Five meaningful key words: *media literacy, online, information, media education, disinformation*

Fit for purpose? Taking a closer look at the UK's Online Media Literacy Strategy

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Abstract

Now more than ever, media literacy is essential as we navigate our daily lives (Mesquita-Romero et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how we need to frequently navigate media spaces filled with changing, and not always credible, information (Austin et al., 2021). Media literacy affects our habits as well as our social connections (Hobbs, 2021). This short opinion piece from two educators in the field provides an exploration of the Online Media Literacy Strategy (OMLS) published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, UK, in 2021. The aim of the OMLS was to predict how media literacy may evolve in our society. This paper gives a brief introduction to the OMLS and offers three critiques, which educators may find useful, namely the undersold role of schools, the negative connotations of seeing 'media literacy' as solely a way of navigating online harms, and the negative perception of social media (SM). The concept of SM as being 'production-positive' is pitched.

Introduction

In global terms, media literacy is an element that transcends several disciplines, from media studies right through to educational sciences, and deals with a wide range of themes and issues such as our privacy, our management and engagement with news, and key citizenship activities (De Leyn et al., 2021) It is also informed by wider, global, attitudes towards media which show several voices and perspectives on how we can best develop media literacy in our learners (De Leyn et al., 2021). It is undeniable that these media are having a profound effect on our wellbeing and behaviours (Byrne, 2017). Media literacy allows people to judge if something they read or engage with is credible, reading between the messages and pressures from advertisers and marketing companies. Consequently then, it is of importance to us as researchers to examine how these global concerns work on a national level, by exploring how a government proposes to involve young people in any incipient

media literacy policy. The UK's Online Media Literacy Strategy is an example of such a proposed national policy. Internationally there is a lack of comprehensive evaluation data of media literacy efforts (Bulger and Davidson, 2018); however, for the UK, there is some national data which shows a need for a national media literacy programme.

The National Literacy Trust (2021) found:

- Only 2% of children have the skills they need to identify misinformation (National Literacy Trust, 2018)
- Half of teachers (53.5%) believe that the national curriculum does not equip children with the literacy skills they need to identify fake news (National Literacy Trust, 2018)
- 2 in 5 parents (39%) never watch, listen to or read news with their child at home (National Literacy Trust, 2019)

Part of the issue comes where we lack evidence about pupils' starting points with media literacy (Bazalgette, 2018); as shown in the statistics from National Literacy Trust (2021; 2019; 2018) above, pupils are engaging with media in different ways and at different ages, with very different experiences in the home. The co-authors of this paper highlight, therefore, that this learning must begin with schools, catching children early and develop their skills to be enquiry-minded researchers (Gibson and Smith, 2018). There is also a wider, long-term responsibility at play; with the employment market requiring new digital professions, our education system must help to prepare professionals to fill these roles (Botturi, 2019). This opinion piece seeks to give a brief introduction to the OMLS and offer three critiques of it which educators may find useful. The article finishes by outlining some future directions for further policy and research.

What is the DCMS Online Strategy?

In the summer of 2021, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in the UK published its Online Media Literacy Strategy (OMLS). This document, available online at www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-media-literacy-strategy, sets out how the UK government sees the development of media literacy across the next

few years. The OMLS highlights how there is no globally recognised definition of 'media literacy', instead quoting the description from Ofcom as the 'ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts' (Ofcom, 2021 cited in DCMS, 2021). While there is some discussion about this definition, and what the term "media literacy" really means for policy makers, educators and the general public, there is some consensus that the current cultural and political climate of the early 21st century requires that people of all ages, but particularly young people, become aware - and perhaps, "literate" - in the way that information, news and entertainment are communicated to them. Furthermore, it is generally agreed that this consensus is articulated through a policy response, and the OMLS is one such response.

The OMLS is part of a wider range of measures which form the new Online Safety Bill in the UK. This piece of legislation is aimed at achieving a number of purposes, most notably the reduction of online harms, online harrassment, the spread of disinformation or "fake news" and the creation of a "digital" charter designed to guarantee certain rights and benefits in the online environment. As we discuss below this focus on the online environment does present some problems, particularly when some of these issues have their origin in offline activities. The issue of media ownership and how this affect what young people can or cannot access, for example, is a vital aspect of media literacy, but this is not accounted for in a strategy which sees media literacy as being purely about what young people actually "do" online.

The OMLS is a policy document which outlines how the UK government wants to tackle the problems presented by misinformation, disinformation, online abuse, and other "online harms" (DCMS, 2021: 2) which arise from a range of digital and internet technologies, but primarily social media. The strategy sets out a three year plan to develop a media literacy framework for the country and to support existing user groups and organisations develop media literacy. It identifies six challenges for Media literacy in the UK

- A Lack of Evaluation Evidence for "what works" in media literacy
- A lack of funding for media education initiatives
- Hard to reach audiences

- The problem of vulnerable users
- Building audience resilience
- A lack of co-ordination in media literacy initiatives.

These challenges are unquestionably, very real and the way that the strategy explores them is both transparent and necessary. While we are absolutely clear that any governmental action aimed at meeting these challenges is on one level, thoroughly welcome, there is some dissatisfaction with the strategy amongst media educators and others in the UK who have an interest in this area. The strategy as a whole avoids some pressing issues and truths about media literacy in the UK, which we as educators, wish to raise here. These issues form the basis for three critiques of the OMLS which we explore here, albeit briefly, and in raising them we want to signpost readers to some of the excellent work done in the area of media literacy both in the UK and the wider world. It is our hope that these critiques will prompt educators and policy makers to address these gaps and build on the framework that the strategy sets out.

Three key critiques of the OMLS document

1. *The strategy does not acknowledge the role of schools, and that there is a significant amount of media literacy work that has gone on in UK schools for the last four decades*

If media literacy is the product of good media education, then it is important to acknowledge the lengthy history of a pluralist, diverse and ultimately effective media education movement in the UK and its efforts to make the country more media literate. From the 1980s onwards (e.g. Masterman, 1985) teachers and academics in the UK sought to develop a critical awareness of the media through a range of well-established school subjects (most notably English) and the development of standalone Media Studies courses. As the 1990s progressed these courses came to involve significant numbers of young people (Connolly, 2018). and by the 2000s the establishment of a number of specialist Media Arts Schools (Burn & Durran, 2007; Connolly, 2022) meant that there were national networks devoted to the

development of media education. It is also important to note that between 1990 and 2014, there was a mandatory requirement to study media texts in English as outlined in the country's National Curriculum (DfES, 1990; DfE, 1995; DfEE/QCA, 1999).

Given this history, it is surprising to note that the OMLS sees schools as only having a very small role in the promotion of media literacy in the 21st century. There is very little in the strategy document about either the work that schools have done on Media literacy in the past, or how it might support the strategy in future. Indeed, the words "school" and "schools" appear fewer than a dozen times throughout the document. Instead much of the expected delivery of the media literacy framework is anticipated being carried out by charities, voluntary and third sector (non-governmental) organisations. This move away from the school sector and towards the third sector is rationalised in the following way:

"Schools are often highlighted as 'easy' places for media literacy organisations to deliver educational programmes to upskill students. However, providers have cited that they face difficulties in being able to deliver through schools due to funding and timing constraints."   (DCMS, 2021, p.84)

Putting aside for one moment the fact that any funding constraint is likely to have been caused by the people publishing the OMLS, this statement completely ignores the fact that schools have been doing media literacy work through the school curriculum for many decades. Asserting that it is only third sector charities who can do this work is bewildering, and indeed, potentially damaging to the prospects for good media literacy. As the Media Education Association (MEA, 2021) have pointed out, these organisations may be "well intentioned" but do not have the established track record of delivering media education that teachers and schools in the UK do.

Similarly, the curricular opportunities where schools might potential deliver media literacy work also receive scant attention. There are only two pages of the strategy (pp.90-91) which discuss media literacy in relation to the National Curriculum in England, and these discussions are in many ways, deeply disingenuous. Consider, for example the following passage about Key Stage 4 English, the part of the

National Curriculum which outlines what 14 to 16 year olds should be taught in English lessons:

"At Key Stage 4, students are expected to distinguish between statements that are supported by evidence and those that are not, and identify bias and misuse of evidence. They are also expected to make critical comparisons, refer to context and draw on knowledge and skills from wider reading to help them understand and critically evaluate texts"   *(DCMS, 2021; p.91)*

On one level, this seems eminently reasonable, and is a truthful record of what the curriculum for English outlines. However, when one remembers that the most recent (2014) iteration of the National Curriculum has removed the requirement to study any media texts at all in English, this seems both perplexing and contradictory. This removal of references to media and media texts in the 2014 iteration of the National Curriculum for English (see Connolly, 2018, 2022 for a more detailed account) mean that it is very easy for the OMLS strategy to highlight a lack of co-ordination amongst organisations, including schools, who are seeking to promote media literacy

Interestingly, in its response to the Joint Committee report on the OMLS   and the wider Online Harms bill (HM Government, 2022) the government acknowledges suggestions that there should be greater engagement with schools and their role in developing media literacy. (ibid, p.49) This suggests that policymakers both in and outside of government realise that this is a weakness in the strategy.

However, there is perhaps, some inevitability, about the UK government's actions here. Conservative politicians in particular (e.g. Patten, 1993) have long been suspicious of the wider subject of media studies, which has historically been the vehicle for media education in England and Wales. To this end we, as media educators, are clear that in some respects the OMLS is a deliberate attempt to distance media literacy from media studies, and this is a dangerous and divisive separation.

2.There is a need to think about media literacy in terms of "all media" and not just online media. Media literacy should not be reduced to nothing more than a vehicle for dealing with online harms

There is tendency in both the OMLS and the associated mapping exercises (GOV.UK, 2021) to equate media literacy with e-safety or protection from online harms. This is deeply problematic for a number of reasons, not least because many of the sources of online harms have their origins in very "offline" institutions and organisations. Historically, Media Studies in schools has always asked questions not only of the message being delivered by news stories but also of who was doing the delivering and how that delivery was paid for. This interrogation of what was referred to, in the key concept model of Media Studies, as *institutional analysis*, is missing from both a view of media literacy which is solely concerned with either online phenomena or its potential from harm. This study of media institutions should form an integral part of media literacy. Moreover, a significant proportion of the world's population still consume their news in printed form, visit the cinema and listen to a radio. Even if this changes completely in the very near future, questions about who writes the news that I read on my phone, pays for the adverts that populate the top of my Google search results and provides the platform to send me disinformation are still essential ones that must be addressed by any media literacy strategy. They are tacitly ignored by the OMLS, which instead chooses to clothe any discussion of the role of institutions in the language of risk management rather than genuine enquiry:

"It is clear that tech companies need to be held accountable for the actions and harms that take place on their platforms. We are ensuring this through our world-leading Online Safety Bill, which will establish a new duty of care to make companies take responsibility for the safety of their users"   *(DCMS, 2021; p.2)*

While there is no doubt that companies do and should have a duty of care, this is only one small aspect of the larger tapestry of questions which a media literacy strategy should address. As the MEA (2021) have pointed out
 " a comprehensive media literacy strategy requires a wider definition of what it means to be literate across all forms of communications. It should entail a

democratic entitlement for all members of society to be able to use, create, critique and challenge digital and media texts"

This disjuncture between the "online" and "offline" means that the OMLS often considers the effect of media use and consumption without ever having young people consider the cause. For example, at one point the strategy suggests that

"those who experience high levels of online abuse need to be supported and upskilled in aspects of media literacy that can help to protect them online, for example to: report unwanted and hateful content; filter the content they see online; identify and avoid individuals or groups that may generate harmful content; access support; and express themselves online"   *(DCMS, 2021; p.60)*

For us genuine media literacy involves not only supporting young people to do these things, (which are, unarguably important) but also to ask questions about how things like unwanted content gets to them; about how groups that generate harmful content are permitted to do so; and ultimately about the way that this understanding can contribute to better citizenship in the offline world. Similarly, issues of access ("I can't get online") and affordability ("I don't have any data left") all have very offline origins which should entail an understanding of the economics and industry of the media as a whole.

3.The OMLS seems very concerned with the overly negative aspects of social media (SM) use, whereas part of media literacy should involve knowing and recognising when social media is being used as a force for good.

Engaging with digital media is part of everyday living for many children, yet opportunities to learn about, through and with media are denied many pupils in compulsory schooling (Cannon, Connolly and Parry, 2020). Despite the documented number of studies that investigate social media in teaching and learning settings, the topic of social media literacy is still an under-researched area (Manca et al., 2021), and empirical research on social media literacy is notably rare (Festl, 2021). For us as educators adopting the theoretical lens of New Literacy studies (Luke et al., 2016) would allow us to suggest a combined perspective for investigating social media literacies. This perspective considers both social media skills that are transversal across different social media (global skills), and those that pertain to a specific social

media platform (local skills). It examines practices that are decontextualized (literacy as something to be acquired), and those that are situated and context-dependent (literacy through participation). (Manca et al., 2021). This complex, dynamic view of literacies, as articulated by Cannon et al. (2018) suggest that both social and other digital media allow for both play and learning to happen simultaneously. In these affordances (Bucher and Helmond, 2018) lie the potential for social and digital media to create a wide of opportunities for both learning about texts and creating texts. We might term these opportunities the "production-positive" aspects of social media which the OMLS largely ignores – while there is some discussion of "self-expression" in a few places this is not articulated in terms of production. Take for example, this passage from page 5 of the OMLS document, which suggests media users should learn…

"how to participate in online engagement and contribute to making the online environment positive, whilst understanding the risks of engaging with others"

(DCMS, 2021:p.5)

This would seem an excellent opportunity to outline ways that young people might make a positive contribution to the online environment by the texts that they author and the content that they curate. An approach to literacy which combines a socially dynamic view of literacies, with well-established school Media studies would, however, give such production-positive knowledge and skills renewed emphasis.

The Rewired Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education (UNESCO, 2021), launched in December 2021 at the RewirEd Summit, highlights the potential of using technology for good, and for impactful transformational education, but warns that without a shift in mindset towards focus on the benefits that technology can offer, we risk further polarisation of learners, a narrowing of teaching and learning experiences, and achieving isolation instead of inclusion. Teachers at all levels can have their role to play, but ultimately the teachers themselves need subject knowledge and self-efficacy in this area to teach it adequately. Ensuring that teacher training providers and ITE settings help practitioners to understand the importance of media literacy for their learners is a key part on this journey towards having a media literate society (Botturi, 2019).

Where does this research need to go?

The coauthors of this paper propose that the chief area that needs research is that into the use of social media, and the development of social media literacy, both within and outside school curricula. Research into SM use by vulnerable groups, such as children and young people, the elderly, or those with Special Educational Needs (SEN)/Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD) (NFER, 2022) must be paramount, yet the 'production-positive' aspects of SM must not be lost and neither should the more critical consideration of offline media. These aspects of media literacy should be actively promoted alongside the avoidance of online harms. Being literate in SM can offer great benefits such as connection, networks, and the creation of content, and this can be achieved through designated media literacy programmes and school Media Studies. In this sense the OMLS offers an incomplete picture of media literacy

Conclusion and final comments

To conclude, although the OMLS document sets out how the UK government sees the development of media literacy across the next few years and is a useful foundation for understanding the government's understanding and consideration of media in our daily lives, it is important that educators, policy makers, and users see this document as one response only. The co-authors of this piece are authentic 'voices from the field' who wish to encourage the reader to consider the positives that the OMLS can offer, but also stress that this is just one response to our management of online media, and that media should equally be as consciously regarded in the offline world.

The 'voices in the field' of this paper encourage both the reader and media educators of all types to supplement the information within the OMLS with other key literature around media literacy (please see reference list for further signposting) in order to form a full view of media literacy in the UK. Ensuring that teacher training providers and ITE settings help practitioners to understand the importance of media literacy for their learners is a key part on this journey towards having a media literate society (Botturi, 2019). It is impossible to predict the exact trajectory of online media into the

future, but current literature on issues such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR) and digital capability analytics (Nazaretsky et al., 2021) suggest that the learners of tomorrow will need progressively more resilient critical skills when it comes to navigating online spaces (Mesquita-Romero et al., 2022). Without doubt, there is a need for more extensive and in-depth theoretical elaboration in the field (Manca et al., 2021)

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