



Policy Brief

Embedding Critical Thinking and News Literacy in the UK School Curriculum

The spread of misinformation and the rising influence of conspiracy theories on social media pose significant threats to democratic engagement and social cohesion in the UK. As a result, growing efforts are being made in the UK to promote news literacy (i.e., the ability to critically engage with news) as part of what is commonly referred to as media literacy. Described as an umbrella term that overlaps with different literacies (e.g., information, news, digital), media literacy refers to “the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts”.

In line with the [Online Safety Act](#), in the last few years Ofcom have made media literacy (especially in relation to the consumption of information and news media online) increasingly central to their remit. As part of this, they are currently expected to publish a new [media literacy strategy](#) spelling out their plans, for the next three years, to support the work of different stakeholders (e.g., academics, civil society practitioners, online platforms) in promoting and delivering academic provision and interventions. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) has also been actively promoting media literacy by bringing together different stakeholders and, similarly to Ofcom, conducting and commissioning [research](#) in this area. Finally, Secretary of State for Education Bridget Phillipson recently [recognised](#) the challenge of dealing with misinformation, announcing a school curriculum review aimed at embedding critical thinking and news literacy more robustly across primary and secondary education.

Grounded in the conviction that education has a key role to play in equipping citizens with the know-how required to navigate (mis)information in the digital age, this policy brief, informed by recent findings from the [NewsWise programme evaluation](#), outlines the importance of this educational reform. As such, it offers evidenced based recommendations for effectively integrating news literacy into the school curriculum.

Curriculum Review and Critical Thinking:

- The UK Government plans to enhance the curriculum to develop students' abilities to identify fake news and resist extremist content. This initiative reflects a broader societal need to prepare young citizens to navigate an increasingly complex information landscape.
- Embedding critical thinking skills across various subjects, from English to Computer Science, is central to this approach. Pupils need to be better supported and equipped to analyse news articles and assess the credibility of online sources and information more broadly.

Impact of NewsWise Programme:

- The NewsWise programme, a cross-curricular initiative designed by The Guardian Foundation, has demonstrated significant positive outcomes in improving the ability to spot fake news among 9-11-year-olds, as found by a 40-school study conducted by researchers at the University of Birmingham and the University of Liverpool in collaboration with The Guardian Foundation, The National Literacy Trust, and the PSHE Association, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. Students who participated in NewsWise were better able to identify fake news and showed sustained improvement in their critical evaluation skills.
- The programme also established a strong association between news literacy and civic engagement. Children with higher news literacy skills were more likely to engage in civic activities (including community involvement and a desire to vote and take part in the political process in the future), thus highlighting potential wider societal benefits of such educational interventions if implemented at scale.
- Qualitatively, children and teachers both reported enjoying taking part in the NewsWise programme. However, they also reported that competing curricular demands pose a challenge to the task of providing robust and consistent news literacy education which, in the absence of a programme like NewsWise, remains patchy and at the discretion of schools.

Challenges and Opportunities:

- While NewsWise was effective, its impact varied across schools, indicating that the success of such programmes depends on consistent and high-quality implementation. Schools with higher engagement and better resource allocation saw more significant improvements in their students' news literacy.
- The findings also suggest that integrating news literacy into the school curriculum can be challenging due to competing curricular demands and varying levels of interest among pupils. Therefore, it is crucial that news literacy is allocated dedicated curriculum space and supported by professional development opportunities for teachers.

Recommendations

Mandatory Integration of News Literacy:

- The government should make news literacy (and media literacy, more broadly) a mandatory component of the school curriculum. This could be achieved by embedding news literacy lessons within existing compulsory subjects such as English, PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education), Computing and Citizenship.
- Teacher training should be enhanced to ensure educators are well-equipped to deliver these lessons effectively, with a focus on both the practical and critical skills and knowledge required to identify, and understand the nature and implications of, misinformation.

Resource Allocation and Support for Schools:

- To ensure consistent implementation, schools should receive additional resources, including access to the NewsWise programme or similar initiatives. Funding should be prioritised for schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, where the risk of misinformation may be higher.
- The development of condensed versions of news literacy programmes, tailored to different school contexts and student needs, could help address the issue of curricular overload.

Longitudinal Monitoring and Evaluation:

- The government should commission ongoing research to monitor the impact of news literacy education on students' critical thinking skills and civic engagement. This data will be crucial for refining the school curriculum and ensuring that educational interventions remain relevant in a rapidly changing digital landscape.
- Annual national surveys on news literacy and civic engagement should be introduced to track progress and inform future policy decisions.

Conclusion

As the UK navigates the challenges of the digital age, equipping young people with the skills to critically evaluate information is not just an educational imperative but a societal one. The proposed curriculum reforms, bolstered by evidence from the NewsWise programme, represent a crucial step towards safeguarding the integrity of public discourse and fostering a generation of informed, engaged citizens. Policymakers must act decisively to implement these changes, ensuring that every child in the UK has the tools to develop the lifelong skills they need to discern truth from falsehood in an increasingly complex media environment.

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