media *policy brief 2*

Media Literacy and the Communications Act
What has been achieved and what should be done?

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Key Messages

- o Progress in digital skills has stalled, the evidence shows. This is especially the case for the crucial dimensions of critical and participatory literacy.

- o Yet citizens and consumers must rely on digital skills more than ever before. Rapid transformations in the digital media landscape are putting ever more pressure on individuals to navigate complex technologies, risking digital exclusion, consumer detriment and inequality among citizens.

- o Government support has been cut just when it is most needed. Industry support also is vital. Carefully targeting the promotion and resourcing of media literacy for those most in need could make a real difference.

Contents

Introduction

Media literacy is 'the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts' (Ofcom, 2011b)[1]

Work, education, civic participation, commerce, social relations and leisure rely ever more on the media for their everyday functioning. This raises crucial questions about how the public can be enabled to engage effectively with the media and, through the media, with the wider world.

Convergence and diversification in media and communications technologies and services open up new opportunities for individuals across all spheres of life. Yet these same changes also expose individuals to new risks of exclusion, misuse and abuse.

The media can no longer be relegated to the domain of leisure. Rather, the media are infrastructural to modern life, underpinning our work as well as family, public as well as private life, civic as well as personal domains. We do not leave individuals to figure out for themselves how to use the crucial medium of print. Media illiteracy is as problematic in the twenty first century as print illiteracy was in the twentieth.

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>
> *Is the British public sufficiently media literate? Can people keep up with the pace of technological and market change?*

But improving media literacy is not easy. Initially the tasks of defining and measuring media literacy proved to be difficult and much contested. But these are straightforward compared with the task of implementing policies so that all citizens can gain media literacy, with fair access to tools, resources and opportunities to learn. Indeed, despite the many enthusiastic and creative initiatives designed to enable media literacy, these are often unsustainable or difficult to implement on a large scale.

Section 11 of the 2003 Communications Act gave Ofcom the duty to promote media literacy. After a decade of such activity, it is timely to ask, has it worked? Is the British public sufficiently media literate? Can people keep up with the pace of technological and market change?

This policy brief presents evidence that the initial increases in media literacy have tailed off. Now is not the time to reduce efforts to promote media literacy. . The risk is that persistent inequalities will exacerbate digital and

social exclusion, leaving the UK without the media-savvy public needed to avoid consumer detriment and support active citizenship.

In May 2011, Secretary of State Jeremy Hunt called for input into the upcoming Communications Act. Should media literacy be in the new Act? This brief says yes, and it calls for increased resources to promote media literacy across the UK.

Efforts to promote media literacy have hit a plateau

In what follows, we re-examine national survey findings from successive Media Literacy Reports published by Ofcom for adult and child populations (Ofcom 2006a&b, 2008a&b, 2010a&b, 2011a&b). These reports draw upon nationally representative surveys of around 2000-3000 interviews conducted in-home with adults aged 16 and over, and children aged 5-15 with parents/carers[2]. Although year to year data shows some fluctuations, overall a clear story emerges.[3]

Since there is abundant evidence of growing use of digital media, we focus on the crucial dimensions of:

Critical literacy
- Checking reliability of new websites (adults and children)
- Adult concerns about media platforms
- Adult understanding of media funding
- Adult digital skills (for safety and participation)
- Formal lessons to promote digital skills (adults and children)

Participatory/creative literacy
- Social networking and creative activities (adults and children)
- Adults civic/public and health information uses of the internet

In the graphs that follow, it is clear that the early wins in increasing media literacy have stalled. This may be because initial gains are easier to achieve, with a public willing to learn the basics of media literacy in the digital age. Or because initial efforts - in time, money and new initiatives - really paid dividends. If this is the case, then considering the lack of progress in relation to critical and participatory literacy the recent cuts in media literacy initiatives are particularly unfortunate.

What matters now is that there is little evidence of improving media literacy among the British Public.

… a new policy direction is vital.

What matters now is that there is little evidence of improving or further spreading media literacy among the British public. Changing this situation will demand investment of resources along with high profile public policy support. If the UK is not to fall behind – in the skills and competences of its citizens and consumers, as well as in the usability, transparency and innovativeness of its digital media offer – a new policy direction is vital.

The evidence presented in this report also pinpoints specific groups for whom greater efforts could deliver particular benefits, thus guiding the careful targeting of limited resources.

Figure 1: Users who check reliability of new websites[4]
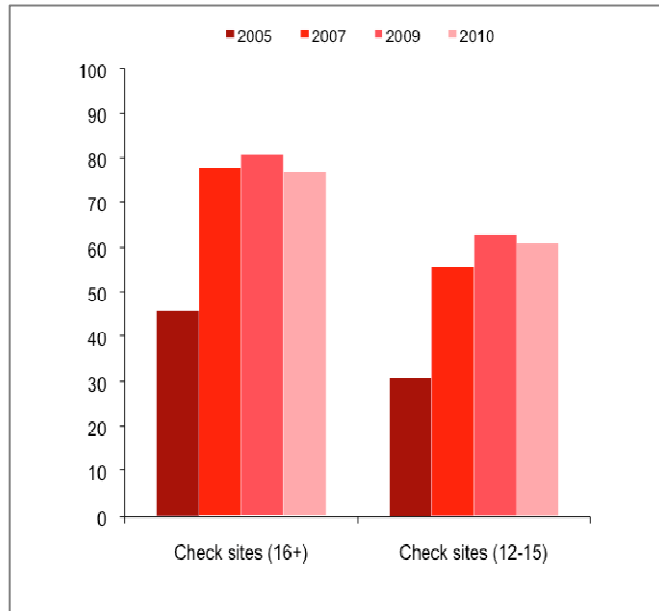
Adults are learning, possibly from experience, possibly from direct guidance, to check the reliability of new websites. This rose sharply between 2005 and 2007, and less so more recently.

Those aged 65+ or from lower socio-economic status (SES) groups are the least likely to check website reliability, and fewer children check than adults. This has not improved in recent years.

The early gain in users evaluating website reliability in this way has reached a plateau. Knowledge gaps remain - for the young, old and less privileged.

### *Figure 2: Adult (16+) understanding of media funding sources[5]*

People generally know how broadcast media is financed. But despite mass internet use, few understand that search engines are funded by advertising.

Though the internet is increasingly used for information and news, knowledge of how it is financed has barely risen, notably among youth, women, the elderly, or recent users.
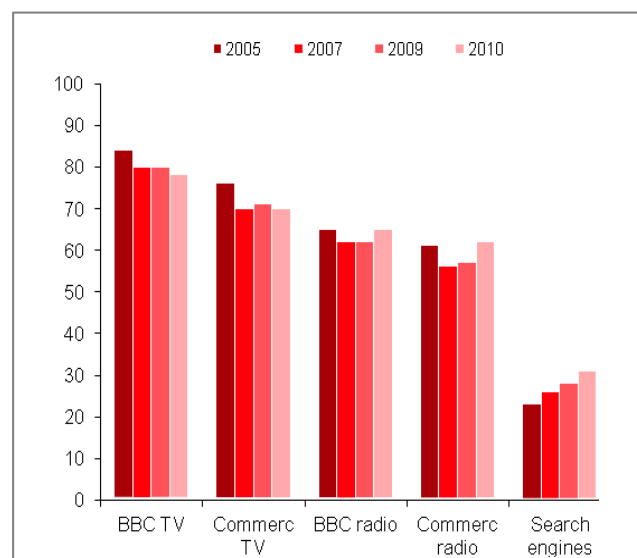
Understanding media funding aids evaluation of content.[6] Without intervention, it seems unlikely that this vital aspect of critical literacy will increase.

Figure 3: Adult (16+) concerns about media platforms[7]
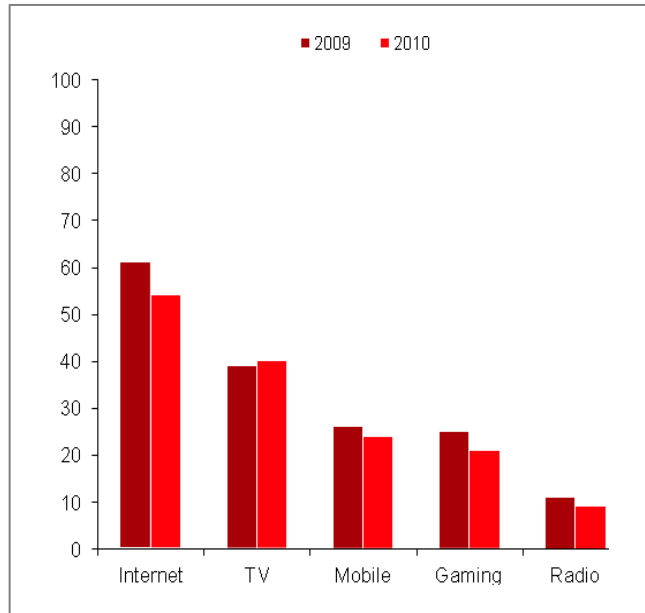
Although users' concerns about media platforms have slightly reduced from 2009 to 2010, they remain far more concerned about offensive or illegal content on the internet than about any other medium.

Also, those who use the internet more are more concerned, not less. Thus, the more people experience the internet, the more they worry.

Public concern regarding media content   indicates that there may be interest in gaining media literacy skills, particularly critical ones that will enable them to assess sources and types of content.

Figure 4: Digital skills among adults 2005-2010[8]

Since 2005, there has been a slight increase in middle class adults' ability to block viruses.

But otherwise, five years of internet safety promotion has produced little evident benefit in digital safety skills. Using digital skills to participate in public debate remains low overall. Noticeable differences between people of higher and lower socio-economic status persist.[9]
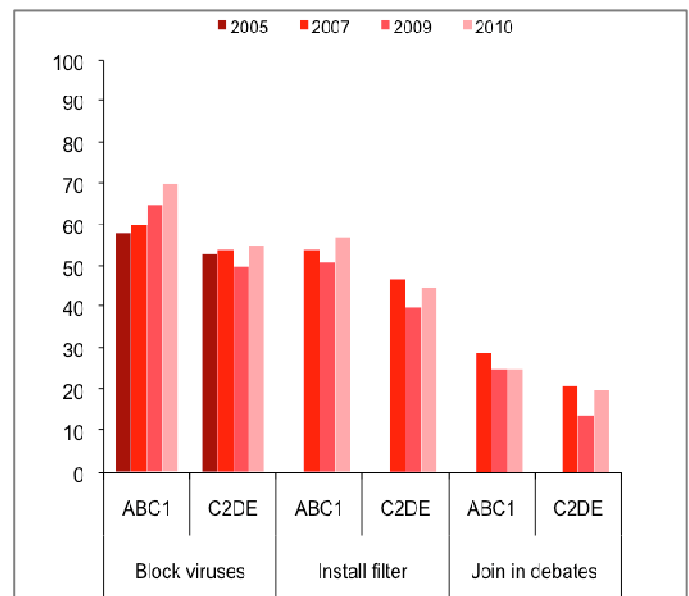
Greater efforts are needed than have been made so far to increase safety and participation overall and particularly to reach those who are not already among the savvy. Participation and safety skills are both vital in an inclusive society.

Figure 5: Adults' and children's receipt of formal lessons about media[10]
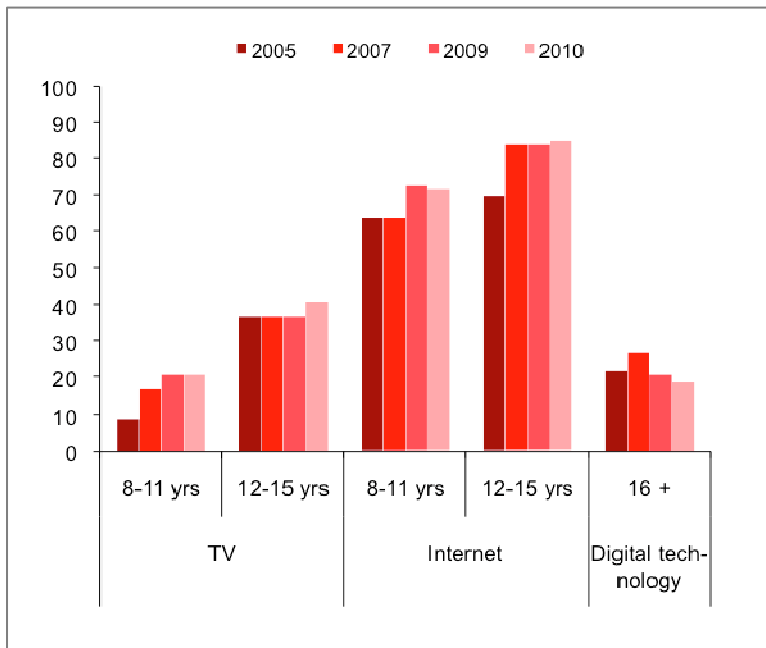
Children are now taught about the internet at school. Their learning about TV lags, even though it is a major source of information.

Adults have fewer opportunities than children to learn about digital technology. Possibly for this reason, their learning has not risen over recent years.

For adults, the chance to learn about digital media is also very important. While primary school children may be mostly online, efforts are needed to reach adults currently outside formal education.

Figure 6: Children's (12-15) communicative and creative online uses[11]

Among teens, making a website was slowly taking hold when it was replaced by social network system (SNS) use. Now, SNSs and online photo albums make a limited form of content creation easy.

But despite the ease of user-generated content sites such as YouTube and other sites, few 12 to15 year olds make and upload video.
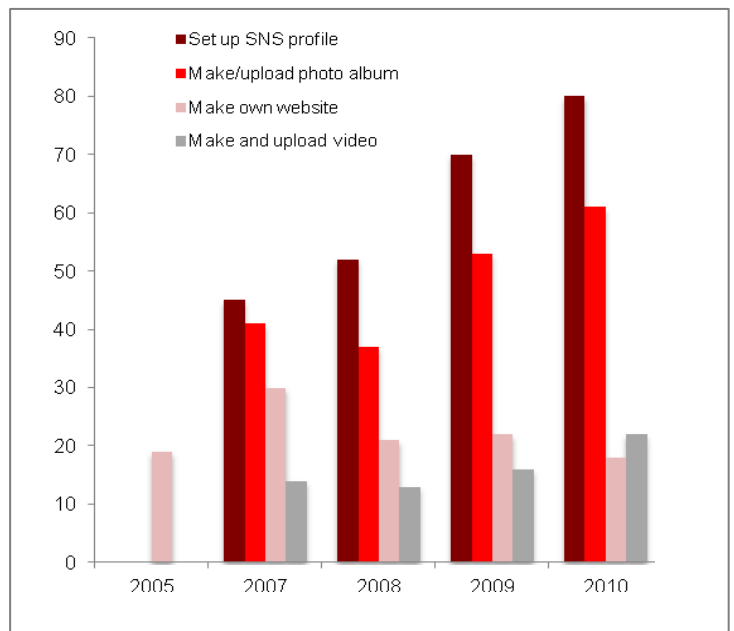
Without improved skills, and increased guidance, and/or motivation, children's use of the internet for creative purposes will remain minimal.[12] Children should be made to feel confident in their skills and abilities to create.

Figure 7: Adults' civic/public use of the internet[13]
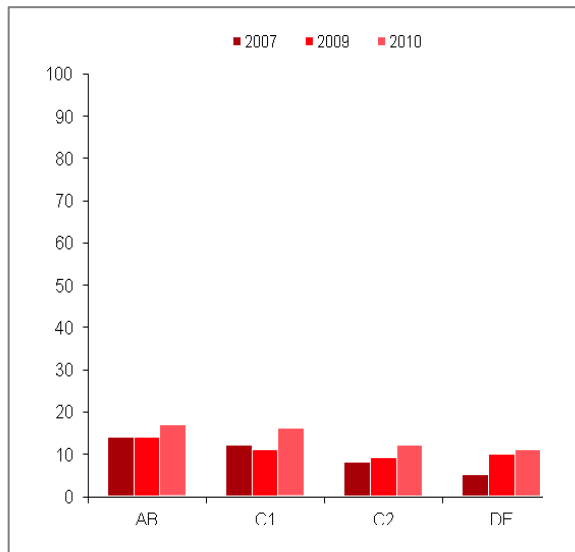
The take up of civic participation among internet-using adults is lowest of all forms of use, with little increase since 2005 across all socio-economic groups.

Notable differences exist among the four SES categories remain consistent. If civic participation online is a goal, most adults, especially from lower SES groups, are missing out.

Without the chance to learn from, participate in, or receive an adequate response from a public institution or political organisation, civic uses of the internet will not spread.[14]

Figure 8: Adults' use of the internet for health information[15]

More promisingly, there is a steady rise in internet-using adults going online to learn about an illness.

Adults from higher SES groups lead, but lower SES groups are catching up.

Among those adults who do seek health information online *(left hand bars)*, most of them consult public sites e.g. NHS Direct *(right hand bars).*
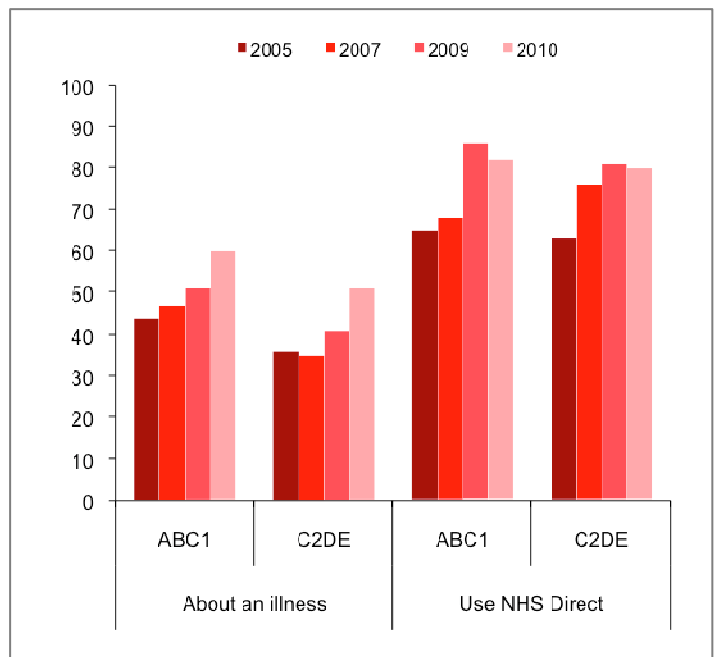
Among adults using NHS Direct, there are no SES differences, which could point to the importance of motivation or need in stimulating internet use. More investigation into the reasons for the success of online services such as NHS Direct may benefit other public services operating online.

Government support for media literacy is vital

The 2003 Communications Act placed a duty on Ofcom to promote media literacy. This was followed by a National Media Literacy Plan as part of the Digital Britain agenda, along with a Minister and a Champion for Digital Inclusion, and then, a National Plan for Digital Participation (BIS, 2010) with substantial funding promised. Few disagreed that:

> *"The necessary education, skills and media literacy programmes to allow everyone in society to benefit from the digital revolution will be a central part of the Digital Britain work and key to our success" (Digital Britain Interim Report 2009: 5).*

But recent statements from the Government in support of media or digital literacy are few and far between. Crucially, the budget for the National Plan has been cancelled and Ofcom's activities in the field of media literacy have been substantially curtailed. Such statements of support as do exist focus mainly on access (i.e. the digital divide) and safety (especially for children) rather than on ensuring the use, critical understanding and creative participation of all citizens with and through digital media. Moreover, Government endorsement is also likely to encourage industry support, which has much to contribute in this policy domain.

Industry support also has much to contribute in this policy domain.

In Europe, support for media and digital literacy is growing. As part of the Lisbon strategy and in response to calls from the European Parliament and the media and communication sector, the European Commission has worked to promote media literacy with a Recommendation on media literacy in the digital environment to promote a more competitive audiovisual and content industry and an inclusive knowledge society (EC(2009) 6464 final).

June 2011 sees the EC's Digital Agenda call for e-skills, among other proposals, building on the requirement in the Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS) Directive 2007/65/EC for a three-yearly reporting obligation regarding levels of media literacy in all member states (European Parliament and the Council, 2007). The OECD concurs, identifying a range of key competencies essential for full participation in society, including the critical ability to use knowledge, information and technologies interactively (PISA, 2005). FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn, announcing a National Digital Literacy plan in 2010, said

"Nothing can open more doors for a person than literacy. But knowing how to read is no longer sufficient to be 'literate' in the 21st Century. Basic literacy must be supplemented with digital literacy." (Clyburn, 2010)

The media landscape that the public must navigate grows more complex daily. No wonder, then, that this report shows that early rises in media literacy have not been continued. The risks of consumer detriment and digital/social exclusion are also growing. Working out how to judge matters of information, identity, privacy, data and security bewilders lawyers and experts as well as ordinary people. Many people will not, it seems, simply 'pick it up as they go along'. Nor will inequalities be reduced by digital media use – quite the contrary, gaps in media use exacerbate gaps in knowledge and participation.

Media literacy should be promoted so as to benefit:

The whole population - since people are faced with rapid changes in the choices, complexity and importance of communication technologies

Disadvantaged populations - in particular (e.g. young, elderly, poor, disabled, ethnic minorities), for whom digital knowledge gaps compound prior disadvantage

The state - since currently the population does not meet government expectations in key areas such as health, civic participation, e-government, e-commerce, creativity/innovation, digital take-up/switchover

Citizens - in important areas such as empowerment, civic engagement, critical information skills, creative expression

In the early days, the public was ready and willing to be informed in new media challenges. Now they seem more wary and, perhaps, weary. Reaching the widest population with complex messages, 'just in time' support, and scaffolded learning opportunities is demanding and expensive. All stakeholders – industry, state, educators and citizens – must play their part. Without concerted action and resources, although the 'rich will get richer', overall the UK will fall behind and consumer and citizen detriment can only grow.

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Notes

[1] This definition draws on the US National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy (Aufderheide, 1993; see also Livingstone, 2003): 'The ability to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms.'

[2] While some yearly comparison data are provided by Ofcom in the reports, most other comparison data are extracted from the datasets that Ofcom also publishes with the reports.

[3] It must be acknowledged that the measures employed may be only proxies for the complex dimensions of media literacy conceived by educators, researchers and many stakeholders.

[4] Base for Children (2005/2007/2009/2010): Children aged 12-15 who use the internet at home. Base for Adults (2005): All internet using adults; (2007/09/10): All internet using adults who visit new websites. Questions for children: QC26Z (2005), QC19 (2007), QC16 (2009), NQC16B (2010: 'Thinking about the websites that you visit that you haven't visited before. Which, if any of these things would you check?'). Questions for adults: I13 (2005), IN16(2007), IN16 (2009), NIN16 (2010: 'Thinking about when you visit a website you haven't been to before... Which, if any, of these things would you say you regularly do?'). Source: Ofcom (2006a,b/ 2008a,b/ 2010a,b/ 2011a,b). Note that Ofcom publishes reports a year after fieldwork conducted. So, for instance, question number NIN16 (2010) refers to data collected in 2010 published in the 2011 report.

[5] Base: All adults. Questions: T20/R17/I31 (2005), T8-T9/ R5-R6/ IN34-35 (2007), T5-T6/R4-R5/IN28-29 (2009/2010: 'How would you say BBC TV programmes are mainly funded?/ How would you say programmes are mainly funded on ITV, Channel 4 and Five?/ How would you say BBC radio stations are mainly funded?/ How would you say the other main radio stations are mainly funded? / How do you think search engine websites such as Google or Ask.com are mainly funded?'). Source: Ofcom (2006b/2008b/2010b/2011b).

[6] Awareness of the economic aspects of media production helps one understand that media messages are constructed and shaped by various media institutional forces, and may have commercial, ideological and political implications (Aufderheide, 1993; Brown, 2001).

[7] Base: Adult users of each platform. Questions: IN30/T7/M4/G6/R6 (2009/2010: 'Can you tell me if you have any concerns about what is on the internet/ TV/ mobile phones/ gaming / radio?'). Source: Ofcom (2010b, 2011b).

[8] Base: All adults with internet at home (2005), All internet using adults (2007/2009/2010). Questions: I24 (2005), IN7 (2007), IN8 (2009/10: 'I'm going to read out some different types of tasks associated with the internet, PCs or laptops, and for each one please say which of the options on the card applies to you'. The options are: Interested, can't do with confidence. Can do with confidence. Not interested). Source: Ofcom (2006b/2008b/2010b/2011b).

[9] The gap between those who are interested in blocking viruses and installing filters and those who are confident in their skills to do so is sizeable (20% and 18% respectively), suggesting an appetite for further cultivation of media literacy skills given support (Ofcom, 2011b).

[10] Base: All children aged 8-15 & All adults. Questions for children: QC57Z (2005), QC43 (2007), QC42/44 (2009/2010: 'Do any of your lessons at school teach you about TV / about the Internet?'). Questions for adults: Z16 (2005), Z6 (2007/2009/2010: 'Thinking about the types of things you might learn about TV, the internet, mobile phones and so on... Which, if any, of these you have learned about through classes, training or any other type of formal learning?'). Ofcom (2006a,b/ 2008a,b/ 2010a,b/ 2011a,b).

[11] Base: All children aged 12-15 who use the internet at home. Questions: QC49ZA (2005), QC42 (2007), QC18 (2009/2010: 'I'd like to read out a number of things people might do. For each one, could you please tell me if you've done it, you'd be interested in doing it, or not interested?'). Source: Ofcom (2006a/2008a/2010a/2011a).

[12] Hargittai and Walejko's (2008) study shows that users' internet experiences and skills mediate whether they share content online. Correa (2010) shows that users' perceived competence (self-efficacy), intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are the most important predicting factors in content creation. When one feels competent about their skills, they are more likely to be motivated to create content online.

[13] Base: All internet-using adults. Questions: IN14 (2007), IN13/14 (2009/2010: 'Could you please tell me from this list the types of things you currently do using the internet, and how often you do each?'). Internet activities considered public/civic in 2008: Finding info about public services provided by local or national government; Looking at political/ campaig

websites. In 2009/2010: Finding info about public services provided by local or national government; Looking at political/ campaign/ issues websites; Completing government processes online. Source: Ofcom (2008b/2010b/2011b).

[14] Research shows that low political efficacy and low trust account for low participation - people must believe their contribution will be responded to (Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988; Kahne and Westheimer, 2006). Also, if political participation online is taught about as part of the media literacy education for young people, they are more likely to take part online (Kahne, 2010).

[15] Base for 'about an illness': All internet-using adults. Base for 'public sites such as NHS Direct': Those who use the internet to learn about an illness. Questions: I26/28 (2005), IN26/27 (2007), IN21/22 (2009), NIN21/IN22 (2010: 'Do you ever use the internet to find out more about an illness? / Which of the following types of websites do you tend to look at to find out more about an illness?'). Source: Ofcom (2006b/2008b/2010b/2011b).
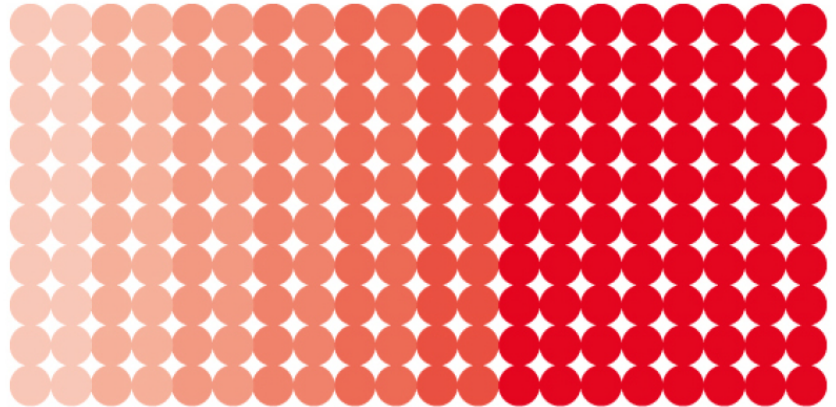
LSE *media policy project*

About The Media Policy Project aims to establish a deliberative relationship between policy makers, civil society actors, media professionals and relevant media research. We want policy makers to have timely access to the best policy-relevant research and better access to the views of civil society. We also hope to engage the policy community with research on the policy making process itself. We plan to examine how policy issues emerge on the agenda and how networked communications may aid stakeholder consultation.

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