

Call for Evidence: Media Literacy

1. Genia Schönbaumsfeld (the author of this submission) is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southampton and currently Principal Investigator on a £2m UKRI-funded ERC Advanced Grant project called ‘The Ethics of Doubt – Kierkegaard, Scepticism and Conspiracy Theory’ (The Ethics of Doubt - ethicsofdoubt.org). The project, which started in October 2023 and runs for 5 years, aims to develop new ways of tackling knowledge scepticism in academia and the culture at large by focusing on the question of how knowledge and the intellectual virtues – in particular, intellectual courage – are connected. This response seeks to demonstrate how intellectual courage can better equip people to handle the challenges of the ‘Information Age’, including:

- the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and ‘fake news’
- the difficulty of avoiding online ‘echo chambers’ and conspiracy theories
- the problems posed by AI and deep fakes

2. Addressing these challenges, this response provides the following recommendations:

- A wider rollout of online courses—‘Navigating the Information Age I and II’—should be implemented across UK universities.
- The UK should adopt a similar approach to Finland, which provides media literacy in all lessons as a part of the school curriculum.
- A new Philosophy and Media Literacy GCSE should be devised to teach critical thinking skills alongside media literacy and digital criticality.
- Instruction about intellectual virtues should also be part of primary education to build children’s resilience to peer pressure and online disinformation.
- Teachers should be trained to recognise the importance of the intellectual virtues to formal education and develop these virtues in young children.

3. Intellectual virtues are praiseworthy intellectual capacities and dispositions that enable one to pursue and acquire knowledge. Examples of such virtues include open-mindedness, curiosity, and intellectual courage (among many others). It is a **key hypothesis** of the project that **educational development of these virtues** is one of the most important things that governments and states can facilitate in order to produce adults that not only possess the critical thinking skills necessary for media literacy, but also persons who have an intellectual character that is truth-oriented and resilient against the proliferation of ‘fake news’, conspiracy theories, and ‘deep fakes’.

4. As one practical step in this important direction, the PI, in collaboration with Prof. Duncan Pritchard from the University of California, Irvine, has developed two online courses called ‘Navigating the Information Age I and II’ that have just been rolled out to students at both institutions (Southampton and UCI). The modules – **the first of their kind in the UK and Europe** – aim to introduce students to the pitfalls of the ‘Information

Age' and to teach them how to develop the intellectual virtues necessary for navigating their informational lives critically and safely. The modules are based on prior philosophical and empirical research that shows that such educational interventions are effective at increasing media and digital literacy skills (Orona and Pritchard 2021; Croce and Pritchard 2022; Pritchard 2023).

5. The project will track the success of these modules and seek to adapt them to other educational contexts, such as schools and adult learning institutes in the longer term. Thus, the modules can provide a foundation for a UK-wide educational strategy to enhance media literacy and digital criticality in students and adult populations.

How would you define media literacy? What would 'good' media literacy look like?

6. Media literacy is the capacity to use and critically to examine different forms of information to be able to distinguish fact from fiction. A media literate person is someone who:

- can cross-check the information they read in print and online
- is aware of the many ways in which information can be manipulated
- can take steps to guard against manipulation

Given that the avoidance of manipulation and online harm is becoming ever more difficult, it is important to start educating for a virtuous intellectual character as early as possible, so that children can develop the competencies required in the pursuit of truth and the avoidance of falsehood in school.

What are the risks and consequences of not achieving these aims?

7. A media illiterate population is a threat to democracy, as citizens can easily be manipulated and radicalised online. Such citizens can also fall prey to foreign nefarious actors who seek to interfere with UK elections and to rouse public sentiment against the government. People with poor media literacy are also at higher risk of falling prey to conspiracy theories, as they are less able critically to examine the (mis)information they receive. Such theories, too, can pose a great threat to democracy and to life itself: during the pandemic, many Covid deniers risked their own lives and those of others because they did not think that the virus was real. Even more recently, the Netflix drama, *Adolescence*, has heightened awareness of the danger of misogynous online disinformation that threatens young males and the progress towards gender equality.

Are there examples of good practice on a local or regional level that could be scaled more widely across the UK?

8. The 'Navigating the Information Age' modules trialled at Southampton could be rolled out across all UK universities and can be adapted for use in school and adult learning institutes.

How does the UK's approach to media literacy compare with that of other countries? What international best practice could be adopted or adapted here?

9. In comparison to some Nordic countries – in particular, Finland¹ – the UK is not doing well on media literacy initiatives. In Finland, children are taught how to spot misinformation and ‘fake news’ at school. This learning environment sharpens children’s critical thinking skills and makes them more committed to finding the truth, rather than just believing what they read online. In this respect, lessons about the dangers of disinformation also enable children to develop virtuous intellectual characters. The UK should adopt a similar approach.

What is the role of formal education in relation to media literacy?

10. Formal education plays a key role in producing citizens who are media literate. Finland, which incorporates media literacy training into all lessons, performs consistently well in international media literacy rankings.² The UK should also introduce such training into schools, universities and adult learning institutes. Given the reputation of UK universities, it is surprising that Southampton is currently the only university that has modules that attempt to plug the media literacy gap. We are demonstrating thought leadership to influence the sector.

How effectively is media literacy being taught in schools at present? How can critical thinking best be taught?

11. Media literacy training is currently not a part of the school curriculum, which means that most children in the UK do not learn about the dangers facing them online. This is a serious problem that has knock-on effects further down the line, especially in disenfranchised communities, where parents may not be available to teach children basic media literacy skills. For these reasons, media literacy training, a key component of which is critical thinking, needs to be incorporated into the school curriculum. It is unfortunate that the subject that has critical thinking at its core – Philosophy – is not offered at GCSE. A **new Philosophy and Media Literacy GCSE** could be devised to fill this gap. This subject would teach critical thinking skills alongside media literacy and digital criticality. This would mark an important step forward.

How should approaches to media literacy education vary according to age group?

12. It is nevertheless important to emphasize that media literacy training needs to start long before GCSE, given that very young children nowadays use online devices such as tablets, potentially exposing them to harmful online content from a very early age. For these reasons, incorporating instruction about the **intellectual virtues** as positive qualities to develop should begin at an early age and be part of primary school classes. Allowing children to develop intellectual courage is particularly important, as children are very susceptible to peer pressure at school, which includes pressure about what to believe (not just about how to act). For example, if a child’s peer group believes in a conspiracy theory, it is probable that the child will feel pressured to believe it to ‘fit in’ with friends. Consequently, it is important to take steps to guard against this danger by incorporating instruction about how not to accept false beliefs just because one’s friends might endorse these views.

13. Intellectual courage is also a key enabler of critical thinking. To think critically, I must have the courage to challenge what I’m told or what I read and to cross-check

information against different sources. Intellectual complacency or docility makes one more easily manipulable. Discussing such issues in class, in an age-appropriate way, could help children develop the necessary resilience against peer pressure and online disinformation.

14. Teachers should be trained to recognise the importance of the intellectual virtues to formal education and learn how to facilitate the development of these virtues in young children. For example, children are taught from very early on that it is bad to lie. Lying is bad, because you are trying to deceive someone by effectively providing them with disinformation. In other words, here it is easy to draw an explicit connection between moral and intellectual virtues. Children should be taught that honesty is not just a moral virtue, but also an intellectual one that prevents them from disseminating and receiving false information. Such an 'indirect' approach can be complemented by more 'direct' media literacy training in the higher age-groups.

¹ [How Finland starts its fight against fake news in primary schools | Finland | The Guardian](#); [Finland's 'visionary' fight against disinformation teaches citizens to question what they see online | Canada's National Observer: Climate News](#)

² [Media Literacy and Education in Finland - Finland Toolbox](#)

References

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