

Feedback to the Digital Britain Interim Report - Section 5:

“Equipping everyone to benefit from Digital Britain”

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It is of great importance for the future UK society that the Digital Britain Interim Report recognise and call attention to issues relating to new media literacies. The ambitious aim of ensuring that everyone has “*access to the right education, skills and digital media literacy programme*” (p. 63), and the launch of a new National Media Literacy Plan have the potential of truly equipping the UK citizens to become empowered and autonomous agents in a globally networked society. However, I argue that the section dealing with these matters, section 5, unfortunately displays too narrow an understanding of the *function* and *role* of new media literacies; omitting the reciprocity between *individual* levels of media literacy and *individual* growth in forms of lifelong learning opportunities. Instead, section 5 primarily focuses on strengthening UK’s position as a globally competitive economy and society. A few examples:

“All the evidence is that effective deployment, understanding and use of digital technologies are crucial to every business’s competitiveness.” (p.64 - my emphasis)

And even more evident:

“For the supply of high-quality professionals for Digital Britain, the challenges are long-standing and deep-seated: our national willingness to engage in education with the ‘hard’ subjects- mathematics, technology and the physical sciences; our ability to combine, in those who do, creative and cognitive capability and deep technical competence with interpersonal and business skills; and the relevance of courses to business and the understanding of the career opportunities for students of both sexes.” (Ibid. - my emphasis)

When examining the categories and types of needs of new media literacy skills put forward in the report - “Digital Life Skills”, “Digital Work Skills” and “Digital Economy Skills” - the societal and economic focus is reinforced. Even though it might seem reasonable to assume that not everyone will need the same skills in order to function in the digital age, the formal distinction between these unintentionally reduces the importance of mastering new media literacies among certain parts of the population. In the report it says that these skills “of course overlap and share core competencies” (p. 63) - I argue that they not only overlap and share competencies, but indeed are so intertwined that they cannot be separated - and thus, that it will serve the ambition of a Digital Britain better to discuss these matters from a perspective of over-all set of new media literacy skills that then can be graduated to serve the needs of the individual when addressing the actual implementation of the new National Media Literacy Plan.

To contrast the scope of digital literacy portrayed in the Digital Britain report with scope of other descriptions, it is of relevance to investigate the recommendations for a ‘Information Literacy’ (2003) outlined by the Information Literacy Meeting of Experts (organised by the US National Commission on Library and Information Science, the National Forum on Information Literacy, and UNESCO) - the Prague Declaration, including statements of:

- 1) “Information Literacy encompasses knowledge of one’s information concerns and needs, and the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues or problems at hand”;

- 2) “it is a prerequisite for participating effectively in the Information Society”;
- 3) “is part of the basic human right of life long learning.”
- 4) “it plays a leading role in reducing the inequities within and among countries and peoples, and in promoting tolerance and mutual understanding through information use in multicultural and multilingual contexts” (p.1 - my emphasis)

I argue, that it is necessary to also incorporate this much broader understanding of the role and potential of digital literate citizens into the final Digital Britain Report, so that it will encompass more humanistic aspects present in the ‘Information Literacy’ recommendations. I also suggest, that that key-words of other governmental learning strategies and aims (empowerment, autonomy, celebrating culture/community, sense-making, dialogue, personalisation) should be embedded in the report as well. At its core new media literacy is not about matters of basic access and simple skills, but about critical thinking, creative media use, and digital citizenship.