



# Is there a relationship between news literacy and civic engagement in 9-11-year-olds?

A summary for researchers,  
practitioners and policymakers

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## Summary

- *The NewsWise programme aims to cultivate news literacy in primary school children aged 9-11 in the UK. As part of the evaluation of NewsWise, the research team behind the project explored whether an higher in 9-11-year-olds' levels of news literacy would be associated with higher civic engagement.*
- *This study identified a strong positive relationship between news literacy and civic engagement in 9- to 11-year-olds in the UK for the first time.*
- *Strong correlations were found between all dimensions of news literacy and civic engagement among 9-11-year-olds. These included, for example, associations between awareness of socio-political issues and motivation to follow the news, participation in civic life (e.g., through community involvement) and interest in the news.*
- *For researchers, these findings highlight which elements of news literacy are likely to correspond to different dimensions of civic engagement in 9-11-year-olds.*
- *For practitioners, findings from the study can inform efforts to increase children's resilience to mis and disinformation and their civic engagement, as one supports the other.*
- *For policymakers, the implications of these findings for democracy and society suggest a need for greater emphasis on developing news literacy in primary schools and the potential benefits for improving civic engagement.*

## Background to the study

Advances in digital technology have changed how news is created and experienced. This has increased the need to develop a greater awareness of, and resilience to, mis and disinformation to ensure a functioning democracy.

Children often lack the critical skills needed to assess the reliability of information. The NewsWise programme was designed by the Guardian Foundation in partnership with the National Literacy Trust and the PSHE Association to improve news literacy in children aged 9 to 11.

The NewsWise in Primary Education research project aimed to contribute to the evidence base by exploring the impact of the programme, including how news literacy ("the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to evaluate news stories and understand the broader news ecosystem") and civic engagement ("community involvement, acts of service, and political participation that is age-appropriate") could be measured in this age group, and any relationship between them.

## How were links between news literacy and civic engagement explored?

The study sought to answer four research questions, including "What is the relationship between news literacy and civic engagement among 9- to 11-year-olds?" It used a mixed methods approach involving surveys and focus group discussions. Findings are based on 1,972 participants from 40 schools across the UK.





Various aspects of news literacy and civic engagement were assessed before the intervention period, one month after the intervention period, and three months after that as a follow-up. The study adapted, piloted and revised existing measures to create a new framework and set of measures suitable for 9–11-year-olds.

Dimensions of news literacy included news attitudes, motivation, knowledge and evaluation skills and strategies. Civic engagement measures included awareness (discussing/ engagement with community issues), attitudes (positive disposition towards civic engagement), and actions (reports of actual civic engagement).

## Key findings on news literacy and civic engagement

The study identified a strong positive relationship between news literacy and civic engagement in 9- to 11-year-olds, meaning that students with higher news literacy also tended to have higher civic engagement. To our knowledge, this was the first time a link between news literacy and civic engagement has been found in this age group in the UK. The finding indicates that news literacy levels in children aged 9 to 11 can be used to predict their civic engagement levels and vice versa.

More specifically, this study found strong correlations between all dimensions of news literacy and 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.

## Key findings on news literacy and civic engagement

There is an urgent need for engaging and effective media and news literacy education fit for the digital age. While aspects of media and news literacy such as the distinction between facts and opinions already feature in the school curriculum, effective interventions are needed to broaden children's awareness of how this distinction relates to everyday life and strengthen their resilience to mis and disinformation.

## Supporting teachers to deliver news and media literacy education in the primary classroom

In addition, findings from this study suggest that improving news literacy has the potential to increase civic engagement and that the reverse is also true. This has significant implications for the future of democracy and society, suggesting that children and young people who are given opportunities to develop their awareness, attitudes and skills in these areas are better placed to contribute positively to their communities and to society at large.

These findings can guide the development and evaluation of future educational interventions. For researchers, alongside a set of validated measures of news literacy and civic engagement for children aged 9 to 11, the study has highlighted which elements of news literacy are likely to correspond to different dimensions of civic engagement in 9-11-year-olds.

For those working to support children's media and news literacy or civic engagement, findings indicate that news literacy and civic engagement could be developed together in 9-11-year-olds with mutually reinforcing benefits. Those developing or delivering interventions intended to increase civic engagement may, therefore, wish to include elements relating to news literacy and vice versa. For policymakers, the findings of this study add weight to calls for greater emphasis on news literacy and civic engagement in primary schools, suggesting this could benefit democracy and society.

Civic engagement is crucial to a functioning democracy, and the ability to critically evaluate information is vital to addressing local, national and international issues such as conflict, global warming and pandemics. The increasing prevalence of false news can affect trust in evidence and authority and calls for a focus on skills that support an informed and critical evaluation of media and information.

### Further Information

For more information, please visit the project website <https://jubileecentre.ac.uk/project/news-literacy-and-civic-engagement/> or contact Professor Tom Harrison (t.j.harrison@bham.ac.uk).