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National Literacy Trust
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Educating and Measuring News Literacy and Civic Engagement in 9- to 11-year-olds

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

A well-informed citizenry that can evaluate the validity of news is a sign of a healthy democracy. Such an ability requires media consumers to be *news literate* – that is, to possess the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to engage with the news, to evaluate news stories and understand the broader news ecosystem.[1] Research shows that many children, especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, lack basic news literacy skills and knowledge. Furthermore, as stated by Ofcom,[2] there is a lack of effective measures and knowledge of what, and the extent to which, media and news literacy educational initiatives are effective.

The aim of the *NewsWise in Primary Education* project was to address these gaps and understand how news literacy could be effectively educated and measured. The research also provided an opportunity to collect and analyse data pertaining to young people's attitudes of news literacy and civic engagement and as well as to establish, for the first time, if there is a relationship between them.

Designed by The Guardian Foundation in partnership with the National Literacy Trust and the PSHE Association, the NewsWise programme was developed with a view to cultivating news literacy in school children aged 9-11 in the UK.

Methods

The study adopted a mixed methodology based on the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods chosen to answer the following four research questions:

>   RQ1: How can news literacy and civic engagement be measured in 9–11-year-olds?

>   RQ2: What are 9-11-year-olds' self-reported levels of news literacy and civic engagement?

>   RQ3: Does the NewsWise programme improve the news literacy and/or civic engagement of 9-11-year-olds?

>   RQ4: What is the relationship between news literacy and civic engagement among 9-11 yar olds?

1972 participants from 40 schools, participated in the research. The participants were drawn from a broadly representative sample from all four UK nations and attended schools with

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[1] References adapted from Tully, M., Maksl, A., Ashley, S., Vraga, E. K., & Craft, S. (2022). Defining and conceptualizing news literacy. *Journalism*, *23*(8), 1589-1606. https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849211005888

[2] Ofcom (2023). Children and parents: Media use and attitudes. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/255852/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf

high levels of pupils on free school meals. Twenty schools were randomly selected to receive the NewsWise intervention, and 20 schools selected to receive no intervention, proceeding with their regular curriculum instead. Teachers of pupils in the intervention group were trained to deliver a series of 15 hour-long lessons. Delivery varied school to school - some schools delivered the intervention every day, one lesson per day, for three weeks, others took longer to deliver the intervention, depending on their school timetable. Schools typically took between three and five weeks to deliver the full intervention.

The NewsWise programme was designed to encourage them to engage with the news, to learn about the difference between facts and opinions, to understand the meaning of terms such as bias and "fake news", to learn about different strategies to identify misinformation, to learn about the processes of consumption and production that are inherent in the news industry, and to write a news report.

Various aspects of news literacy and civic engagement as outcome measures were assessed at three time points: immediately before the intervention period, one month later after the intervention period, and three months after that as a follow-up to test for maintenance of any treatment effects. Additionally, focus groups were conducted with pupils who participated in the NewsWise intervention condition, as well as one-to-one interviews with teachers who participated in delivering the NewsWise intervention.
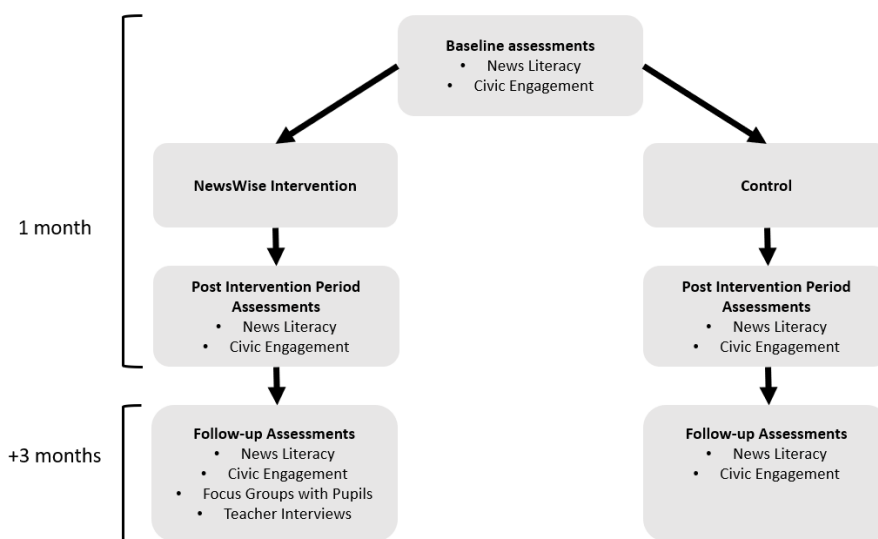
Findings

A summary of the main findings for each of the four research questions is provided below.

Finding 1: A new validated set of news literacy measures, suitable for 9- to 11-year-olds, was created.

Existing news literacy measures were adapted to create a new framework and set of associated measures suitable for 9–11-year-olds as none previously existed. The new measures, which were first designed, piloted and then revised, sought to measure the following three dimensions of news literacy and five associated constructs:

Dimension of News Literacy	Related Constructs
Dimension 1: Attitudes towards news reporting and trustworthiness Definition: An appreciation of the importance of news reporting in terms of quality and trustworthiness.	Construct 1A: News motivation Definition: the motivation required to engage with the news.
	Construct 1B: News attitudes Definition: Beliefs that news should be balanced, honest, fair, and useful.
Dimension 2: knowledge of news production and consumption Definition: An understanding of the processes of news production and consumption inherent in the news industry, and of the role of audiences.	Construct 2: News knowledge Definition: An understanding of the processes of news production and consumption inherent in the news industry, and of the role of audiences.
Dimension 3: Evaluation skills and strategies Definition: The ability to deploy different strategies to evaluate the trustworthiness of information and news stories.	Construct 3A: News evaluation self-report Definition: The self-reported ability to evaluate the trustworthiness of news stories.
	Construct 3B: News vigilance Definition: The self-reported actions taken if/when confronted with misinformation.

In addition to the above, we also developed a twelve-item objective test of 9-11-year-olds' ability to correctly detect fake news stories.

The five sub-constructs loading onto three higher-order dimensions were all found to be theoretically, methodologically and empirically valid for use with 9–11-year-olds in the present and future studies.

Finding 2: A new validated set of civic engagement measures, suitable for use with 9–11-year-olds, was created.

As no measure for civic engagement suitable for younger children was available, a new measure was created. The new measure for civic engagement consists of the following three constructs:

Construct	Definition
Awareness	Awareness of the issues that pertain to the socio-political context.
Attitudes	Positive attitudes towards community and political life and towards one's own rights and responsibilities as a citizen.
Action	Participation in community and political activities in the present time.

All three constructs were found to have good psychometric properties and suitable for use in the present and future studies seeking to measure civic engagement in 9-11-year-olds.[3]

Finding 3: 9–11-year-olds in the UK believe the news should be truthful and balanced, but less than half know how to spot fake news and only three in ten are interested in the news.

Baseline data from the control and experimental participants was used to analyse the attitudes of 9- to 11-year-olds towards the news.[4] Notable findings from this analysis include that 9- to 11-year-olds (all % are strongly agree or agree):

- Believe that news stories should be truthful (86%).
- Believe that fake news is bad (84%).
- Believe that news stories should be balanced (81%).
- Believe it is difficult to tell if information online is trustworthy (62%).
- Stop and check facts before believing the news (59%).
- Can name trustworthy places to find news (52%).
- Find it is easy to tell if a news story is real (52%).
- Know how to spot "fake news" (47%).
- Often read, watch or listen to the news (42%).
- Are interested in the news (35%).
- Read a newspaper to stay informed about the news (19%).

Finding 4: 9–11-year-olds in the UK have extremely positive attitudes towards civic engagement. Five in ten, however, think that they will vote when they grow up, and only 35% talk about politics and social issues with their parents.

Baseline data from the control and experimental groups was used to analyse the participants' attitudes towards civic engagement.[5] Notable findings from this analysis include that 9–11-year-olds believe:

- It is important to support charities (90% strongly agree or agree).
- It is important to know what is happening in the world (90% strongly agree or agree).
- That they want to be the sort of person who helps others whenever they can (88% strongly agree or agree).
- That helping others makes them feel good (88% strongly agree or agree).
- That adults should vote in elections (68% strongly agree or agree).
- When they grow up, they will regularly volunteer their time for good causes (61% Strongly agree or agree).
- Adults should take part in peaceful protests (57% Strongly agree or agree).
- When they grow up, they will vote in an election (49% extremely likely or likely).

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[3] See McLoughlin, S., Polizzi, G., Harrison, T., Moller, F., Maile, A., Picton, I., & Clark, C. (2023). Measuring Civic Engagement in Young Children. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 07342829231205070. https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829231205070

[4] It should be noted that the sample was broadly representative geographically but skewed towards schools with high free school meals.

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Finding 5: The NewsWise programme improved 9-11-year-olds' ability to detect fake news and this improvement sustained over time.

Results from the trial found that the programme improved participants' ability to detect fake news and this difference sustained to the follow-up period. This finding is particularly significant as it was based on the only performance-based, rather than self-report, measure used in the study.

The NewsWise programme was found to have not made a significant difference to the other areas of news literacy and civic engagement that were measured. The analysis revealed considerably different results at a school level, suggesting the programme was likely to have had a higher impact in some schools than others, which requires further exploration.

Finding 6: Qualitative analysis found many benefits of the NewsWise programme as well as areas for improvement.

Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data. These themes suggest that the programme: (i) potentially presents multiple benefits in terms of developing pupils' news literacy; (ii) has the potential to develop pupils' civic engagement through their engagement with news; and, (iii) was well received by both pupils and teachers and could be improved for future delivery.

Finding 7: A strong positive relationship between news literacy and civic engagement among 9-11-year-olds was found for the first time.

The study found a strong relationship in 9- to 11-year-olds' news literacy and their civic engagement. This means that news literacy levels can be used to predict civic engagement and *vice versa*. This is the first study to test for and discover a link between news literacy and civic engagement in 9–11-year-olds.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings from the study have significant implications that are relevant to researchers, educators and policymakers interested in improving news literacy and civic engagement education. This is pertinent given the need for engaging and effective media/news literacy education in the 21st century, where there is potential for even greater spread of bias and mis- and disinformation, which may be exacerbated through the rise of generative AI and other emerging technologies.

Below is an overview of the four key overarching findings that relate to the research questions of this project, along with their implications and our recommendations for policy-makers, researchers and practitioners.

1: A new set of validated instruments for measuring news literacy and civic engagement in 9-11-year-olds were created and can be used for future population monitoring or evaluation of instruments. The instruments, which were designed, piloted and tested prior to conducting this study, were found to have good psychometric properties.

- **Implications:** These instruments, the first of their kind, are suitable for use in further studies seeking to measure the news literacy and/or civic engagement of 9-11-year-olds. As such, they may be used by future researchers – as well as a range of stakeholders including policymakers, educators and civic society practitioners – seeking to capture levels of news literacy and/or civic engagement among children aged 9-11 within the broader population in the UK and/or in other English-speaking countries. Relatedly, the instruments may be used as part of the evaluations of future educational interventions aimed at improving 9-11-year-olds' levels of news literacy and/or civic engagement.
- **Recommendations:** Future research should focus on using these newly validated instruments to conduct longitudinal studies that track changes in news literacy and civic engagement in 9-11-year-olds over time. This will provide valuable insights into how news literacy and civic engagement develop and evolve as children grow, and how they are influenced by various factors such as societal changes brought about by policy and new technologies, educational interventions and socio-economic background. Additionally, policymakers and educators should consider integrating these instruments into regular educational assessments and curricula to monitor and enhance news literacy and civic engagement from an early age. This integration can also help in tailoring educational content and teaching methods to foster news literacy and civic engagement more effectively in young learners, which is important in an era of rapid technological transformation including news written through generative AI. Furthermore, these instruments can be adapted and tested in diverse cultural contexts to understand cross-cultural similarities and differences in news literacy and civic engagement among children.

2: Data from this study represents a reliable baseline of 9-11-year-olds' self-reported levels of news literacy and civic engagement to measure future change.

- **Implications:** This baseline measurement was the first to simultaneously assess news literacy and civic engagement levels of young children aged 9-11 in the UK. As such, it shows the dimensions of 9-11-year-olds' news literacy that are less developed, including their ability to spot fake news and interest in the news. The baseline dataset highlights areas that require more attention when designing future interventions aimed at developing different aspects of news literacy, including news engagement, vigilance about fake news, and the ability to correctly identify fake news. In addition, it has the potential to enable future research to produce longitudinal comparisons over the years, or comparisons with adjacent datasets such as those produced by Ofcom.
- **Recommendation:** National surveys of news literacy and civic engagement should be repeated annually to track trends over time. The benchmark data from this study may be used by future comparative studies with the aim at informing priorities for educating news literacy and for developing civic engagement in young children.

3: NewsWise appears to help young children detect "fake news", but school engagement remains a challenge given competing curricular demands.

- **Implications:** This project's findings about the effectiveness of NewsWise, and about the aspects of this programme that worked best or might need improving, can be used when designing new, and/or making revisions to, current news literacy programmes. Drawing on this study, researchers and practitioners designing new programmes should take into account that, as found by this study, NewsWise was particularly effective in developing children's interest in the news and in spotting misinformation. At the same time, they should also keep in mind that the programme would benefit, as reported by teachers, from revisions aimed at producing a more condensed version with more differentiation in terms of resources and the delivery of these to pupils with different needs. The analysis revealed considerable difference in results at a school level, which suggests a variation in the quality of delivery and teacher/ pupil engagement. The reasons why the programme was more successful in some schools than others requires further investigation, and findings should be interpreted with some caution due to levels of attrition in this study.

- **Recommendations:** researchers, educators and civil society practitioners, both in the UK and elsewhere, could use the NewsWise programme to develop primary school children's news literacy or take inspiration from this study with a view to designing new and/or revising existing news literacy programmes to maximise their effectiveness. It is recommended that primary schools teach key stage 2 pupils about "fake news" and how to recognise it using the learning approaches adopted by the NewsWise programme. These include teaching pupils about the difference between facts and opinions and about the different strategies that may be undertaken to spot misinformation. Furthermore, it is important that funders and researchers recognise and value evidence for what does not work, as well as what does work. This extends beyond what might work as an intervention towards also recognising practical barriers including schools' competing curricular priorities and children's general disinterest in the news.

4: News literacy is positively related to civic engagement, and so future intervention efforts should consider how both might be developed in tandem to reinforce each other.

- **Implications:** Findings from this project can usefully inform the design of future news literacy programmes aiming to develop not only primary pupils' news literacy but also their civic engagement. This study found strong correlations between all dimensions of news literacy and of civic engagement among 9-11-year-olds, including, for example, between (i) their awareness of socio-political issues and motivation to follow the news, (ii) such awareness and their self-reported ability to evaluate news stories, and (iii) their participation in civic life (e.g., through community involvement) and interest in the news As such, these findings can guide both the development and evaluation of future educational interventions by shedding light on what elements of news literacy are likely to correspond to different dimensions of civic engagement in 9-11-year-olds. This adds weight to those calling for increased news literacy education in schools, suggesting that this might have wider implications for society in general.

- **Recommendation:** The design and evaluation of future news literacy interventions for 9–11-year-olds should be developed in ways that are grounded in the recognition that there is a positive relationship between their development, and especially between certain dimensions of their news literacy and their civic engagement. Relatedly, we recommend that future research and interventions seeking to develop children's civic engagement could consider their development of news literacy as a crucial aspect of such interventions.

Acknowledgments