitous and relatively cheap, so that financial circumstances are not a significant barrier to the development of print literacy. On the other hand, cultural barriers (or 'cultural capital') may represent a significant barrier (Livingstone and Bovill, 1999, found that one third of children – and perhaps also their parents, lacked books in the home).

- Television is more or less universally available within the home, making access less of an issue, although only those with multi-channel access have yet had the opportunity to develop certain skills in relation to navigation, interaction, or evaluation of cable, satellite or digital offerings.

- Access assumes central importance in relation to the internet because thus far it is only available in a minority of homes (the ITC puts current domestic access at 35%, the BBC quotes 45%; Towler, 2001; Jones, 2002) and because such access is heavily stratified, being present disproportionately in middle-class homes. The cost of constant software upgrades and high UK telephone charges renders internet access from home impossible for many (Burrows, et al 2000).

- Even given access in the household, not all members of the household may obtain equal or even any access (Livingstone, 2002); and the social contexts of use also matter. For example, regular internet access in a situation where friends, family or colleagues informally exhibit a range of uses will help new users to develop useful skills; by contrast, isolated access may not be so beneficial (Haddon, 2000: 395).

- Many first encounter ICTs outside the home and it is often through seeing others using the technology that they learn how they can be useful (Haddon, 2000). However, public provision of internet facilities does not necessarily lead to a widening of who has access to the internet, for it depends on the characteristics of the facility (Lee, 1999).

- There are conflicting findings on gender: men are found to have more access and to use the internet more (see BHPS data in Burrows, et al 2000), but in certain environments, (e.g. internet cafes in Lee, 1999), women and men are found in equal numbers. In 1997 'ethnic minorities' were more likely to have home-based internet access than those who identified as 'white' (Burrows et al 2000).

Formal learning

A varied mix of formal provision in the UK for adult education includes curricula in audiovisual media and in information and communication technology.

Audiovisual media

Research has sought to establish what media education is on offer in the UK, including which skills are being taught and not taught, and who is and is not taking advantages of the available educational opportunities (BFI 1999; Merry and Titley, 2002). It appears that:

> *'At the moment, provision across the country is very uneven. It is difficult for an adult learner to map out their own progression, and the level at which "introductory" courses are offered varies enormously.'* (BFI, 1999: 42).

Similarly, Bazalgette finds that media education relies heavily on the enthusiasm of individual teachers (Bazalgette, 2001; also see Hart, 2001).

At the same time, research on the diverse range of adult education in media literacy points to a clear demand for media literacy education among the adult population (see also Jones, 2002; Tucker and Sargant, 1999). Although this research does not specifically measure levels of media literacy, it does suggest at the very least that standards of literacy vary enormously, given that provision is so varied and demand for existing education so high.

Information and communication technology

Emerging evidence on families' use of the internet at home suggests that many parents consider their children, rather than themselves, the 'experts', making for a population which may fall further behind, with no obvious way of 'catching up' (Facer et al, 2001; Ribak, 2001).

Yet, it is evident that the public wants ICT-related skills. For example, the 1999 NIACE (National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education) survey found widespread commitment to developing the skills associated with internet literacy (Tuckett and Sargant, 1999). Specifically, it was found that:

> *'Computer studies is the main subject of study for almost one in four adults (23%, up from 17% in 1996'* (Tuckett and Sargant, 1999: 5), and that *'Computer studies continues to increase as the main subject of study among 25-74 year olds.'* (ibid: 16)

These population statistics mask significant social inequalities.

> *'Social class, age and the length of initial education all continue to show a powerful effect on adults' participation.'* (Tuckett and Sargant, 1999: 5)

> *'Almost twice as many professional and managerial workers and white collar workers as skilled manual workers are currently studying.'* (Tuckett and Sargant, 1999: 12)

Hence, here we see evidence of a well-established finding in the diffusion literature, namely that provision of resources (information, education, support, etc) to the population at large results in disproportionate take-up by those who are already 'information-rich', compared with the 'information-poor', thus increasing the very knowledge-gaps which such provision was intended to reduce, supposedly by 'bringing' up the laggards to the level of the average (Bonfadelli, 2002).

The BBC Webwise initiative – itself a response to the widespread demand for internet literacy education apparent following *Computers Don't Bite* (1997) – was received with enthusiasm by the general public, as described in 'The BBC's commitment to internet literacy' (Jones, 2002). Having begun as Webwise in 1999, this initiative developed into Becoming Webwise, a course which gives accreditation. The level of participation was noteworthy:

> *'In the first six months, 5,000 people completed the course, passed the final test and were accredited. The number dipping into modules – though not necessarily completing the course – is up to 8, 000 a week, and page impressions reach up to 850,000 a week'.* (Jones, 2002: 2)

The BBC have also established Open Centres in local BBC radio stations: access is free, they are run on a drop-in basis and local education tutors are on hand to provide assistance. The enthusiasm with which BBC educational initiatives have been met suggests that adults want

to acquire these skills, and of course that they do not already have them. These initiatives are matched by many initiatives instigated by local authorities, libraries, community centres etc: though no audit has been conducted on a national scale to document their scale or success, it is clear that the public is ready and willing to gain ICT skills.

Levels of media literacy among adults

Given the variable availability and take-up of informal and formal channels for acquiring media literacy, what do we know about the levels of media literacy thus acquired? As stated at the outset, this will be assessed in terms of (1) technical competencies, (2) critical reception practices and (3) content production.

Although the question asked in this report addresses the broad question, how 'media literate' is the population, it should be noted that the academic research literature is medium-specific. In other words, although the media are converging – technologically, and although people integrate different media in the routines and habits of their daily lives, academic research remains – for the most part – medium-specific. Different researchers specialise in particular media forms, and they ask different questions about these forms.

By far the most research has centred on audiences for screen-based media (specifically, television, computers and the internet). Little research has addressed audiences (or readerships) for books, the press, magazines, radio or music, and such that exists is widely scattered. Given the limitations of time and resources, these media are, therefore, not addressed in this report.

Audiovisual media

It has been argued that access is a prerequisite for gaining media literacy. As we have seen, most use audiovisual media as part of the domestic, leisure setting. Hence, the conditions for acquiring media literacy in relation to audiovisual media derive from their being a familiar and well-established part of our everyday lives. This familiarity arises through domestic, leisure use, and is fairly evenly distributed throughout the population. Each successive innovation in technological facilities or consumer choice is accommodated to incrementally within a context of confidence and competence. What skills have these circumstances supported?

Technical competencies

It seems that only for the newest innovations (e.g. digital television) do people routinely notice the technology; rather they 'see through' the technology to the content. Consequently, academic research into adult use of television does not examine technical competence or 'navigation skills', these being taken as given. The key findings in the research literature on technological competence are that:

- Television is so seamlessly integrated in everyday life across age and gender difference that the question of technical competence does not arise (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999).

- The VCR is equally well integrated in daily life (the number of UK households with a VCR was 87% in 2001; Towler, 2001). Across all sectors of the adult population people tailor television schedules to suit individual requirements and to create personal 'collections' (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999).

- Nonetheless, it is probably still the case that many cannot programme the VCR or use the full services of teletext. How many digital viewers manage to use their electronic programme guide, interactive services, etc satisfactorily is not yet clear.

Critical reception practices

Given the focus on content, most research on audiovisual literacy is concerned with people's responses to content - i.e. their critical viewing practices. The research reviewed here is part of a large body of work on television audiences. Taken together this research suggests that in many respects, though not all, adults in the UK meet the requirements for the first area of media literacy as outlined in the DCMS definition, *'ability to view and evaluate material critically'*, at least in relation to the audiovisual media with which they have extensive experience – hence, for national, terrestrial television. For cable, satellite and digital television, certain significant gaps in public understanding and awareness remain probable.

It should be noted here that academic audience studies were partly born out of an objection to the idea that television viewers passively received producers' 'messages' or that audiences were mindless, passive or uncritical. Perhaps as a result, there is a rather celebratory bias in the literature, meaning that evidence of critical viewing practices is highlighted, but that absences of or inequalities in such practices are played down. Nonetheless, we may conclude that the degree to which adults 'view and evaluate material critically' varies for different dimensions of media literacy:

- Research suggests that people are well able to 'explain and justify media choices'. Here the long tradition of 'Uses and Gratifications' research finds that people offer clear and systematic reasons for their choices of programmes (Blumler and Katz, 1974), although some research instead supports the 'Couch Potato' theory of mindless and unselective viewing (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

- This is not to say, however, that people only choose to see what they already agree with; rather they precisely watch to learn, to debate, to discover (for example, it is clear that television frames the parameters of viewer conversation about certain, much-represented subjects; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Philo, 1996). Hence there are limits to their critical viewing and they are 'vulnerable' in some respects to misinformation or manipulation. On the other hand, if people are predisposed to distrust media representation of a

subject they may seek out a wider range of information sources or 'dismiss coverage' altogether (Reilly, 1999; this critical rejection may be a matter of education, but is also characteristic of some disadvantaged or marginalised populations – Morley, 1980; Towler, 2001).

- In general, it seems that people are adept at distinguishing factual from fictional representation (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999), though the recent spate of 'reality shows' which blur traditional genre boundaries suggests lower levels of literacy among the audience (although a degree of 'knowingness' among the audience is revealed by research on these audiences, finding that it is precisely the blurring of boundaries that many viewers value; Hill, 2000, 2002; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). For example, viewers might watch a factual series such as Animal Hospital precisely because they know it will always have a happy ending (Hill, 2000).

- There also seems to be a high level of competence when it comes to 'recognising commercial messages in order to maintain a critical distance to advertising', although this point is taken as sufficiently obvious to merit little empirical research. One exception is ITC research which shows that viewers respond critically to advertising and are well aware when confronted with a commercial message (Sancho and Wilson, 2001).

- There is a well-established tradition of researching adults' understanding, evaluation, and memory for the news (e.g. Graber, 1988; Gunter, 1987; Robinson and Levy, 1986). This research makes it clear that although people can be critical and media-savvy in relation to familiar genres such as the soap opera, when research asks concrete but important questions about comprehension and recall, a less-flattering picture of the public emerges. Hence while trust in the objectivity of television news especially is high, few can recall many of the news items they watched a few minutes earlier, and many do confuse, or misunderstand key aspects of the message content.

- It is much less clear that adults have a solid grasp of the 'production and distribution structures' which shape television content. This review identified no academic publications on adults' awareness and understanding of the concept of public service, the commercial context, the role of media regulators, the relation between foreign and national media owners, etc.

Content production

In the normal course of their lives, the public has few opportunities to create audiovisual content. Exceptions include those engaged in community/access radio or in amateur film or video production (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999, found 17% of their sample owned a camcorder, but their respondents had little to say regarding its use). Since content production is a recognised means of improving children's media literacy, it is noteworthy that adults have little or no such opportunities. Since also, content production represents a key new

opportunity opened up by the internet, one should note that here, unlike in some other domains, adults are unlikely to have already developed the transferable skills ready to apply to this new domain.

Information and communication technology

The conditions for acquiring media literacy in relation to information and communication technology differ from those for the audiovisual media, for they represent a distinctively new and challenging part of our everyday lives. For many, such familiarity as exists arises through the workplace, or depends on relative privilege in terms of domestic finances, making for very unequal distribution of access and familiarity across the population. Moreover, skill acquisition here is less an incremental than an all-at-once experience, often occurring in a context of uncertainty and ignorance.

Technical competencies

Computers and the internet represent very new media for the UK population, and the relationship that people have to these are entirely different to their relationship with television. Just as the 'technology' of television is so naturalised that people do not appear to notice it in itself, so the technology of the internet is exactly what they *do* see, impeding their view of its content and uses. This emphasis is reflected in the academic research on internet use. Having mapped access, research is turning to an examination of levels of technological competence: what do people use the medium for and how well do they manage this?

At present, people who have never had work-based access are unlikely to have developed computer literacy: ICT literacy appears to require *routine access* (Haddon, 2000). Hence, many of the widespread anxieties among adults about the internet arise through a lack of familiarity. Other anxieties centre on people's perceived lack of control over the content and services to which the internet provides access: particularly for parents, it is clear that their felt lack of expertise undermines the informal learning process (Livingstone, 2001).

Among different sectors of the population, we see very different levels of competence in the use of information and communication technology. Many are finding the internet extremely useful for the main uses they put it to (which nonetheless may represent only a subset of the potential of this medium):

- The internet is mainly used for emailing (Lee, 1999); the ITC survey says 58% of users use the internet for email (Towler, 2001).
- Both users and non-users of the internet are concerned about 'information overload' (Hanley, 1999).
- There are low levels of IT literacy among the workforce within the manufacturing sector and there are negative attitudes towards ICTs on the part of many senior mangers (Psoinos et al, 2000).

Critical reception/use practices

Little research has yet examined adults' response, critical or otherwise, to the contents accessed through information and communication technologies. Intriguingly, when people learnt about information and communication technology during the ITC's recent two-day forum (Hanley, 1999), anxiety levels were noticeably reduced as basic understanding increased. It is still unknown, however, whether – as familiarity grows - the critical viewing practices already developed in relation to television content will prove transferable.

- Concerns ranging from anxiety about 'information overload' to the trustworthiness of internet sources suggest that people do not have the same comfortable, critical distance to the internet as they have to television (Hanley, 1999; Schweiger, 2000).

- Specialised use of the internet, for example as a forum for interactive self-help and social care, is likely to remain the preserve of the middle classes even if access is extended to the whole population. (Burrows, R, et al 2000).

- More research is required on use of web content. For example, Swiss-based research has found that more educated people use the internet more actively and their use is more information orientated, whereas less educated people use the internet more for entertainment, thereby perpetuating rather than reducing knowledge gaps (Bonfadelli, 2002).

No doubt, widespread access and technical competence must be achieved by the majority of the population, as was the case with television, before we can begin to assess adult media literacy in terms of the 'ability to view and evaluate material critically' or the 'ability to produce content'.

Content production

Some of the grander hopes for the internet are centred not on entertainment or even on education, but on participation – as a citizen, as a cultural actor, as a participating member of a social group (c.f. Communications White Paper, 2000). For these hopes to be realised, the public must be sufficiently media literate, and sufficiently connected to civic organisations, not only to receive but also to produce content. Producing content may be conceived fairly minimally – sending emails, visiting chatrooms, creating a webpage – but even this, if used for civic or cultural goals is of significance. Producing content may also be conceived more ambitiously, in a manner generally not possible for audiovisual media, precisely because in relation to the internet the limitations on volume and accessibility of content, and on the tools to produce content, are modest.

A casual search of the worldwide web reveals that it includes many sites constructed by ordinary members of the public, both as individuals and as part of their local or community roles. What is less clear is the epidemiological question, namely what proportion of the population has or wishes to thus participate in the construction of the content. The research remains to be done; and only when we know the incidence of such participation can one conduct research on the barriers to content production in order to determine whether these are skill-based (cf. media literacy) or motivational (cf. social capital; Putnam, 2000).[5] However, it is apparent that:

- Many are unaware that they can put up a website as an individual without special permission, and were concerned about accountability and the posting of unacceptable material (Hanley, 1999).

- More research is required on who is doing what in terms of content production. For example, figures for 'lurkers' in chat rooms are very high in comparison to the few who do post content. Is the internet mainly 'read' rather than being 'written on'?

Conclusions

Learning the lessons from old media to apply to the new

Given that much more is known of audience response to audiovisual media than for newer information and communication technologies, it is appropriate to learn some more complex lessons from this domain, in answering the general question, how media literate is the UK adult population?

Literacy is a matter – as critical educationalist Paolo Freire has observed – of 'reading the world'. Unsuprisingly then, in a domain they know well, namely audiovisual media, adults' knowledge is exhibited in a highly uneven and inconsistent manner.

- For example, in analysing focus group discussions about talk shows, Livingstone and Lunt (1994) found that some people are sophisticated in their critique of the genre (for its lack of objectivity, representativeness or balance); yet at the same time they are blind to the values of the genre which are important to – and equally well articulated by – others (such as its inclusiveness, diversity and authenticity of expression). These two groups thus differ in the skills and expectations they bring to bear in evaluating the genre, and so make different choices in their everyday lives. There are also clear demographic correlates of these different positions (the former being more male, middle-class and older than the second).

In short, this and other research suggests that there is no simple 'right answer' to questions of literacy: what counts as 'a better public understanding', and so which group in the above example can be said to be 'more literate' than the other, is far from obvious. This problem

5 Commentators on the changing nature of the worldwide web note further that as a proportion of the web (rather than as a proportion of the public), amateur or local sites are being squeezed out by corporate, branded sites (McChesney, 2000).

of the 'right answer' makes it clear that media literacy for adults is in some respects a different matter from that traditionally taught to children.

- For children, some degree of 'right-answer' learning is appropriate and important, making a broadly normative approach to media literacy unproblematic. They should understand the distinctions between news and drama, between programmes and advertising, between public service and commercial production.

- For adults, such understanding is generally not in doubt. Hence, media literacy for adults must mean something different and more controversial. Are viewpoints expressed in a talk show balanced or biased? Is a website propaganda or authoritative? Is the news objective or value-laden? Both children and adults should be equipped with criteria to make such decisions, but this is not the same as saying that everyone will reach the same conclusion, thereby posing problems for measuring 'levels' of literacy.

A second example should serve to make the point that not only is the achievement which distinguishes the literate from the illiterate impossible to define unambiguously but also, the application of these skills by adult viewers depends on a complex set of circumstances.

- Philo (1996) found that people used quite different criteria – or skills – to evaluate the balance and coverage of a news story when they had personal experience of the event being portrayed compared with when they did not. In the case analysed, in which the television news was found to emphasise the violent picketing of workers during the miners' strike, those who had direct personal experience of the (mainly) peaceful nature of the pickets regarded the news more critically than those who lacked such experience.

Since they applied critical distance to this particular story but not to all news items (for which personal experience was lacking), the distinction is not between literate or critical and illiterate/noncritical *individuals,* but rather it is a matter of distinguishing among the *occasions* on which literacy skills are applied. Thus, it would seem that people *can* regard the news critically, drawing on their understanding of the conditions and conventions by which such material is constructed, but they do not always do so. Whether they should therefore be labelled as 'media literate' or not is again far from obvious.

A psychological approach would resolve this by distinguishing knowledge from action: people may know something but not act in accordance with this knowledge (the classic example being knowing that smoking causes cancer but not giving up cigarettes). Philo's study suggests that people know in principle about the constraints on media content production, but fail to use this knowledge when relaxing in front of the set after work. Since the DCMS view of media literacy assumes a straightforward link between knowledge ('the ability to think critically about viewing') and action ('to take greater responsibility for viewing choices and the use of electronic media'), this is problematic. Without wishing to

patronise the public, it must be recognised that demonstrating a certain level of literacy under some circumstances may not legitimate simply devolving responsibility from the state, or the media producer, to the supposedly 'knowing' and therefore 'selective, critical' public.

How media literate is the adult population in the UK?

Given the rapid pace of change in the media and information environment, it is particularly problematic that the overwhelming focus in provision and concern has centred on children rather than adults. While undoubtedly children represent 'the future', it is adults who currently comprise the majority of the population and the whole of the workforce. In a complex and fast-changing media environment, the media literacy of adults clearly demands serious consideration, as is recognised in the Draft Communication Bill.

Recent decades have seen a highly regulated broadcasting environment, combined with minimal domestic access to global or hi-tech communication and information technology. Given this context, academic research on adult media literacy has concentrated largely on (1) identifying levels of the audience's critical distance from the potentially powerful media messages (research mainly conducted by the academy), and (2) assessing public satisfaction with existing regulation (e.g. in relation to advertising, taste and decency, concerns over violence, etc; research mainly conducted by regulatory/policy bodies).

The current changes in the media environment, to which the new provisions for promoting media literacy must apply, renders some of this research of only indirect usefulness. The increasingly complex multi-media environment will require significantly greater media literacy skills on the part of the public if it is to respond appropriately to both the enhanced opportunities and the greater dangers coming its way. It is clear that a renewed research programme is imperative in order to address the issues raised by this new environment.

Such research and, indeed, greater public media literacy, is of growing importance. As broadcast media receive a 'lighter touch' regulation, and as internet content is excluded from Government regulation (beyond that which is illegal), more and more responsibility is devolved to the public in locating, selecting or excluding, analysing and evaluating media contents. At present, it would seem that people are beginning to understand this responsibility. In some ways, they welcome it. In others, they feel unsupported or ill-equipped to take on such a responsibility (Livingstone, 2001). To the extent that levels of media literacy are satisfactory, little intervention will be required. However, to the extent that the public, or sectors of the public, may be judged lacking in appropriate levels or aspects of media literacy, one must ask who bears the costs and the consequences of this lack.

This review has found adult media literacy to be uneven across the population and unevenly exercised across different media and media genres. In some respects, the public is indeed media-savvy (for example, in recognising the nature of television genres and conventions of fiction and realism). In other respects, levels of literacy are lower (for example, in comprehending the news, or in navigating and evaluating internet contents).

Generalisations across all media are particularly difficult given the fast-changing media and information environment. However, if we refer back to the expectations regarding media literacy identified in relation to the duties of Ofcom, it would seem, notwithstanding its sophistication in the understanding and evaluation of audiovisual materials with which it has long been familiar, that the public:

- has a far better understanding of 'the nature and characteristics' of audiovisual contents than it does of 'materials published by the electronic media';
- may have only a weak understanding of 'the processes by which materials are selected and made available';
- may have little understanding of 'the available systems by which access to material is or can be regulated';
- may have little understanding of 'the available systems by which the public may control what is received'.

Media literacy cannot develop until access to media and information technologies is fairly and routinely embedded in the daily life of the public. Having defined here the skills that make up media literacy as encompassing technical expertise, critical reception practices and content production, it has been suggested that while access is a prerequisite for technical expertise, technical expertise is in turn a prerequisite for critical reception, this including skills of analysis and evaluation. Such skills are themselves likely to be supported by experience of content production, though this has not - until the advent of new information and communication technologies - been available to many adults.

While this sequence of stages may fairly represent the process of gaining literacy, it poses a problem also. The problem would appear to be that unless an intervention is made to improve literacy before access and experience have time to play their part, there will always be a lag during which an inexperienced public makes use of a technological innovation before it properly understands the opportunities and dangers associated with that innovation.

At present, further technological convergence (e.g. accessing the internet through the television set) is beginning to take place. The DCMS writes:

'With technological convergence, boundaries between hitherto distinct media (the net, TV, films, etc) will increasingly erode, and linkages and cross-references be quicker and easier. It will be essential for viewers (especially younger ones) to be able to identify quickly which environment they are in and what they can expect there'.

How far viewers – and surely this matters for older as well as younger people – can identify and navigate within these converging environments remains a question for future research, the changes being too recent for research yet to have been published.

What is already clear is that a clear and defined vision - of the key dimensions of consumers' skills and abilities, of the minimum and desired levels of literacy required, of the population sectors which risk being left out, of the most appropriate means of both promoting and evaluating media literacy – must be debated and agreed if media literacy are to reach satisfactory levels across the whole population.

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Appendix: Selected research on adult media literacy

BFI (1999). *Making Movies Matter* Report
BFI/ Southampton University
www.soton.ac.uk/~mec/index.html

■ Method/Topic

Report by the Film Education Working Group (FEWG) sets out a strategy *"For transforming moving image education in the UK".* The report makes 22 recommendations on what the next steps should be and calls on a wide range of bodies and organisations to bring about the neccesary developments to bring about consistent well structured moving-image literacy throughout the UK population, for both adults and children. In constructing a strategy the FEWG neccesarily surveyed existing provision.

This report offers a picture of the current state of cinema moving-image education in the UK. Through this we get a picture of the level of moving-image literacy among adults but we must bear in mind that the report does not directly set out to discover or quantify levels of literacy. Rather it is through seeing what is lacking in terms of provision that we make educated assumptions about what the levels of moving-image literacy are.

■ Key findings

Of particular relevance to the question of adult media literacy is the section on learning and recommendations for life long learning.

- All publically funded film in the UK should include an educational component - this to be implemented by the Film Council.
- 'Higher priority should be given to funding moving image research, and to research into teaching and learning about the moving image at all levels of informal and formal education, and findings should be appropriately and widely disseminated'.
- Funding should be sought to improve teachers' 'knowledge and skill in moving image education'.
- Cinema based education should be improved and extended. Art house cinemas often have educational film studies courses, involving both practical and critical elements, running alongside their programmes e.g.: Watershed Bristol (P 6 1.14). But provision is ad-hoc and there is no proper training or pay for these education officers. Programme providers who want to develop this aspect need access to good training. Hence BFI developing national exhibition strategy. Metier (National training organisatin for the arts) has developed NVQs for Art Form development and with these aims to broaden the range of exhibition venues able to offer moving image education (8)
- There are 200 Film Societies in the UK with one million admissions per year. BFFS now receives an annual grant from BFI to improve and extend services and reach of film societies.
- States that moving image learning should be lifelong and should include skills to articulate why you like X as well as a sense of film history, in short the skills associated with Media Literacy but as applied to the cinema. However the report follows the FEWG remit and focuses on schools based learning.

- Life-Long Learning and informal learning spans film appreciation courses to part-time and evening accredited courses which can lead to an undergraduate degree. Provision is very uneven. Both in terms of availability - disparity between rural and urban areas and also in terms of the fact that it is not standardised at all. So that 'the level at which 'Introductory' courses are offered varies enormously' and it is very difficult for adults to map their progress. Some progression possible e.g. from GCSE to accredited courses but inconsistently available across localities.
- Distinction between informal and formal learning is unclear. Many adults take accredited courses but do so for 'leisure reasons'. In fact often put off by accreditation. Refers to the 'eclectic range of self-motivated and often self-directed learning'. NIACE research shows that 'film and video 'most popular past time for largest group of respondents but few took an active role and few are pursuing a qualification'.
- 'Evidence base of informal learning is weak relying mainly on anecdote and evaluation of one-off events'

Bonfadelli, H. (2002). The internet and Knowledge Gaps: A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation. *European Journal of Communication*, 17(1), 65-84.

■ Method/Topic

Proposes that rather than reducing inequality the internet may in fact exacerbate it, because the internet may increase the 'knowledge gap' in societies. Secondary analysis of two large representative surveys in Switzerland. The Surveys are regularly carried out on behalf of the WEMF which measure the use of print media for advertising campaigns. One survey carried out twice yearly is the MACH basic study which involves telephone interviews with representative samples of about 10,000 people aged 14+ Contains questions concerning access and use of the internet as well as demographic data. The second survey used here was a new survey carried out in 1999 by the WEMF MA COMIS 1999 which was based on a representative sample of over 2000 users who use the internet 'several times a month at home'. This survey involved quantitative questions about frequency of use, use of sites, types of content, as well as more qualitative questions on attitude.

■ Limitations

For the present purposes, this article raises important questions to be addressed to UK internet use. However the evidence is of limited use because it pertains to Switzerland.

■ Key findings

- That the typical Swiss internet user is 'well educated, affluent, young and male'.
- Unlike American-based research which has seen the gap in who has access to the internet narrowing, this data showed the 'digital divide' widening between 1997 and 2000.
- Bonfadelli also identifies a divide in what the internet is used for. More educated people use the internet more actively and their use is more information orientated, whereas the less educated use more for entertainment.
- Argues that we urgently need more research into what people use the internet for and attitudes to it, rather than what currently dominates, which is research on levels of access.

Borrows, R. (2000). *Wired Welfare? The internet Support Research Project*. UK: University of Teeside and York University (Part of ESRC Virtual Society Programme.)

■ Method/Topic

This paper uses examples from an ESRC research project *'Wired Welfare'* to discuss the use of the internet for self-help and social support and to suggest implications for social policy. The methodology employed for the research project is not detailed here. The paper provides secondary analysis of data on home based internet use taken from '*Wave 7 of the British Household Panel Survey* (BHPS) collected towards the end of 1997' and from NOP research group (NOP 1999).

■ Key findings

Interesting characteristics of home-based internet use in 1997 taken from the BHPS

- Men significantly more likely to be users than women
- Older people significantly less likely to be users
- London and the South East more likely
- Higher social classes more likely
- Higher incomes more likely
- People in employment and students more likely than those with other economic status
- People in social rented sector more likely than other housing tenures
- Households with children more likely: *'In 1997 at least members of minority ethnic groups were more likely than those who identify themselves as 'white' to have internet access from home'* (Burrows, R, 2000:3).
- The authors emphasize that access to the technology in itself does not provide media literacy: *The issue of social exclusion is assessing the media literacy of UK adults not just a function of assessing the media literacy of UK adults, but one of the already better equipped (virtual?) middle classes being able to understand and engage with the technology in ways that advantage them even further* (Burrows, R, et al, 2000:19-20).

Gauntlett, D., and Hill, A. (1999). *Television, Culture and Everyday Life.* London: Routledge/ BFI.

■ Method/Topic

A qualitative investigation of the television consumption habits of the UK population. The book is based on the findings of the BFI longitudinal audience tracking study which took place between 1991 and 1996. Sample of initially 509 respondents (427 by the end) drawn from all regions of the UK. Aimed to be representative, but final sample consisted of slightly more students, women and older people than the actual population. Data collected in diaries three times per year. Diaries consisted of open and closed questions inviting people to comment on particular aspects of their television viewing. Unfortunately no data were recorded and no questions posed on ethnicity. The authors suggest ethnic minority viewers were under-represented and middle class viewers may have dominated. Although the data is relatively old we might speculate that levels of VCR literacy and critical viewing skills are unlikely to have *decreased* more recently.

■ Key findings

- People are technically proficient in relation to television. The centrality of television to daily life is confirmed. Older people were found to be just as engaged and comfortable with television as other age groups. TV viewing choices were not found to break down along gender lines which suggests that gendered patterns of media use are disappearing.
- People regulate their use of television. The authors found that all adult respondents regulate the amount of time they allow themselves to watch television. *'Young adults, unemployed people, parents, retired couples, all regulate their television viewing'.* (Gauntlett, D, Hill, A, 1999: 293). Clearly viewers are in control of their television use and can explain and justify their choices.
- In relation to people's responses to violence, and confirming previous research findings (BSC Hargreave 1993, Joint Working Party 1998 quoted in Gauntlett and Hill), this study found that *'viewers differentiate between fictional and factual violence'* (Gauntlett, D, Hill, A, 1999: 252). Only a small minority of respondents did not make this distinction, indicating that most viewers are critical towards television content. However, viewers were keen to discuss violence and often used similar language to that used in discussion of the subject on TV itself. *'Most diarists know about and are very familiar with the most common arguments regarding negative 'effects' in relation to media violence'* (Gauntlett, D, Hill, A, 1999: 255). We might temper the judgment that viewers are critical with the observation that television appears to frame what viewers talk about and the language they use.
- People are competent and confident in their use of the VCR. Similar ease is found in use of VCR amongst all age groups including the elderly. The authors write of *'...intelligent uses of VCR, harnessing technology for the ways in which it can be deployed to contribute to one's own life…'* (Gauntlett, D, Hill, A, 1999: 146). The authors observe a similarity between the way people use VCRs, and computer and internet use: they suggest that this indicates large numbers of people were becoming familiar with computer interfaces. There is a difference between this and earlier studies (Morley 1986, Gray 1987,1992), whereas both Morley and Gray found men chose what to watch and operated the technology, Gauntlett and Hill did not find gendered use. They suggest: *'In general, video use seems to have broadened out, with the technology now so commonplace and everyday' (*Gauntlett, D, Hill, A, 1999: 158).

Haddon, L. (2000). Social exclusion and information and communication technologies. *New Media and Society,* 2(4), 387-406.

■ Method/Topic

Two one year qualitative studies from the 1990s are used to explore the relation between ICTs and social exclusion as experienced by two groups: single parents and the young elderly. In both studies the adults in 20 households completed ‘time-budget diaries’ and were interviewed twice. The first interview centred on the participants' daily lives and the second on experience of, and attitude to ICTs. Because internet penetration was low at the time of data collection no data was collected on internet use; however much of the patterns of access and use described are likely to be pertinent to internet use as it develops. The authors do not explain how they selected the 20 households from which the respondents were drawn, but they emphasize the strength of the data is its depth and the purpose was not to produce generalised findings.

■ Key findings (television)

- Young elderly and single parents are both accustomed users of television and VCR.
- Overall tendency to watch more TV with retirement (reflecting national statistics).
- Likely to watch the news and to think TV has ‘educational value'.
- Young elderly quite strictly regulate the time spent watching television.
- Low income single parents are often reliant on TV for leisure and to provide company but they are still discerning and greet specific programmes with particular enthusiasm.

■ Key findings (internet)

- Access outside the home enables development of computer literacy
  In general, many people first encounter new ICTs in contexts outside the home. Hence it is in such situations that they learn not only how to use them but under what conditions and how they can be useful (Haddon, L, 2000: 402).
- Access at work. People without work-based access to computers are unlikely to develop computer literacy, for instance, unemployed single parents do not often come into contact with computers and therefore have no opportunity to develop expertise. The young elderly are not likely to come into contact with computers because their generation did not learn computer use at work, also their children are usually older than those that have grown up with computers at home. There were exceptions to this, for example, people who had used computers at work and were now using them for OU courses.
- Access through friends or family. Where people saw friends or family using computers in their daily lives, they then might develop an interest. If people moved in social groups where no-one had access and they were unemployed, or did not use computers at work, then they were unlikely to develop an understanding of how computers might be useful in daily life.
- Other barriers. People sometimes acquire poor quality computers with out of date software (also poor quality TVs) which constrains development since they cannot use the technology to its full potential. The young elderly sometimes choose to reject new ICTs because they regard them as 'unnecessary' citing sometimes economic and sometimes moral reasons. Finally, anxiety about cost was shown to constrain use of the telephone in both groups. This same anxiety is likely to constrain internet use.

Hanley, P. (1999). Internet *Regulation: The Way Forward?* London: ITC/BSC

■ Method/Topic

A Citizen Forum was used to investigate attitudes of both users and non-users to internet regulation. In exploring attitudes to regulation, the research uncovered attitudes to the internet per se. The non-residential forum was held for two days in Birmingham, it consisted of a mixture of full sessions including expert presentations on aspects of the internet, 'break out groups' of 18-20 participants and smaller groups within these breakout groups. Moderators and note takers accompanied each group and IT experts were on hand. On the first evening participants completed questionnaires on opinion and knowledge on arrival and a similar questionnaire was completed at the end.

A sample representative of the local population was drawn from 800 responses to a mail out to 15,000 names on the electoral register from 12 constituencies across Birmingham. A 'booster sample' of internet users (defined as those who use more than email) was added to match the demographics of current users. 16 and 17 yr olds who aren't on electoral register were recruited face-to-face. Of 241 people selected, 199 completed the forum.

Demographics of sample: Frequent users (at least once a week) were skewed towards 16-34s, Bs, men and Asians, there were few frequent users over the age of 55 and few frequent users who were Black. Occasional users were also skewed towards 16-34s, but were no different from non-users in terms of sex or ethnicity. Occasional users were mainly B and C1, and there was a shortfall of C2s.

■ Key findings

- Respondents were excited by the amount of data on the internet and the possible educational and informative uses, but they were simultaneously worried about ‘data overload’ (Hanley, P, 1999:14).
- People worried about the trustworthiness of the internet as a source of information.
- Parents worried about not being sufficiently computer literate to help their children.
- There was concern that people with ‘sinister or illicit intentions’ might ‘prey on vulnerable users’ (Hanley, P, 1999: 14).
- Majority felt there were risks associated with internet use. Particularly with regard to: fraud, children accessing unsuitable material, access to anti-social and offensive material, and confidentiality and data protection. *‘There was surprise and alarm that anyone could put up a website without prior checks or vetting. This led to questions about the lack of accountability - how trustworthy were the ISPs?’* (Hanley, P, 1999: 20). Although contradictorily people seemed to think that from what they learnt at the forum there was more regulation over content than they had anticipated.
- Lack of regulation became less of a concern over the course of the two-day forum. Many thought there should be a 'clamp down' on credit card fraud, and half or more thought that ‘blocking’ should be used for anti-social and abusive material: discussion on the question of blocking and filters was sophisticated, for example the difficulty of regulating the internet across international borders was raised, as was the question of subjectivity regarding offensive material. Non-users across all demographic groups considered their own knowledge of the internet to have improved markedly over the forum.

Hill, A. (2000). Fearful and Safe: Audience Response to British Reality Programming. *Television and New Media*, 1(2), 193-213.

■ Method/Topic

This paper also draws on data produced by the BFI audience tracking study 1991-1996 in which respondents completed three diaries per year. (See above for more information on sample and method). In 1994 respondents commented on a range of reality programmes. This article focuses on comments about *999* and *Children's Hospital.*

■ Key findings

- Viewers are critical and knowing. Viewers who claim to dislike reality TV clearly articulate what it is that makes them uncomfortable, usually focusing on the mixture of entertainment and information. Viewers who like the programmes mix comments on why they find the programmes entertaining and compulsive, with comments on how they are informative and educational. Hill warns that emphasis on the educational aspects of the programmes might be a sign that viewers are aware of the negative discourse surrounding reality programming and *'feel a need to justify their viewing pleasure...'* (Hill, A, 2000: 206). Arguably, though, even this shows an awareness of the constructed nature of the programme. Viewers enjoy these programmes precisely because they can be certain of 'happy endings'.

Hill, A. (2002). Big Brother: the real audience. *Television and New Media.*

■ Method/Topic

A survey in 2000 included a representative sample of over 9000 TV viewers taken from BARB and aged 4 - 65+, in order to explore who is watching factual entertainment programmes and why. This paper focuses on *Big Brother.* Qualitative fieldwork is used to unpack and shed light on survey responses, although details of who took part in qualitative research are not given. Difference within audiences is insufficiently addressed: the author points out that ethnicity is not explored in the research 'due to the make up of the BARB sample'. Hence findings are not representative.

■ Key findings

- The research found that 72% of children aged 4-15 (80% of over 10s) and 70% of adults watched, at least occasionally. *'… what is so surprising is the homogenous audience for factual entertainment: it appeals to everyone' (*Hill, A, 2002: 7-8).
- The paper breaks down factual entertainment into three 'sub-genres': *Observation* – e.g. *Airport;* Information – e.g. *Pets*; Created for TV- e.g. *Big Brother. Observation* was most popular and *Created for TV* least popular, except with young viewers.
- Most audience members were not expecting to see something 'real'. Hill suggests that the viewing pleasure is in identifying 'moments of authenticity' which erupt in the factual entertainment format: *'Audiences have developed viewing strategies which foreground authenticity in a highly constructed TV environment.'* (Hill, A, 2002: 20). Viewers are knowledgeably 'playing' with these programmes, and are to some extent aware of production processes.

Lee, S. (1999). Private uses in public spaces: A study of an internet cafe. *New Media and Society*, 1(3), 331-350.

■ Method/Topic

This paper presents a case study of an internet cafe in Brighton, part of a larger project investigating internet use in public spaces. Interviews were held with 50 randomly selected users and consisted of a combination of administered 30-minute questionnaires and a short unstructured discussion of 'no longer than 15 minutes'. From this initial sample of 50, 60-minute semi-structured interviews were held with eight self-selected users. Such a small scale study cannot tell us about the whole adult population, rather, it is useful precisely because it serves to emphasize that the adult population is broad, diverse and extremely difficult to generalize about.

■ Key findings

- Overall, the internet was most often used for emailing. In this case study, public internet access is found to function as complementary rather than alternative to home access. 86% of the *Surfer's Paradise* sample had used the internet before, nearly a third of the sample had internet access at home and were using the café whilst temporarily away from home. This research shows that thinking in terms of either home or public access is too simplistic, and indicates that we need to examine the kind of public facility in question and ask who uses the facility.
- The findings also supports Haddon's suggestion that people learn from being around other, confident users – though the majority who attended the café were experienced users who came to carry out a specific task, there were also many for whom internet use was social and even educational: *David and Mark, two gay male friends came in to use the terminals together and had been doing so at least once a month for over a year. Mark, the older man, had never used the internet before and came in with David on Sunday afternoons…He was interested in dabbling with the technology and both men booked machines and engaged in conversation and banter during the whole time of use, getting up to look at each other's machines and comment on each other's findings.* (Lee, S, 1999: 337).
- There were also those who did attend the café specifically to learn how to use the internet. These people sometimes took advantage of the provision of short introductory courses. Lee describes these users as 'autodidactic surfers' (Lee, S, 1999: 339) and observes an interesting difference in the way in which people described what they were doing. She writes*: It was noteworthy that earnestly autodidactic customers were the only users likely to use the term 'internet' when describing their activities in the café. They had come to* 'learn how to use the internet' *or* 'try out the internet', *whereas other users were more likely to refer to a single functionality when questioned on their use patterns such as 'emailing relatives' or 'talking to friends via a chat room'. The latter group rarely identified themselves as 'internet users' since that described broad generic use of a variety of functionalities which they simply didn't do. (Lee, S, 1999: 340).*

Another way of describing what Lee has observed here is, the more internet literate a person is, the more they see past technology and concentrate on content. This observation also draws our attention to the fact that the internet encompasses a diverse array of activities and therefore perhaps it is not actually helpful to speak in terms of internet literacy since people might be very able to use the internet for emailing and attending a chosen chat room and they might not have tried other online activities but they are literate when it comes to particular actions.

- New users often found the internet café environment intimidating.
  '... you buy some time and they give you a number and once you've put the number in you're faced with this screen and if you don't know where to look, then you're lost. You've got to have somewhere to try out the email and the web before you come in.' (Martin, male, 25) (Lee, S, 1999: 340).
- This research suggests that this internet café does not serve to widen access to the internet to excluded sections of society. The authors suggest that this might be because *Surfers Paradise* was marketed as an: 'up-market, trendy cafe with internet facilities', not as an internet café (Lee, S, 1999: 332).
  In terms of occupation, users in professional occupations were one of the largest groups represented in our research sample which is unsurprising, given that these individuals would presumably have the amount of disposable income needed to pay the relatively high prices of the internet café, as well as having more opportunities to become familiar and/or aware of internet technologies. (Lee, S, 1999: 336).
- Nonetheless the café does function as a learning space for some individuals who may have access elsewhere but are not competent users.
- The random sample included exactly equal numbers of men and women, contradicting nationwide survey results showing male use as consistently higher than female use. However of those that used the internet, male users were more likely to use it for browsing. The researchers speculate that a dedicated leisure space away from the domestic responsibilities of home may appeal to both men and women, also that the many young, single female users may wish to avoid having to set-up a home based internet account which women may not feel computer literate enough to do (cites Wakeford 1999).

Liff, S. and Stewart, F. (2001). Community e-gateways: locating networks and learning for social inclusion. *Information, Communication and Society*, 4(3), 317-340.

■ Method/Topic

Discussion of the government supported policy to ensure provision of e-gateways in deprived areas across the UK. Discusses a case study of one e-gateway, which was carried out as part of a wider ESRC research project on the provision of public access to computers and the internet.
Research involved observation, questionnaires to users and non-users and interviews with staff and those in funding or other relationships with the centre in question. Case studies were chosen, after broad survey and short visits, to illustrate the range of facilities and users in existence.

■ Key findings

- Questions the claim in policy documents that such gateways will narrow the digital divide.
- Focus is on access to technology and technological prowess - including ability to create content – and how this might be taught in a genuinely interactive way by using 'relevant content', but it is argued that this is not often done. Indicates that while there is widespread recognition of the need to develop, in this case internet literacy, it is not often made clear exactly what skills are important. Therefore even where e-gateways exist effective interactive learning is patchy.
- The case study highlights the need for on-going training opportunities rather than one off introductions. Finally that government policy advice is not reflected in provision. Funding requires formal courses but affective learning requires learner centred, more informal approaches.

OECD. (2000). *Literacy in the Information Age: Final Report of The International Adult Literacy Survey assessing the media literacy of UK adults* Paris Ottawa: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The OECD report on Adult Literacy measured basic literacy levels (reading, writing, and arithmetic) in the populations of 22 countries. Serious criticism has been levelled at the methodologies employed, nonetheless the report gives us a crude idea of literacy levels in Britain. According to the OECD 15 percent of UK adults have only very basic literacy skills (measured in 1996). Further, these low levels of skills were not found only in 'marginalised groups' but across populations. We might assume that at least 15 percent of UK adults are not ICT literate. However this figure is perhaps not meaningful to the question of television literacy since critical viewing of television content arguably does not call for reading, writing or arithmetic.

Philo, G. (1996). The media and public belief. In G. Philo (Ed.), *Media and Mental Distress.* London New York: Longman.

■ Method/Topic

Focus groups and in-depth interviews were used to explore the relationship between media and the development of opinions and beliefs. The groups were all drawn from the west of Scotland and were constructed to be broadly representative of income levels, occupation and housing.

■ Key findings

- Glasgow group research on media content found the majority of representations show people with serious mental health problems as likely to be violent, and this view of media content is supported by mental health workers, (see Philo, G, *Users of Services, Carers and Families* in Philo, G, (ed) 1996: 105). 40% of the participants in this study thought that people with serious mental health problems were quite likely to be violent, and cited factual and non-factual media representations as the source of their belief. Personal experience to the contrary sometimes led people to disagree with media representations but sometimes, where personal experience contradicted the idea that seriously mentally ill people were likely to be violent, people were more likely to believe media representations: *'...there were 13 cases where people had non-violent experience which was apparently 'overlaid' by media influences. These people traced their beliefs mostly to violent portrayals in fiction or to news reporting.'* (Philo, G, 1996: 104).
- Research finds that personal experience of a given subject tends to exert more power over beliefs than a media representation of the same subject. In this case, people's experience was often a less powerful influence on their opinion than media representation. This finding demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between media coverage and audience understanding. The degree to which people are critical towards media content may be affected by what the subject is, for instance when fear is provoked, people may have a less thoughtful and more emotional reaction to content.

Phipps, L. (2000). New Communications Technologies: A conduit for social inclusion. *Information, Communication and Society*, 3(1), 39-68.

Article based on research, which examined over 40 Projects by public authorities, private agencies and community groups which have attempted to use ICTs to tackle social exclusion. These attempts usually involve provision of access to ICTs and tend to concentrate on teaching navigation and content production skills to members of under-privileged groups. Argues that ICTs can at this point go either way: either they can exacerbate, or add another facet to, social exclusion, or they can be used as an empowering tool for communities and individuals to help bring about more social inclusion. The author does not specify by what criteria the 40 projects used as the basis of the discussion in this paper, were chosen, nor how they were examined.

Psoinos, A., Kern, T., and Smithson, S. (2000). An exploratory study of information systems in support of employee empowerment. *Journal of Information Technology*, 15(15).

■ Method/Topic

Paper reports on a study of use of Information Systems to support the management strategy 'Employee Empowerment'. Postal survey of 450 UK manufacturing companies and 20 in-depth interviews in 18 UK top manufacturing organisations. Finds that many UK companies attempt to implement 'Employee Empowerment' and Information Systems (IS) can facilitate. But IS do not bring about 'empowerment': constraints to achieving 'employee empowerment' with IS are outlined, one such obstacle is low level of IT literacy in the workforce.

■ Key findings

- Inadequate user skills and negative attitudes towards information systems
  'The skills that the employees possessed regarding the use of IT strongly constrained the support that IS could provide to employees.' (Smithson, S, et al, 2000: 224).
  'One of the things that holds the organisation back is our general IT literacy.'
  HR manager, health science company (Smithson, S, et al 2000: 224).
- However, the workforce were found to have better levels of IT literacy than senior management. This suggests at best a wide level of very basic IT literacy amongst workers in UK manufacturing.
  '...senior management did not appreciate the value and usefulness of IS as much as their staff did.' (Smithson, S, et al 2000: 224).
  'In a very traditional car manufacturer senior production managers just refuse to use electronic mail.' (Smithson, S, et al, 2000: 225).
- Recognition of the value of IT skills may break down along age lines, indeed the research found that younger workers were much more IT literate than older workers. While some were willing to obtain training out of hours because they saw it as 'useful self-development' (Smithson, S, et al: 225), others were extremely reluctant to learn. The authors suggest that incorporation of IS should be gentle and that employees have to be made to feel comfortable.

Reilly, J. (1999). Just another food scare? Public Understanding and the BSE crisis. In G. Philo (Ed.), *Message received: Glasgow media group research 1993-1998 assessing the media literacy of UK adults* London: Longman.

■ Method/Topic

In order to explore how individual and group attitudes may have been shaped by media coverage, qualitative research with small groups of audiences was carried out in two different time periods, first in 1990 when BSE first hit headlines and second in 1996 when it re-emerged in the media. The 1990 respondents were re-interviewed in 1996.

■ Key findings

- Audiences dismiss ‘sensationalist’ coverage. When BSE was first in the media in 1990 it came swiftly after other 'food scares' which the participants saw as discredited, as a result they were predisposed to dismiss BSE as a passing 'scare' and to attribute the problem to media sensationalism. Further, people were unwilling to believe the government would lie about the (lack of) risk associated with eating beef and were more inclined to dismiss media coverage than to question government.
- Learning from previous experience. In 1996 when BSE returned to the news and the government contradicted their earlier line, respondents sought out alternative sources of information as a way of re-evaluating the media coverage. Reilly speculates that such public skepticism towards expert sources is likely to remain.
- Critical some of the time: this research illustrates the difficulty inherent in any attempt to generalise about the extent to which audiences view media content critically. In the case of BSE coverage, it was the earlier experience that encouraged critical viewing on the part of audiences when the subject of BSE re-emerged in the media. Critical viewing would seem to be more likely if personal experience leads to a critical attitude.

Schweiger, W. (2000). Media Credibility - Experience or Image?: A Survey on the credibility of the Worldwide Web in Comparison to other Media. *European Journal of Communication*, 15 (1), 37-59.

■ Method/Topic

Now that use of the worldwide web in Germany has now past the 10% mark, making it arguably a medium of mass communication, the author examines, via a survey, how 'credible' users and non-users of the web regard the web in comparison to newspapers and TV. Three surveys are reported:

1. Face-to-face interview, respondents divided equally in terms of gender and level of education, varied ages, but does not say how respondents were selected.
2. Telephone survey of 1000 randomly selected phone numbers
3. Email survey: random sample selected using email address indices (very low response rate).

He defines 'credible' by referring to six 'levels' of credibility which his survey questions focus on from presenter at the first level to media type at the 6th level.

■ Key findings

- Concludes that the web is seen as quite credible, but not as credible as television and newspapers.

The author describes the problems arising from attempting to define 'credible'. He writes: ‘One can only consider a medium as more or less credible - whether this is objectively right is impossible to verify’. He also makes the point that attempting to rate the 'credibilty' of the Web as a whole does not sufficiently differentiate between differences within media types.

Towler, R. (2001). *The Public's View 2001.* London: ITC/BSC research publication.

■ Method/Topic

Annual survey of UK adults television viewing (and radio and internet use). 1,228 face-to-face interviews were held in households with at least one TV set. The random sample was drawn from the post code address file and stratified in terms of age, region, gender, employment/unemployment, the sample was also weighted to reflect the actual composition of the population.

■ Key findings (television)

- Self regulation: the majority watch television everyday and most for two or three hours, older people claim to watch the most hours.
- For the first time in the history of the annual survey over 50% of respondents had multichannel television.
- Of those with multichannel television 76% knew they could ‘block’ access to channels and 3% used such functions.
- Majority thought there is ‘about the right amount of regulation’, older people often thought there should be more.
- Most thought TV should be regulated in order to protect children, though protection of other ‘vulnerable’ adults was also mentioned, particularly by younger respondents.
- 96% were aware of the existence of the watershed 85% knew it was at 9pm.
- The majority (62%) thought parents should be responsible for children's viewing.
- These findings indicate that most adults feel able to take what they need and want from television and are not overwhelmed by information, even in multichannel homes.
- How critical towards television content?
- TV still seen as main source of news but figure decreasing year on year.
- 90% saw news as 'very' or 'fairly' important part of viewing and 90% saw it as 'essential or important' part of programming on public service channels.
- 86% thought the news was 'accurate always or most of the time'.
- 57% saw documentaries as 'accurate always or most of the time'.
- Non-white respondents 'more sceptical than white respondents about the veracity, accuracy and honesty' of factual programmes.
- Non-white respondents much less likely to say that 'advertisements on television were always or often truthful'.
- Less than 0.5% of respondents thought there was a political bias on any of the main channels.
- That non-white people are more sceptical about the truth claims of factual television content is particularly interesting because of the lack of data on ethnic-minorities in the audience studies discussed above. This finding adds support to the argument that personal experience informs and affects reception, so that if non-white viewers have experiences that are either misrepresented or not visible on television, the way they view television output as a whole will be affected.

■ Key findings (television)

- 35% had PCs with internet access (doubled from 18% in 2000).
- Striking regional differences in internet access: 37% in England, 25% in Northern Ireland, 25% in Scotland and 25% in Wales.
- internet mainly used for 'communication, e-commerce and gathering information'.
- Most common internet use was email (58%).
- 51% aware of special software for controlling internet access (26% in 2000).
- Levels of access are rapidly increasing. However the fact that 58% of those with access primarily use the internet for emailing suggests that the use of the internet to the full range of its capacity is very low, and particularly so outside of England. Controlling access to the internet might be regarded as a basic function and the fact that only half of those with access are aware that software exists for this purpose, suggests again, low levels of technical literacy. At the same time the dramatic year-on-year increase of awareness of this capability as well as steadily increasing access, reminds us that the situation is rapidly changing, accordingly we can speculate that internet literacy is increasing, at least in terms of the technical capability of users.

Useful websites on media literacy

- www.mediachannel.org
- www.media-awareness.ca
- www.cme.org
- www.medialiteracy.net
- www.filmeducation.org
- www.theory.org.uk
- www.netcomuk.co.uk
- www.englishandmedia.co.uk
- www.ccsonline.org.uk
- www.coe.int/t/e/cyberforum
- www.netconsumers.org
- www.21stcenturyliteracy.org
- http://medialiteracy.engage.nu
- www.mediauk.com

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