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Media and the Citizen workshop report

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Report

The workshop was held as part of the evidence-gathering stage of the Truth, Trust and Technology Commission. It was designed to feed in to the Commission's report, which is due to be published by LSE in November 2018. The workshop was held under the Chatham House rule. Participants included a range of experts from academia, civil society and the public and private sectors. This report was prepared by the LSE Truth, Trust and Technology team as a record of points raised in the discussion. It is not a verbatim summary, nor is it a statement of a consensus position.

We may not like to admit it, said **Prof Nick Couldry** in his opening presentation, but the optimism of the post-Cold War era has not been sustained and a number of countries are showing signs of de-democratisation and electable authoritarianism (such as Viktor Orban's 'illiberal democracy' in Hungary, Recep Tayek Erdogan in Turkey and Donald Trump's presidency).

To what extent has misinformation played a role in the retreat from liberal democracy? The digital age has led to fears about the quality of engagement. Hannah Arendt worried that people no longer met in the agora to discuss politics (The Human Condition, 1958) and Walter Lippmann (Public Opinion, 1922) believed they were under-informed about politics. In the 21st century people have more opportunity than ever before to take part in political debate and scrutinise politicians and government. But the sheer scale of content creation is overwhelming, with unprecedented feedback loops. Social spaces have changed, and platforms are at the forefront of designing them.

At the same time, societies are becoming more unequal and polarised. In the UK, for example, Leave and Remain voters have hardened their respective stances since the vote (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, [Emerging Brexit identities](#), 2018). In 'The Public and its Problems' (1927) John Dewey argued that democracy is undermined when the public forms antagonistic sects and fails to communicate a 'shared experience' of democratic society.

Citizens need to be able to speak, but also to be listened to - and not just during campaigns. Robert Dahl's concepts of personal autonomy and of time and rhythm (the need for sustained engagement outside election periods) are important in this context (Democracy and its Critics, 1989).

How do we educate citizens for democracy? **Prof Sonia Livingstone** began her presentation by referring to [UNESCO's definition](#) of media literacy, which is a skill learned through active participation in media (and consequently suffers from a knowledge gap, with those who are already skilled easier to reach). It depends on legibility and transparency, both of which are even more difficult to achieve in the digital environment. Platforms have (often unwillingly) taken on a mediating role for which they are ill-prepared and unfit.

Media literacy is neither compulsory nor a priority in schools or education policy: it is crowded out by other subjects regarded as more important or prestigious. But it should not be regarded as the responsibility of educators alone, particularly since the media and digital landscape changes so rapidly.

A participant noted that at the European level, the media literacy requirement in the [Audiovisual Media Services Directive](#) has been 'beefed up' (though the final text has not yet been signed off at the time of writing) and a [Council of Europe global task force](#) is tackling the subject.

Prof Livingstone observed that good media literacy practice is rarely evaluated or shared, but cited the BBC's video clips explaining how Blue Planet was filmed as an example of how media outlets can shed light to audiences on their decision-making and editing processes.

Matty Edwards, a reporter at the crowdfunded newspaper [The Bristol Cable](#), explained its innovative approach to running investigative local journalism. The Cable, which was inspired by De Correspondent's model, is owned by around 2,000 people who each pay a minimum of £2 per month and set the editorial direction at the AGM. It employs five journalists and produces a quarterly newspaper with a 35,000 print run and daily articles on its website.

The Cable aims to produce empowering 'slow news', 'the kind of content only working-class Bristolians could do' and create a 'less hierarchical, white and middle-class' journalist-reader relationship. It also helps train reporters.

Some noteworthy initiatives

Several efforts to promote media literacy by platforms, media and the government were discussed during the workshop. They included:

Facebook groups

One of Facebook's aims is to foster commonality and non-polarising debate through its Groups - "the more we can do to find cross-cutting communities, the better". A group for London dachshund owners was mentioned as an example of a place whose members had managed to disagree about Brexit in a non-confrontational way. Bigger groups may eventually be able to challenge political and societal norms: one closed group for Nigerian women, founded by a woman of Nigerian origin living in the US, has more than a million members.

Participants disagreed about whether such groups represented a safe space in which majority groups could gain the confidence to play a greater role in mainstream public life, or whether they were absolving national governments of their duty to empower their citizens - and liable to be driven by stereotypical western notions of what their participants 'need'. Do such groups amplify existing inequalities? "[When] you give equal space to the prime minister of India and to a woman fighting against hate speech and murder [of Muslims in India], this notion that everything will just balance itself out means that the structural inequalities that existed offline have come online and in some cases have been exaggerated," said one participant.

Facebook: Why am I seeing this?

Facebook's new tool allows users to see which of their personal characteristics have been involved in an advertiser's decision to target them. Its use as a literacy tool relies on an active and engaged user base.

The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland media literacy policy

Launched in 2016, this [policy](#) was cited by a participant as a good example of collaboration between media, government, civil society and academia. It identifies three core competencies of media literacy and skill and success indicators. Practitioners are encouraged to pick the competencies that best match what they do.

Responsibility for media literacy

Platforms, the media, governments and individuals themselves are jointly responsible for enabling people to play a part in democratic life. The nature and extent of that responsibility varies. People may choose not to engage in political activity or to understand exactly how civil society and government function, but they still have a right to know where they can find trustworthy information.

What responsibilities do platforms have towards their users?

Participants generally agreed that platforms have a duty of care towards their users, but the nature and extent of that duty - and whether it should be enshrined in new law or values-based - was contested. They noted

- 'Platforms are in the weird position of being asked to define what values they have to police, then police them, and then account for them,' said one attendee. In this respect Facebook shares some of the characteristics of a (very large) state, partly by virtue of how long its users spend there, but without democratic accountability for its governance decisions, nor transparency about how they (particularly algorithmic and takedown decisions) are made.
- The consumer-buyer paradigm is unsuitable for a participatory environment where people are taking political decisions. If Facebook is indeed more like a state, should citizens not participate in its governance?
- Some users are more vulnerable than others, and platforms heighten their vulnerability by exposing them to potential abuse (for example, female public intellectuals in India).
- If platforms are not simply enablers (allowing people to share content), then they will take on a patrician role by shepherding users to 'good', 'better' or 'balanced' content, or making it harder for them to encounter misinformation. (Twitter's blue ticks and Facebook's now abandoned 'fake news flags' are examples.) But how can they establish enough trust and credibility to do this effectively, given a large minority (40%) of users do not trust the terms and conditions to which they agree? How transparent should they be about efforts to educate their users?
- Should they encourage minorities who might otherwise not have come together to do so? Do platforms have a responsibility to empower as well as protect?
- Do they have a role in sustaining civility, rather than simply curbing hate speech?
- Smartphones are an intimate technology, carried everywhere and used to mediate personal relationships. Similarly, trust has a strong emotional component.
- Platforms have a particular responsibility towards older people, whose education did not prepare them for using social media. 'It should be at the forefront of the way these companies think,' said one attendee.
- Collaboration with other organisations is crucial in this area.
- Do they have a duty to disclose their work with governments? Facebook publishes an annual report detailing government requests.
- Differing national norms and laws make it particularly difficult to establish common expectations about free speech.
- Platforms may not be able to solve profound inequalities, but they should not perpetuate them through their own recruitment decisions. Facebook's top management, for instance, is male-dominated.

What should schools be doing?

- Teacher training is important: many teachers don't feel adequately prepared to talk about 'fake news' with pupils.

- In terms of finding space for media literacy in the curriculum, citizenship - which teaches people how to live in a mediated democracy - is a more appropriate vehicle than PSHE, which focuses on the personal.
- 'Tick-box' approaches to media literacy can be unhelpful. Critical literacy is a cross-curricular skill that should take in the media landscape, sources, the role of media in a democracy and freedom of speech.
- 'Critical thinking' implies a further set of skills and the ability to identify emotional manipulation and influence in different, non-media contexts. It may sometimes privilege personal responses at the expense of rigorously analysing arguments.
- Teaching critical skills alone risks leaving pupils routinely distrustful. They need to know which organisations **can** be trusted. In this context, the strengths of the BBC were noted: 'Attacks on the BBC weaken trust.' 'We don't notice the good things that are happening.'

While [Ofcom evidence](#) suggests people are becoming slightly more media literate, there is an evidence gap in this area. Is there a gap between what people understand and what we normatively think they ought to understand? In particular, a participant noted a decline in people's understanding of the biases of national newspapers.

What is the media's responsibility?

- While people's claims to want 'the facts' are not always reflected in their media consumption, it is the media's responsibility to show how those facts can be useful to them.
- The distinction between 'facts' and 'comment' is well-intentioned, but has it become counterproductive when people ignore the former in favour of the latter? When does analysis become comment? If the distinction is lost on many of the public, perhaps we should avoid it.
- Small-scale, participatory media is an exciting model, but given rising costs is it unsustainable without public subsidy?
- Many media are under great financial pressure, and overburdening them with duties will squeeze their margins further.
- Letting the audience see how content is made is a way of building transparency.
- Journalists do not always appreciate the emotional impact their content may have on its subjects, and can benefit from training in this regard.

Individual responsibility

- Absolute freedom of expression is not desirable on social media. 'You should never be knowingly misleading someone,' said one participant. 'People need to be held to account for misleading others... We all need as citizens to take more responsibility for our actions.'
- Nonetheless, we should acknowledge that some people may simply not care about how platforms use their data. Others may not have the time, or prefer to get their news from one or two sources that share their political views. As a result theoretical knowledge may not lead to changes in behaviour.

- Platforms are ‘deliberately provocative’ said one attendee, ‘and we have to teach people how to handle that’. (A representative from a platform countered that they were ‘not looking for an adrenaline rush’ and seeking ‘communality’ among users.)

What is the responsibility of government and civil society?

- The ‘hard to reach’ are not a uniform group that can be addressed with a single initiative: this is what makes them hard to reach. Examples include people with limited English and those with reading literacy problems.
- Some of the most effective projects are small and limited in scope. A central co-ordinating organisation could share good practice and evaluation - which are currently lacking.
- Evaluating media literacy projects is difficult and a results-based approach may not capture the full picture and could even widen the ‘digital divide’.
- Civil society and community groups, if they were better funded, could be an effective way of reaching older people. Libraries could play a role but have suffered in recent years.

Key points

- The scale and power of platforms - as well as their role in politics - has grown very rapidly, but without attendant discussion about their responsibilities towards society or their governance.
- In some instances alternative forums have sprung up online, independent of national democratic structures. These may be healthy but can be damaging.
- Media literacy is regarded as an easy solution to the spread of misinformation. But it has not been clear who should take the lead nor how best to coordinate and evaluate projects.
- Teaching people to be critical of what they see is important, but calling out misinformation alone does not build trust.

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