

Ofcom's strategy and priorities for promoting media literacy

A Summary



2 November 2004



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Section 1

Summary

Ofcom is the independent regulator for the UK communications industries. We started work in late December 2003 and our role is to look after television, radio, telecommunications ('telecoms') and wireless communication services.

This statement gives our conclusions following the consultation we held from June to August 2004 about the need to promote media literacy. We held this consultation to meet an obligation placed on us under Section 11 of the Communications Act (2003).

There is no agreed definition of what 'media literacy' actually is but, following the consultation, we will use this one:

Media literacy is the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts.

The media has never given us so much choice. Changes in technology mean that you may need to be more aware of what you and your children see and hear, on screen and online. By being 'media-literate', you will be in a better position to know what to expect, how to make the most of what's on offer and to protect yourself and your family. By being confident with communications technology, you will gain a better understanding of the world around you, and be part of it.

At Ofcom, we will work with everyone involved, to focus on the media literacy needs of everybody, now and in the future. Many people have an important role to play in promoting media literacy in both adults and children. They include:

- organisations which produce content;
- broadcasters;
- platform providers such as digital television and online services;
- educators;
- government departments;
- parents;
- children's charities; and
- many other similar organisations.

Our main role will be to provide leadership and to make things happen.

There are three main parts to our early work in promoting media literacy in the UK.

Research

We will carry out a wide-ranging research programme to investigate how media-literate people are, and the issues that we need to face. We will also set up a process so that we can track progress in the future. The knowledge we gain from this research will be extremely important, and will shape our action and decisions.

Connecting, partnering and signposting

We plan to move media literacy higher on everyone's priorities. We will actively look for opportunities to create and encourage debate at conferences and events. We will create our own initiatives, and contribute to other media literacy projects, to raise awareness throughout the UK and in Europe. We will also offer funding to support projects that promote media literacy, and which couldn't happen without extra help. We will also use our website to direct people to relevant information on issues to do with media literacy.

Labelling

Viewers and listeners need clear, accurate and timely information about the content of programmes they might watch. We believe there should be a standard labelling system which would protect young and vulnerable viewers by highlighting any possible harm and offence. We recognise that some people are worried about how this might be done, so we will be inviting key people to form a working group to investigate how viewers (in particular, in homes with digital television) would like to receive this information.

Section 2

Introduction and definition of media literacy

We received 94 responses to the media literacy consultation and we're grateful to the wide range of people and organisations who took part. If someone who contributed gave their permission, you can see their responses in full on our website (www.ofcom.org.uk).

In July 2004, the Doors section of The Sunday Times canvassed its readers' views on the best ways to encourage media literacy. The Editor of Doors forwarded readers' e-mails and letters to us.

This is what readers were asked:

"What Doors wants to know is what you, as toiled-up newspaper readers, think we should all do to encourage media literacy - sticks and carrots, even - and who is best placed to get a digital society moving: parents, manufacturers, broadcasters, politicians, who? Choose one of the talking points that we have proposed alongside - or any techie issue about which you have insider knowledge. Mail us with specific proposals to bring digital challenges into focus, and we will give £50 to the 10 readers who fare best. Within the month, we will analyse your responses, put your concerns to the great and the good, and report back on what they say. Finally, we will submit every one of your entries to Ofcom's consultation in time for its August 10 deadline. If you need any more incentive, remember the mantra of the digital revolution: interaction is all."

We would like to thank David Johnson, the Editor of Doors, and his staff, and the readers who contributed to this important discussion. The views they expressed have helped us to shape the main conclusions set out in this statement.

Media literacy - what is it?

There is no single, agreed definition of media literacy.

But just as traditional literacy is about being able to read and write text, so media literacy is the ability to 'read' and 'write' audiovisual information.

At its simplest level, media literacy means being able to use a range of media and be able to understand the information it gives you.

At a more advanced level, it also means being able to question, analyse, appreciate and evaluate that information.

Someone who is media-literate may also be able to create communications in electronic form, such as write e-mails, and design web pages or video materials.

With this in mind, the consultation came up with a definition of media literacy as being "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and produce communications in a variety of forms". Or, put simply, being able to use the technology to:

- find what you're looking for;
- understand what it is about;

- have an opinion about it; and
- where necessary, respond to it.

Media-literate people are able to make informed choices about what they watch and the services they use. They're able to take advantage of the full range of opportunities offered by new communications technologies, and are better able to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive material.

Responses to the consultation

A number of the people and organisations who responded had comments on our working definition. Other definitions, mainly put forward by stakeholders in film (UK Film Council and bfi) and education (Institute of Education, NIACE), felt that being able to question and evaluate content, to know what people like, their ability to see quality and show imagination were more important to media literacy than technology or production skills (Scottish Screen and others), knowledge of costs (ICSTIS and TUFF) and an understanding of copyright issues (British Music Rights and others).

BT commented that the difference between 'analysis' and 'evaluation' is so small that we shouldn't separate the two into different categories.

Our response

Although our working definition of media literacy is short and simple, we believe it is broad enough to cover all types of communication technology, types of content and the different ways people use them.

However, we do go along with Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Sonia Livingstone, who suggested using 'create' rather than 'produce' to recognise the creative aspect of the communication process. We also agree with replacing 'forms' with the more wide-ranging 'contexts'. This means that the same content (for example, video) can be accessed on different platforms (for example, television, PC or a mobile phone), and that they have their own characteristics. In other words, they work to different rules, are seen in different places and circumstances, and so on.

Although we do see a difference between 'analyse' and 'evaluate', we take the point made by BT that it is a fine distinction. We consider that we can describe both these abilities with the word 'understand'.

As a result, we will use this definition. **'Media literacy is the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts.'**

However, we recognise that everybody involved will continue to use a definition that emphasises their own priorities and aims.

Section 3

Our approach

This is a golden opportunity to focus everyone's attention on the future needs of all members of society. Our main role will be to show leadership in promoting media literacy. We will use our influence to make things happen. This may include providing funding for other people's projects in the same direction which, otherwise, might not get off the ground. We will be setting out our priorities and consulting people from all walks of life, of all ages, and in all areas of the UK to get to the widest possible spread of views.

But whatever we achieve in promoting media literacy will be through persuasion and debate. We have no powers, or desire, to make people do what we want them to.

Improving media literacy involves all kinds of different people and organisations. Content producers, broadcasters, platform providers such as digital networks and online services already have a responsibility in this area. They're well placed to offer advice, support and guidance to their customers.

Education plays a vital role in laying the foundations of media literacy. Schools, colleges and universities can develop the skills of students of all levels, and to carry out research which will help shape future action. There are also opportunities in less formal settings, such as libraries, UK Online and community art centres, to give people over school age a taste of communication technology and the experience they can offer.

The Home Office, the Department for Education and Skills, the Department for Culture Media and Sport and the Department of Trade and Industry all have responsibilities when it comes to media literacy.

Parents, carers, children's charities, viewer and listener organisations and others quite rightly focus on issues of harm and offence, and protecting young and vulnerable people.

There are also many organisations who can help people get to grips with new technologies. These include the Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services (ICSTIS - for premium-rate telephone calls and services), the Internet Service Providers' Association, the British Board of Film Classification, the Entertainment & Leisure Software Publishers Association (ELSPA - for the games industry), the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) and various European Union projects related to a European project to make the internet a safer place called the Safer Internet Action Plan.

Responses to the consultation

There weren't many views about the approach we are planning to take. People who did comment supported our aim to show leadership and encourage action. There were some calls for us to take a more

active role (Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV) and others). News International said that the media operators already promote media literacy very effectively, because it's good for business.

Some organisations (The Centre for the Study of Children Youth and Media, the Institute of Education, the Regional Screen Agencies and others) said we should help people to think and form opinions about what they hear and watch. Some (BECTA and others) suggested that actually producing content improved media literacy and should be encouraged.

Our first work falls into three main areas, and we have outlined these on the following pages.

Our response

At Ofcom, we welcome the support we've received to take a leadership role in promoting media literacy. We will be actively encouraging all those involved to focus on the future needs of all members of society.

Our first action will be focused on areas where we can have the biggest effect, and where we see the greatest risks to people. While our research will show us whether people think critically about programmes and services, most of our work will focus on the general need for media literacy, how to make the most of what's on offer and how to control content. These are areas where we can make the most difference.

Section 4

Research

Research is essential if we're to promote media literacy. The answers we receive will identify the issues, shape our priorities and, later, show us how we're performing.

Research carried out by the Independent Television Commission (ITC) the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC), and others (see note 1 below) found that "little research on adults' awareness and understanding of the new and changing media and information environment has been conducted, so much remains to be discovered and understood, this being crucial as increasing responsibility for accessing content is being devolved to the public.

"Clearly, a well-defined vision - of the key dimensions of consumers' skills and abilities, of the minimum and desired levels of literacy required, of the population sectors which risk being left out, of the most appropriate means of both promoting and evaluating media literacy – must be debated and agreed if media literacy is to reach satisfactory levels across the whole population."

Together with others who have an interest, our research will begin to answer some of these questions and contribute to the policy debate in the future.

Our research will help us understand just how media-literate people actually are, in all sections of society. Some groups, such as children, young people, parents and older people may have particular needs. Some may be vulnerable or risk being left behind. This research will show us which sections of society are at risk and where we should focus our resources.

We will also find out if anything is preventing people from becoming more media-literate. For example, we need to know if there are physical, learning, social, economic or technical barriers in the way. If so, which members of society are more likely to be excluded? These answers will also tell us who is best placed to help people get over those barriers.

Attitudes are also important. We will find out what people expect from a programme or service, and this will help those who create content to give the right level of information to avoid any risk of harm or offence.

Technology can help here. You may already use electronic programme guides (EPGs) and filtering tools for the internet to help you access and control content. Our research will help producers focus clearly

1 Assessing the media literacy of UK adults, a review of the academic literature. Sonia Livingstone with Nancy Thumim, March 2003. ITC, BSC and NIACE

on your needs, with effective tools that are easy to use.

Research will tell us about the more advanced skills people need. Where appropriate, we'll contribute to research that has been started by other organisations, and which can also help us.

Our research will include long-running studies of how people's attitudes and expectations of content may change with the way they receive it. In particular, we want to test new media literacy, and any protection worries, that may come with personal video recorders and the latest mobile phones that let you see the internet and can tell people where you are.

We particularly want to identify anything that could threaten the growth and use of access tools, particularly on equipment that lets you use the internet on the move.

We also plan to use research to form the base of our two other main areas of work – connecting, partnering and signposting, and labelling (audiovisual content).

Responses to the consultation

There was strong support for our proposal to carry out research into media literacy. Most people agree that little is known about the level of media literacy in the UK. Several people who responded

suggested, as a first step, that we need to review the research that already exists. Some offered research they had already completed. Several of those who responded (Media Literacy Task Force, Institute of Education and others) suggested questions that we should ask. The BBC and BT commented that our research should not be driven by the academic community, but should offer practical information to direct action.

We discussed a number of important research issues at a consultation meeting in July. Members of our Media Literacy and Market Research teams noted some useful comments from the session.

Our response

The results of our research will form the basis of our early work to promote media literacy. The basis of this research will be to complete an audit of media literacy skills across the UK, measuring people's knowledge and understanding of the various media platforms. The results will help us assess not only the levels of media literacy, but different types of literacy as well.

We think that this early research will highlight the need for more in-depth, specific research into areas such as:

- children using the latest mobile phones, and issues such as access to adult content and using location-based services;
- attitudes towards harmful and offensive content and services on the internet (for example, extreme websites promoting suicide and race hate) and people's understanding of the controls that already exist; and
- barriers to using online services, due to the abuse of personal information (for example, theft of identity and bank details, unwanted e-mails and system security), and people's experiences of virus protection software.

Other research activities include:

- two literature reviews of academic research into the media literacy of both children and adults (these are already under way and will be published later this year);
- in-depth, opinion-based research on separate areas of media literacy;
- research repeated over time to track the effect of any media literacy programmes; and

- an invitation to form a media literacy research forum. We will ask representatives of broadcasting, the internet, the mobile phone industry, and education to join with consumer organisations and representatives of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to set up the forum. They will give us expert comments on our research plans and tell us how future research can give us the most valuable results.

The main principles behind the research

Our research principles will be to:

- involve the industry and others with an interest (through the media literacy research forum) in developing our research methods;
- make a priority of research areas which can be of real practical value to us and others in the industry;
- respond to emerging issues; and
- monitor all relevant research from other sources.

Section 5

Connecting, partnering and signposting

We aim to promote media literacy in every way we can. This includes strengthening other people's existing activities, stimulating new work and promoting and directing people to advice and guidance on types of technology. In this area of work, we can have an immediate effect in raising the profile of media literacy and making the issues a priority for everyone involved.

Connecting

Our main role in this area is to bring together interested organisations and make their efforts as productive as possible in increasing media literacy.

There are many projects, in education and elsewhere, designed to raise the understanding of media literacy. This is particularly true in relation to 'critical viewing'. We will get behind these plans and encourage people to work together.

For example, we know that teachers have problems gaining access and rights to use certain visual materials in their teaching. We are in an ideal position to get together with a range of stakeholders to find ways of making resources available for education.

Partnering

If research shows that people's needs are not being met, we will be in a position to join forces with others with an interest to make a difference.

In particular, we will support plans to encourage elderly, and socially or physically disadvantaged people, to try new communications technology for themselves.

Signposting

There's a lot going on in the area of media literacy; so much so, it's hard to keep tabs on the full range of activities and where to find them. We aim to raise the awareness of those plans.

We will also direct people to advice and guidance on a range of issues related to communications technology.

For example, research tells us that although there is plenty of good internet safety advice available, many parents don't know how to manage their children's experiences online (see note 2 below). Ofcom will encourage providers of those services to give guidance to their customers on safety and good practice.

We said in the consultation that creating a separate place on the internet where information can be found, or using part of our own website, will help us in this area.

2 Assessing Internet Content Rating and Filtering Tool Effectiveness. I2 media research and Opta, December 2003, ITC

Responses to the consultation

There was wide support for this area of work. In fact, we've already received several offers of partnership, some arising during the consultation, from organisations ranging from Media Smart to Learndirect.

BSkyB suggests that we should only take this further when we have the results of the media literacy research. They also want us to review activity that has already been carried out.

Our response

We have a firm aim to put media literacy at the front of everyone's minds. This means creating our own projects, and contributing to other people's, to raise awareness and stimulate debate of the central issues throughout the UK and in Europe. We will actively look for opportunities to encourage debate, including conferences and events.

In May 2005, we will be working closely with the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and its partners in Adult Learners' Week (ALW). Media literacy will be a central theme during the week, and in the run-up to the event we'll be supporting a number of activities including a series of workshops throughout England and Wales.

The UK takes over the presidency of the EU in the second half of 2005. We have begun discussions with the Department of

Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) on a joint initiative during the presidency to highlight the importance of focusing on media literacy across Europe.

In terms of advice and guidance, research has shown that if families aren't using software to manage their children's online activity, it is likely that the parents see it as hard to install and not user-friendly. We and the Home Office have begun work with the industry to create a British Standard (Kite Mark) for domestic-filtering software. The standard will encourage providers to make their products more effective and easier to use. The kitemark will also help give users confidence, and increase the number using it. The standard will be published in 2005.

Older people are also likely to need help. As a result, we have got together with Help the Aged to plan a series of workshops at their Speaking Up for Our Age forums. Members at the workshops will then pass on their learning and experience throughout the membership of the 350 groups in the UK.

We will continue to work with central partners, and find new ones in all sectors of the communications industry, as well as other relevant stakeholders. Our research will help us to guide stakeholder plans to promote media literacy, and we'll lend our support to make best use of their work.

We will also offer money to support new projects where we have seen a clear need, and where the project would not go ahead without our support.

The consultation suggested creating a separate place on the internet (a media literacy portal) to direct people to helpful material. We have decided to develop this work as part of our own website (www.ofcom.org.uk).

The portal will include:

- information for children and parents on how to use communications technology safely;
- consumer information, such as information on digital television and radio, and guidance on online shopping and so on. ('e-commerce');
- information for teachers and other education professionals on media literacy; and
- links to relevant websites and research into issues on media literacy.

We are considering publishing a media literacy newsletter (online), to spread information and raise the profile of our work in this area.

Section 6

Common labelling of audiovisual materials

In future, viewers and listeners will be able to get their 'content' by satellite, cable, digital terrestrial television or digital audio broadcast. It may be by subscription, free to air, encrypted or PIN-protected. You may be able to access online content through premium-rate phone lines, over the internet or by broadband connection. We can watch and hear programmes on television and radios, on PCs or on 3G mobiles.

Programmes may be available on demand at any time, or recorded to watch later by personal video recorders. Content will also come to us on VHS, CD, MP3 and DVD. Some of this content will be regulated, some not. As you can imagine, there's huge potential here for confusion, frustration and offence.

No matter what the source, young and vulnerable people need protection from inappropriate and harmful content and services. Our codes will continue to give them protection in the areas we regulate. The industry will also take some responsibility. But all of us will have to take more responsibility for what we, and our families, watch and listen to.

We have to become 'active' viewers and listeners, and some more than others. Families with young children, for example, may need particular help.

We need to know more about the nature of programmes and how they come to be on our screens and radios. We need to know how to get the programmes we want, and

how to stop those we don't. In short, we will have to take more control of our viewing and listening.

We think that viewers and listeners can only make informed choices with clear, accurate and timely advice about content. To provide this, we need a framework to label the content.

We challenged the industry to create and apply this framework to all electronic audiovisual material, no matter how it is distributed. With industry agreement, we proposed that we should set up, as a first step, a working group on labelling from across the media (including the BBC, commercial public service broadcasters, BSkyB, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), the mobile industry, the Internet Service Providers' Association (ISPA), the Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers' Association (ELSPA), and others).

We propose the following definitions.

- Label – a word or phrase to describe the nature of the content (for example, 'contains strong language').
- Rating – a judgement of the nature of the content (for example, 'suitable for family viewing'), also known as a 'classification'.
- Audiovisual material – any content that uses a combination of sight and sound to present information (for example, video, but not still images).

The Netherlands was the first country to introduce a single classification system for the audiovisual industry. Research by the Netherlands Broadcasting Corporation suggests that over 80% of parents of children aged between four and 15 want some sort of classification of audiovisual products (see note 3 below). A similar percentage said that if a classification system was available, they'd use it. In particular, parents want to know if productions contain violence, discrimination, drug abuse, frightening scenes, strong language and sex. Research by the BBFC confirms these findings and suggests these categories should go further, to include an idea of how often or how strong (see note 4 below).

The BBC has also found that TV viewers prefer information about programmes to be delivered to them as clear messages in text, describing any content which may cause offence.

In the digital age, viewers and listeners will rely more and more on programme makers and broadcasters to tell them what's being provided. While some information included in labels may help in searching, our main concern is to make sure the information is presented in a consistent way. Only then can young and vulnerable people be properly protected from possible harmful or offensive content.

However, already different sectors and different rules are leading to a messy range of labels and information. Unless everyone starts to work together, this could be a recipe for real confusion.

We have a critical role to play, to make sure that viewers and listeners in the digital age have consistent, accurate information they can trust.

Responses to the consultation

This proposal was supported by consumer groups, many non-industry organisations (film, education, academics, libraries and child-protection agencies) and private individuals.

However, most television broadcasters (apart from the BBC, Scottish Media Group (SMG) and The Community Channel) were against the idea of a common labelling scheme – at least for now. The commercial public service broadcasting (PSB) channels (ITV, Channel 4 and Five) do not believe there's enough evidence of potential harm to justify the possible cost. They are also not convinced that different labelling schemes mean they're confusing, or that a single labelling system will guarantee informed choices. They also argue that viewers have particular expectations according to the channel or brand they're watching

3 <http://www.kijkwijzer.nl/engels/ekijkwijzer.html>

4 Sense & Sensibilities: Public Opinion & the BBFC Guidelines, September 2000

(especially with the PSBs). Since the viewer 'understands' a channel, it reduces the need for a common framework which, they argue, could actually weaken their brands.

The Internet Service Providers' Association (ISPA) and various other web-publishing stakeholders (The Newspaper Society and others) also expressed their concern, as did the Mobile Broadband Group (MBG).

A general worry was the basic differences between broadcast material (which is regulated) and online material (which isn't), and the feeling that a common labelling framework could just be regulation using another name (ISPA and Yahoo).

Many also thought it would be difficult to put a common framework in place for different types of media. However, the Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA) showed how their own labelling system for internet content could be developed for all media.

THUS pointed out that a common framework, even if it could be applied to web material created in the UK, might confuse or even cause a false sense of security if foreign material was not labelled in a similar way.

A number of important issues related to labelling were discussed at a consultation meeting in July. Members of the Media Literacy team were there to hear the comments.

Our response

Our view is still firm. Viewers and listeners need enough information about content, to make informed choices about what they watch and listen to. We realise the likely effect that changing viewing habits will have on the industry. However, the sooner we recognise and begin to prepare for these changes, the less of an effect they are likely to have on viewers and the industry.

We recognise the concerns expressed in the consultation responses, and without the support of broadcasters and internet service providers the initiative will not succeed. For this reason, we consider that the first task of the working group is to carry out more research.

The working group will investigate how viewers in the digital age want to receive information about the nature of challenging content, as they sit down to make their choices. We will invite representatives of the PSB broadcasters, BSkyB, BBFC, ISPA, ICRA, the children's charities, the Mobile Broadband Group, Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV) and others to form a working group. The mission will be to look at how viewing and listening habits may change in a digital world, where multi-channel broadcast, personal video recorders and on-demand services may become routine. The group will be able to look at the experiences of other countries, where similar labelling schemes are up and running. The outcome of this research will show what we need to do to allow people to make informed choices in the digital age.

Section 7

Other issues raised in the consultation

Regulatory impact assessment (RIA)

A number of people who replied disagreed with our proposal not to carry out a regulatory impact assessment (RIA). We said in the consultation that since we were working with the approval of stakeholders, and we were not proposing detailed plans, we did not believe this kind of assessment was necessary. The purpose of the consultation was simply to gather people's views on ways to promote media literacy.

However, BSkyB argued that any 'proposal' we made could have a significant effect on those involved, within the meaning of Section 7 of the Communications Act. In particular, it argued that our decision that we need a common labelling system should only apply if we have an RIA.

The Internet Service Providers' Association (ISPA) commented that any attempt to force content labelling onto internet service providers would need an RIA. If this is what we were planning to do, we would of course fully consider the need for an RIA. However, our consultation was not proposing a compulsory labelling system.

Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Sonia Livingstone argued that media literacy will have a significant effect on the general public - and that a media-literate public will, in turn, have a significant effect on businesses in the UK.

Our response

As we said in our original consultation, these initiatives (such as a working group considering a possible scheme for labelling content) should only stimulate discussion among those involved. The consultation was not proposing options we should put in place.

We understand the industry's concern that, even if a proposal is not for regulatory action, it should be thoroughly analysed against the range of options available.

However, we do not believe the challenge made to the industry - to consider creating a common scheme for labelling content - was advanced enough to merit an RIA.

We still strongly support the idea that viewers and listeners should have information about the nature of content, allowing them to make informed choices over what they watch and listen to. We invite the industry to take part in a working group on labelling content. We will ask this group to look at further research into the issue, and we would expect them to consider a number of different options.

We believe that media literacy as a whole will have an effect on the general public. However, the other areas of work we have identified - research, and connecting, partnering and signposting - are tools to help us understand what else needs to happen to increase levels of media literacy.

For example, our research work may well highlight issues or concerns that could need further action, but it would only be at that stage that we would ask whether an RIA was appropriate. It's too early in the process to consider that question now.

Regulating the internet

CHIS (the Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety) commented that "implicit in the discussions on the Communications Bill in Parliament was the notion that, should Ofcom become convinced that the internet industry was failing to make reasonable and timely progress in terms facilitating effective parental controls in relation to internet access, or in terms of developing greater media literacy in relation to the internet among parents, that you [Ofcom] could go back to ask the Secretary of State to give you new powers or directions".

Our response

In the Communications Act, Parliament made a clear distinction between broadcast content (which we must regulate), and internet content (which is outside our responsibility). Our board believes this was

the right approach. However, over time and as new technology means that content can be broadcast over the internet, the difference between 'broadcast' and 'internet' content will blur. The debate hasn't yet begun – in society, in industry or in Parliament – on whether the rules regulating broadcasting should also be applied to the internet.

Greater self-regulation will undoubtedly play a role. Internet users have far more powerful tools, such as filtering software and parental controls, than television viewers or radio listeners. However, there may also be specific areas where relying on the good sense of providers, and the abilities of media-literate users - is not enough. Where those areas are and what, if anything, could or should be done about them are questions that should be central in the debate ahead.

Regulating the press online

The Newspaper Society (NS), News International (NI), the Periodical Publishers Association (PPA) and others expressed concern about the possibility of us regulating online content that is also published in print ('online print material'). The NS and PPA were concerned about the possibility of 'creeping regulation'.

News International (NI) shares this concern but was more explicit: “We urgently seek a more explicit statement from Ofcom that its work in the area of media literacy will not include the print media in any form – either offline or online.”

Our response

We do not plan to regulate online content, whether it is published just online, or also in print.

However, material published online (in the terms set out in Section 11 of the Communications Act 2003), falls within the scope of our duties. However, we do not plan any specific activity in this area.

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