

Digital Britain: An Interim Report

A Submission from the

Media Literacy Task Force

March 2009

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About the Media Literacy Task Force and the Charter for Media Literacy:

The Media Literacy Task Force is a stakeholder partnership for the advancement of media literacy which has made an impact on government, the European Commission, cultural and other agencies' strategies, as well as raising the profile of media literacy within the media and communications industries themselves.

The Media Literacy Task Force was set up in 2004 with the support of the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in 2004. It is currently chaired by Alex Graham CEO of Wall to Wall. It comprises senior representatives of the BBC, the British Board of Film Classification, the British Film Institute, Channel Four, ITV, the Media Education Association, Skillset and the UK Film Council. DCMS, Ofcom, the Broadband Stakeholder Group and Andrea Millwood-Hargrave sit as observers.

In November 2005, James Purnell MP (then Minister for Creative Industries and Tourism) together with a number of leading figures from the Nations and Regions in education, the film, television and media industries, launched a Charter for Media Literacy. The Charter suggests that being media literate today means an engagement with the 3Cs as an interlinked cluster of competencies: Creative Activity, Critical Awareness and Cultural Context. It also gives priorities for developing media literacy, particularly in relation to moving image media and content

The text of the Charter was widely consulted upon, both within the UK and Europe, and many individuals and agencies in education, cultural organisations, the media and communications industries have since pledged their support (for the full text of the Charter, its context, and a list of current Patrons and signatories see www.medialiteracy.org.uk). The Charter is also championed across Europe by a further group and has signatories from at least 19 other countries (see www.euromedialiteracy.eu for information).

The Task Force:

- Sees 'media literacy' as part of a wider definition of 'literacy' in the C21st and not as a separate set of skills or competencies (see for example the BFI's 'Reframing Literacy' campaign http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/research/teachlearn/pdf/reframing_literacy.pdf)
- Is committed to ensuring a combination of creative, cultural and critical competencies (the Charter's 3 C's) for all users in relation to their full and productive use of media
- Believes these competencies and skills should be an entitlement, not a privilege, and available to all throughout their lives
- Aims to encourage full, purposeful and creative use of the internet and media, including the confidence and competence to respond or question, complain about or object to, content or services on behalf of themselves, their families or communities – whether geographic, cultural or related to disability, age, gender or sexuality
- Believes that collaboration between government, educators, the media and communication industries and cultural agencies is the best route to developing media literacy effectively with parents, children and others

Submission of the Media Literacy Task Force:

ACTION 22 The current statutory and specific remit on media literacy is contained within s.11 of the Communications Act 2003. As this report makes clear, since 2003 there have been significant market changes in the availability of digital technologies and how they are used. We will ask Ofcom to make an assessment of its current responsibilities in relation to media literacy and, working with the BBC and others, to recommend a new definition and ambition for a National Media Literacy Plan.

The Media Literacy Task Force has welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the National Media Literacy Working Group convened by Ofcom.

The Media Literacy Task Force maintains that the future of not just Britain's economy but British society and, indeed, the democratic process itself depends on us embracing positively the opportunities of the digital world. An empowering approach to digital culture will bring wide-ranging benefits to both communities and individuals.

At the heart of this lies media literacy – defined as an extension of 'literacy' which is the ability and desire to participate in a culture fully. Media literacy is, therefore, not just one plank of Digital Britain, it is integral to the whole project of re-shaping the UK for a converged digital age.

What is more, while the Task Force takes issues of safety and the protection of children seriously, the debate about media literacy cannot merely be about protection or restriction of choice but has to be about genuine creative empowerment for all generations.

The Task Force, representing as it does some of the main creative and cultural organisations in the UK, makes the following points for the consideration of the Digital Britain Team:

The current focus of the Interim Report is too narrow and reactive. It is based on the premise that confidence online is primarily concerned with 'security' online and on the view that " a world of universal broadband will require a new approach to online safeguards" (5.3). The Task Force believes that the most effective way of securing a safe population is by giving people the critical tools they need to understand digital media in all its forms. They can then identify the pitfalls and the dangers but also embrace the opportunities for engagement and creativity which digital media offers. The Task Force thinks that, historically, public policy responses have leant too far towards protection and control and it would like to see more emphasis on

engagement and empowerment. Digital Britain is an opportunity to redress this imbalance and it should be grasped.

If the UK is to develop and grow “ a population that is confident and empowered to access, use and create digital media” (5.2) so that the economic benefits of the digital revolution are exploited, fairly and universally available; the citizen can exercise due participation and influence in a digital society; content creators flourish; and a digital culture “that truly informs and educates as well as entertains” (p.5) be as much part of UK culture as the ‘old’ literacy of reading and writing underpinned public and private activity, the Task Force strongly maintains that media literacy needs to be understood as a creative opportunity for all UK citizens.

Media Literacy should, therefore, be central and integral to the argument and recommendations of the whole final Report:

1. This is well illustrated by one of the case studies presented to the Media Literacy Working Group:

For Jean, an elderly person recently widowed, discovering how to use her late husband’s digital camera to take pictures and send them to her children abroad was the emotional draw and trigger which led her to engage with digital media. In her life situation media was not something separate from her world but a means to making her world more compelling and satisfying. Having gained confidence through a life-enhancing possibility her eyes were open to other possibilities, like bingo online with friends which enhanced her social networks. Finally she reflected on the potential negative aspects of online gambling and was able to articulate opinions about some of the related ethical issues of this activity.

2. Conclusions to be drawn from Jean’s journey of relevance to Digital Britain’s approach are:
 - The digital world should not be demonised as more ‘scary’ than the world we live in. It is an extension of own world and full of the same delights, surprises, opportunities (and occasional dangers) as our own.
 - It may be ‘different’ but it is not ‘alien’.
 - Exploring the online world can be a journey not dissimilar to visiting a foreign country where the more empowered you feel about local customs and cultures, the more able you are to engage with them and the more satisfying your journey is likely to be.
 - Digital media opens up new forms of experiences and new opportunities for engagement. While it is true that people will

continue to consume some 'old' media digitally, they will increasingly be drawn to the opportunities for active engagement and interaction. There is not enough emphasis on this sort of engagement in the Interim Report.

- In particular the opportunities for social connections and creative communications are not given enough weight. The digital world empowers ordinary people to express themselves and make online exchanges which were not possible before – this should be affirmed and encouraged.
- Finally, care must be taken not to draw the definition of 'creativity' too narrowly. Creativity is not limited to traditional 'artistic' pursuits but can embrace a very wide range of activities in the digital world.

The notion of 'creativity' should be broadened to take account of the many and varied ways people extend the reach of their lives and communications online. You can be a movie critic on www.rottentomatoes.com or a genealogist on www.ancestry.com or meteorologist on www.wunderground.com without necessarily thinking you are being creative in a narrow artistic sense. Yet these experiences – alongside shopping in its various guises (also – for some at least – a creative pursuit) are arguably people's most common experiences of the web.

Any attempt to create programme of entitlement or proficiency should start with the things that people are most likely to respond to in their everyday lives. The Task Force has raised the notion of an analogy with cycling. This has been interpreted somewhat narrowly – a media literacy version of the Cycling Proficiency Test – but the purpose of the analogy was to make a much broader point.

Cycling is an activity which needs no formal training or qualifications and at one level it isn't a specialist activity at all – merely a mode of getting from A to B. But there are several ways in which as a society we have collectively tried to empower cyclists and enhance the cycling experience. Sustrans has been at the forefront of opening up new cycle routes in both urban and rural areas; initiatives up and down the UK have built on the health and environmental benefits of cycling; at the top end people have been encouraged to develop their skills so that Britain has become the leading exponent of cycling as a professional sport; and at the bottom end, while no-one is forced to take the proficiency test, the consensus is that the test is empowering – making cycling a more enjoyable and indeed safer experience.

For this reason the Media Literacy Task Force would urge that the final Digital Britain Report continues, and indeed expands, its support for "education, skills and media literacy programmes" that will "allow everyone in society to benefit from the digital

revolution” (p.5) but that, further, these programmes adopt the widest and most empowering and culturally creative definitions and range of competencies in their formulation and planned outcomes.

A purely protective or utilitarian approach will not, it submits, bring the ‘key to success’ that the final Report desires. What is needed in the school curriculum, work skills uplift programmes, and in informal education (whether delivered through adult education or by content providers and industry itself) is a baseline acceptance that the digital world is a positive and creative medium for interactive engagement, networking and exploration; where the individual either alone or as part of wider ‘communities of interest’ can participate and innovate in ways which are analogous to the early days of writing, printing and publishing.

Recommendation 1.

The Media Literacy Task Force believes that media literacy should be the foundation of the final Digital Britain Report and that the National Media Literacy Plan should be the starting point of the whole project.

As has been acknowledged by Lord Carter and others, take-up is as big – if not a bigger problem – than connectivity. What is needed is an unambiguous commitment to the opportunities and benefits of being media literate in today’s world and a clear definition of the key media literacy competencies required to engage with that world. That is how we will best position the UK for “the development of a digital, knowledge economy [at the centre of its] economic development” (p. 1).

While the Media Literacy Task Force believes that the opportunities for engagement in the digital world go well beyond the consumption of traditional media content on new devices, it also believes that compelling content will be central to getting people to engage. In that sense, existing public institutions – and in particular the public service broadcasters – have a powerful part to play by virtue of expertise in the creation of engaging content, their archives, reach and marketing power. Not by featuring well-meaning programmes about how to create a blog or e-mail a photograph, but rather by demonstrating the extent to which the digital world is just a very rich extension of the world we know already – and is within their grasp.

Many organisations are increasingly playing their part. The UK Film Council’s Digital Screen Network, BFI’s ‘Screenonline’ (www.screenonline.org.uk), or the growing online presence of cultural institutions like the Tate and the ENO, are examples of the growing digital contribution of publically-funded organisations.

The value and immense potential of national and regional archives could, if made digitally available, be realised through the impetus of the Digital Britain Report. Finally, the resources for engagement with digital media need not come solely from public service broadcasters or the State. Just ask Ancestry.com about the value to their business of a programme like ‘Who Do You Think You Are.’ The Task Force believes the commercial sector can and should play a central role – the ISPs and telecommunications companies, for example, have an obvious interest in growing levels of media literacy in Britain.

It is also the case that many people’s engagement with digital media comes through social networks, online communities and a range of interactions that may owe more to collaborative user-led initiatives and their exchange of information and ideas than to larger public or commercial organisations. This might be seen as one of the places where changes in how people live and interact today is taking place and it should be strongly reflected in the final Report.

Recommendation 2.

That in any work to further the Digital Britain Report:

- *Strong consideration be given to the role and involvement of public broadcasters and other disseminators of cultural, creative content and communications*
- *These providers should have a central role in delivering the means of encouraging a media literate UK.*
- *New forms of public/private partnerships should be explored to deliver public purposes around media literacy (especially, but not only, in economically challenging times)*
- *The power of social media should be aligned with these public purposes over time.*

Conclusion

The Media Literacy Task Force is ready to assist and support the roll-out of Digital Britain and will consider any suggestions as to how it can engage with this work to help make it more effective and sustainable.

**Alex Graham,
Chair,
Media Literacy Task Force
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