Ofcom's Strategy and Priorities for the Promotion of Media Literacy

A statement

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Ofcom
OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Contents

Summary

1. This statement sets out the conclusions of the consultation of Ofcom (the Office of Communications) in relation to the promotion of media literacy. Ofcom is publishing this statement as a result of a consultation into its proposed strategy and priorities for the promotion of media literacy that was launched in June 2004. The consultation arose as a result of the new duty placed on Ofcom arising from Section 11 of the Communications Act (2003). (See Annex B).

2. There is no single agreed definition of media literacy. As a result of the consultation Ofcom will use the definition: **'Media literacy is the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts'.**

3. In an increasingly converged communications world, people face greater media choice. Changes in technology mean that parents may have to take more responsibility for what they and their children see and hear on screen and online. Media literacy will provide some of the tools they need to make full use of the opportunities offered, to manage their expectations and to protect themselves and their families from the risks involved. Through confident use of communications technologies people will gain a better understanding of the world around them and be better able to engage with it.

4. We will work with stakeholders to help focus on the present and future media literacy needs of all members of society. There are many stakeholders who have a key role to play in the promotion of media literacy skills, knowledge and understanding in both adults and children. These include content producers, broadcasters, platform and network providers, educators, government departments, parents, children's charities and other organisations. Our principal role will be to provide leadership and leverage to promote media literacy.

5. Three key strands of work will be the focus of Ofcom's early work to promote media literacy in the UK. These are:

6. **Research.** An evidence base of research is key to the success of our early work and in defining future priorities for Ofcom and stakeholders. Research will drive our agenda for action. It will help us identify the issues, direct activity and inform progress towards achieving our goals. We will carry out a wide-ranging research programme to investigate emerging media literacy issues, current levels of media literacy and to establish a tracking study.

7. **Connecting, Partnering & Signposting.** We intend to put media literacy clearly on the agenda of all stakeholders. We will proactively seek opportunities to stimulate debate at conferences and events. We will originate and contribute to the work of others to raise awareness and stimulate debate of important media literacy issues throughout the UK and in Europe. We also aim to add value to existing media literacy activity, stimulate new work, and promote and direct people to advice and guidance on new communications technologies. Ofcom will offer seed-corn funding to support projects that align with our priorities, where a clear need has been established and the project would not proceed without Ofcom's support. Ofcom will use part of its website to direct people to relevant information on media literacy issues.

8. **Labelling.** To make informed choices viewers and listeners need clear, accurate and timely information about the nature of content. Our prime concern in suggesting a common labelling framework is to ensure consistency in the presentation of information related to possible harm and offence, in particular to help protect young and vulnerable people from inappropriate material. Ofcom recognises the concerns raised by some stakeholders about the best way to inform viewers about the nature of content. Ofcom will, therefore, invite key stakeholders to constitute a working group to investigate how viewers prefer to receive information about challenging content, particularly in homes with digital television.

Section 2

Introduction and definition of media literacy

9. We received 94 responses to the consultation. Where the author gave consent these responses are published in full on Ofcom's website (www.ofcom.org.uk). A list of respondents is given in Annex A. We are grateful for the comments made by the organisations and individuals who responded to our proposals and for their interest in this important issue.

10. In July 2004 the Doors section of The Sunday Times canvassed its readers' views on the best means of encouraging media literacy. The Editor of Doors forwarded readers' emails and letters to us.

   This is what readers were asked:

   "What Doors wants to know is what you, as tooled-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 express its gratitude to David Johnson, Editor, Doors, to his staff and to the readers who contributed to this important discussion. The views expressed have helped inform the core conclusions set out in this statement.

11. There is no single, agreed definition of media literacy. There are parallels with traditional literacy: the ability to read and write text. Media literacy is the ability to 'read' and 'write' audiovisual content rather than text. At its simplest level media literacy is the ability to use a range of media and be able to understand the information received.

12. At a more advanced level it moves from recognising and understanding the information to critical thinking skills such as questioning, analysing, appreciating and evaluating that information.

13. Someone who is media literate may also be able to produce communications in electronic form, such as write emails, create web pages or video materials.

14. The consultation proposed a working definition of media literacy as being 'the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and produce communications in a variety of forms'. Or put simply, the ability to operate the technology to find what you are looking for, to understand that material, to have an opinion about it and where necessary to respond to it. Media literate people will be able to exercise informed choices about content and services, be able to take advantage of the full range of opportunities offered by new communications technologies and be better able to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive materials.

Responses to the consultation

15. A number of respondents suggested alternative definitions or additional phrases to extend our working definition. Alternative definitions, in the main proposed by stakeholders in film (UK Film Council and bfi) and education (Institute of Education, NIACE) would see 'critical analysis' of content and 'taste, aesthetic discrimination, creativity and empowerment' of people take a greater role in the definition of media literacy than access and use of technology and content production and management. Others suggested greater emphasis on particular skills, knowledge and understanding such as the need to acquire 'production skills' (Scottish Screen and others), or knowledge of costs (ICSTIS and TUFF) or understanding of copyright issues (British Music Rights and others).

16. BT commented that the distinction between 'analysis' and 'evaluation' is too fine to warrant their separation into different categories.

Ofcom's response

17. The consultation proposed a working definition of media literacy that is short and simple but broad enough to cover all communication technologies and types of content and service as well as the different ways in which people use them. Ofcom is not persuaded that adding emphases or elaborations to the working definition will significantly clarify what is meant by media literacy.

18. There is, however, merit in suggestions made by Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Sonia Livingstone to use 'create' rather than 'produce' to recognise the creative aspect of the communication process. Replacing 'forms' with the more inclusive 'contexts' recognises that the same content (e.g. video) can be accessed on different platforms (e.g. television, PC or mobile phone) that may be subject to different norms and regulatory regimes and in different physical contexts or environments.

19. Whilst we do see a difference between 'analyse' and 'evaluate' we take the point made by BT that it is a fine distinction. We consider both these abilities can be inferred in 'understand'.

20. We will use the definition: **'media literacy is the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts'.**

21. We recognise that stakeholders will continue to use whatever definition of media literacy emphasises their own priorities and suits their particular aims and objectives.

Section 3

Our approach

22. Our work provides an opportunity to focus stakeholders on the future needs of all members of society. Our principal role will be to provide leadership and leverage to help achieve this goal. We may also provide seed-corn funding for projects and activities that contribute to our objectives but would otherwise not happen. Ofcom has to prioritise its work in this area. We will consult with and involve stakeholders throughout the nations and regions, from all sections of society and of all ages to ensure a diversity of view.

23. Whatever we do to promote media literacy through stakeholders will have to result from persuasion and debate, as Ofcom has no formal power to require action to promote media literacy.

24. There are many stakeholders who have a part to play in improving the level of media literacy in both adults and children. Content producers, broadcasters, platform and network providers all have a responsibility in this area and are well placed to offer advice, support and guidance to their customers.

25. Formal education plays a vital role in laying the foundations of media literacy. Schools, colleges and universities offer opportunities for the development of skills at a variety of levels. They are also well placed to undertake research to inform future priorities and challenges. Informal educational opportunities in libraries, UK Online and community art centres give people beyond school age a chance to use the technology and experience the potential it offers.

26. The Home Office, Department for Education and Skills, Department for Culture Media and Sport and Department of Trade and Industry all have areas of responsibility related to media literacy.

27. Parents, carers, children's charities, viewer and listener organisations and others are rightly focussed on issues of harm and offence, and protecting the young and vulnerable people from illegal, harmful and inappropriate content and services.

28. Organisations such as Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services (ICSTIS - for premium rate telephony), Internet Service Providers' Association, British Board of Film Classification, 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 the Safer Internet Action Plan help provide users with the information and advice they need to benefit from new communications technologies.

Responses to the consultation

29. There was little comment on our proposed approach. Where there was comment it supported our approach to lead and lever stakeholders' activity. There were some calls for Ofcom to take a more active role (Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV) and others). News International commented that consumers and markets promote media literacy very effectively out of commercial self-interest.

30. Some respondents (Centre for the Study of Children Youth and Media, Institute of Education, Regional Screen Agencies and others) considered our work should place more emphasis on people acquiring greater appreciation, aesthetic discrimination and critical awareness of content. Some (BECTA and others) suggested that the production of content was a way to greater media literacy and should be encouraged.

Ofcom's response

31.   We welcome the support given to our approach to provide leadership and leverage with stakeholders to focus on the future needs of all members of society. We will take positive action where necessary and appropriate in achieving its goal of promoting media literacy.

32.   In the early years of our work in media literacy we must focus our efforts where we can make most impact and where we consider the greatest risk to be for citizen-consumers. Some of our research will give us a greater understanding of people's critical awareness, but most of our work will focus on issues of awareness, access and control of content. Ofcom recognises the importance of people being able to appreciate and be critical of content. We also recognise the important role production of content plays in developing confidence in the use of technology and greater media literacy. But to make substantial and timely progress in these areas would require resources beyond the scope of those available to Ofcom. Other stakeholders are often better placed than Ofcom to undertake work in these areas.

33.   We have identified three priority strands of work that are outlined in the following sections of the Statement.

Section 4

Research

34.   Key to the success of our early work in promoting media literacy and defining future priorities is to develop an evidence base of research to identify the issues, to direct our work and inform progress towards achieving our goals.

35.   Research[1] carried out by the ITC, BSC and others 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."

36.   In consultation with other interested parties we will conduct research to begin to answer some of these questions and inform future policy debate. Our research will focus on gaining a greater understanding of the levels of media literacy 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 disadvantaged. This research will identify which sections of society are at risk and where Ofcom needs to focus its resources.

37.   We will explore barriers to greater media literacy. If access is a prerequisite to gaining competence and confidence in the use of communications technologies, we need to know what physical, learning, social, economic or technical barriers exist. And which sectors of society are at greatest risk of being excluded? This research will help identify which stakeholders are best placed to help overcome barriers to greater media literacy.

38.   We will consider people's attitudes and expectations when viewing and listening to materials. This work will help content providers to supply information about the nature of materials so as to reduce the chance of causing harm or offence.

39.   There are tools available to help viewers access and control content including electronic programme guides (EPG) and filtering tools for internet content. Our research will help producers of both hardware and software to focus clearly on the needs of the users and help them to produce tools that are effective and easy to use.

40.   Research will also make a valuable contribution to understanding the higher order levels of skills particularly related to critical viewing. Where appropriate, Ofcom will contribute to research initiated by others that will help our understanding in key areas.

41.   Our research will include long running studies of people's changing attitudes and expectations of content delivered on different platforms. In particular, we want to know about emerging media literacy and protection issues such as the impact of personal video recorders, 3G mobile Internet access and location based services.

42.   In particular we will try to identify potential barriers to the evolution and use of effective access tools particularly on mobile internet platforms.

43.   We also propose to undertake research to direct the two other main strands Connecting, Partnering & Signposting and labelling of audiovisual content.

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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

Responses to the consultation

44. There was universal support for Ofcom's proposal to undertake research into issues relating to media literacy. Most stakeholders agree that little was known about the level of media literacy in the UK. Several respondents proposed that a review of existing research should be undertaken as a first step. Several respondents (Media Literacy Task Force, Institute of Education and others) suggested key questions that should be addressed by our initial research. Some stakeholders offered access to research they had commissioned. The BBC and BT commented that our research should not be driven by the academic community but should offer practical information to direct action.

45. A number of important research issues were discussed at a stakeholder consultation meeting in July. Members of the Media Literacy and Market Research teams were in attendance to capture stakeholders comments.

Ofcom's response

46. Ofcom's research will form the basis of our early work to promote media literacy. The core of this research will be to complete an audit of media literacy skills across the UK, including core media literacy skills, knowledge and understanding across media platforms, thereby gaining a picture of varying levels of media literacy. The aim is to understand different types of media literacy.

47. We envisage this research will identify issues and concerns requiring further, more focussed research.

    Examples of emerging issues that may require further research could include:

    • Children's use of new generation mobile phones and the content and service issues that arise (such as access to adult content and the use of location based services);

    • Attitudes towards potentially harmful and offensive content and services obtained via the internet (e.g. extreme websites promoting suicide, and race hate) and user understanding of and attitudes to existing controls in this area; and

• Barriers to use of online services, including abuse of personal information (e.g. identity and bank detail theft), spam, system security, and experience of firewalls and virus protection software.

48. Two literature reviews of academic research in the areas of children's and adult media literacy are underway and will be published later this year.

49. Our research will also include qualitative projects on discrete areas of media literacy.

50. Many of the elements of media literacy will be tracked over time to assess the impact of any media literacy programmes.

51. We will invite stakeholders to form a Media Literacy Research Forum. We will ask representatives of broadcasting; the internet and mobile industry; education and academia to join with consumer organisations and representative of the Nations in establishing the Forum. They will provide expert comment on our research plans and indicate where they see future research as being of value.

Research principles

52. Ofcom's research principles will be to:

    • involve the industry and stakeholders in developing Ofcom research methodologies through the setting up of a Media Literacy Research Forum;

    • make a priority of those research areas which can give practical, operational guidance to Ofcom and industry stakeholders;

    • respond to emerging issues; and

    • monitor all relevant research from other sources.

Section 5

Connecting, Partnering & Signposting

53.   We aim to add value to existing media literacy activity, stimulate new work and promote and direct people to advice and guidance concerning new communications technologies. In this strand of work Ofcom can have an immediate impact in raising the profile of media literacy and putting the issues firmly on stakeholders' agendas.

Connecting

54.   Ofcom's key role in this area will be to bring interested parties together to maximise their efforts to promote media literacy.

55.   There are many projects and initiatives in education and elsewhere that add to our understanding of media literacy particularly in relation to critical viewing and content production. Ofcom will promote these initiatives and encourage collaborative working in this area.

56.   For example, teachers report difficulty gaining access and rights to use appropriate visual materials to support their media literacy teaching. Ofcom is in a position to explore with a range of stakeholders effective ways of making resources available for education.

Partnering

57.   Ofcom will be in a position to join in partnership with other stakeholders on a range of projects that address unmet needs identified by research.

58.   In particular, we will seek to support initiatives to encourage the elderly and the socially or physically disadvantaged to gain experience of new communications technologies.

Signposting

59.   The media literacy landscape is wide and people do not always know the range of activity going on or where to find it. We will help raise the profile of existing initiatives.

60.   Ofcom will also direct people to advice and guidance on a range of issues related to communications technologies.

61.   For instance, research[2] suggests that despite the availability of high quality information related to internet safety, parents still remain largely unaware of how to manage their children's experiences online. Ofcom will encourage stakeholders to provide advice and guidance to their customers on matters of safety and best practice.

62.   In the consultation we said that Ofcom will encourage the creation of a portal, or use part of its website to facilitate this strand of work.

Responses to the consultation

63.   There was wide support for this strand of work. Several offers of partnership have already been made and more arose during the consultation (ranging from Media Smart to Learndirect).

64.   BSkyB suggests that only after research into the current state of media literacy in the UK and a review of activity being undertaken by stakeholders should Ofcom take action in this area.

Ofcom's response

65.   We intend to put media literacy firmly on the agenda of all stakeholders. We will originate initiatives and contribute to the work of others to raise awareness and stimulate debate of important media literacy issues throughout the UK and in Europe. We will proactively seek opportunities to generate debate by stakeholders including at conferences and events.

66.   In May 2005 we will work 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. In the run up to ALW we will support a number of activities to raise awareness of media literacy including a series of workshops to be run throughout England and Wales.

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

67. The UK assumes the Presidency of the EU in the second half of 2005. Ofcom is in discussions with DCMS on a joint initiative during the Presidency to highlight the importance of advancing media literacy across Europe in the context of updating the Television without Frontiers Directive.

68. Research suggests that one of the main barriers to people using filtering technologies to manage their family's online activity is the perception that it is difficult to install and not 'user-friendly'. Ofcom and the Home Office have begun work with the industry to create a British Standard for domestic filtering software. The Standard will encourage the industry to make their products more effective and easier to use. The kite mark will also help give confidence to the user and increase take-up. The Standard will be published in 2005.

69. One of the sectors of society likely to need particular help in developing greater media literacy is the older audience. Ofcom with Help the Aged is planning a series of workshops for members of the Speaking Up for Our Age forums. Forum members attending the workshops will then cascade their learning and experience throughout the membership of the 350 groups in the UK.

70. We will continue dialogue with key partners and extend the range of potential partners to all sectors of the communications industry and other relevant stakeholders. Our research will inform us about the various stakeholder initiatives in place to promote media literacy. Ofcom will lend support to maximise the impact of these initiatives.

71. Ofcom would offer seed-corn funding to support new projects where a clear need has been established and the project would not go ahead without Ofcom's support.

72. The consultation suggested the creation of a media literacy 'portal', either hosted by Ofcom or partners as a means of directing people to media literacy material. We have decided in the first instance to develop this work as part of our own extensive website (www.ofcom.org.uk).

73. The portal will include the following elements:

    • Information for children and parents on issues related to safe use of communications technologies;

    • Consumer information, for example, information on digital television and digital radio and guidance on e-commerce;

    • Information for teachers and other education professionals on media literacy; and

    • Links to relevant websites and research into media literacy related issues.

74. To help further disseminate information and to raise the profile of our work in this area Ofcom might publish a media literacy e-newsletter.

Section 6

Common labelling of audiovisual materials

75. In a 'converged media world' viewers and listeners will be able to obtain their 'content' via satellite, cable, digital terrestrial television or digital audio broadcast. It may be subscription, free to air, encrypted or PIN-protected. Online content may be accessed via premium rate telephone lines, over the internet or streamed by broadband connection. Programmes can be watched and listened to on television and radio sets, on PCs or on 3G mobiles. Programmes may be available on-demand at any time or time-shifted 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. The potential for confusion, frustration and offence is great.

76. Young and vulnerable people need protection from inappropriate and harmful content and services from whatever source. Ofcom's codes will continue to afford protection in the areas we regulate. The industry, in the form of self and co-regulation will also take some responsibility. But it will fall to all of us to take more responsibility for what we and our families watch and listen to. We will all become gatekeepers for content coming into our homes.

77. We have to become more 'active' viewers and listeners. Some may need to be more proactive in protecting themselves and their families than others: those with young children may need particular help.

78. 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 keep off our screen and radio the programmes we do not want. In short, we will have to take more control of our viewing and listening.

79. To enable this, we consider viewers and listeners need to have clear, accurate and timely advice about the nature of content so that they can make an informed choice. This advice can be effectively delivered using a content labelling framework.

80. Ofcom challenged the industry to consider creating a common content labelling (information) scheme for electronic audiovisual material delivered across all platforms. With industry agreement, We propose that we should establish a cross-media working group on labelling (including the BBC, PSB commercial broadcasters, BSkyB, BBFC, the mobile industry, ISPA, ELSPA and others) as a first step.

81. We propose the following definitions:

    - Label - a word or phrase to describe the nature of content e.g. contains strong language;
    - Rating - an appraisal of the nature of content e.g. suitable for family viewing. Also known as a 'classification'; and
    - Audiovisual material - any content that uses a combination of sight and hearing to present information e.g. video, but not still images.

82. The Netherlands was the first country to introduce a uniform classification system for the audiovisual industry. Research[3] by the Netherlands Broadcasting Corporation indicates that over 80 per cent of parents of children aged between four and 15 want some sort of classification of audiovisual products. A similar proportion of parents also said they would use such a system if it were available. In particular, parents want to know if productions contain violence, discrimination, drug abuse, frightening scenes, strong language and sex. Research[4] by the BBFC confirms these findings and suggests these categories should be expanded to include some indication of frequency or intensity.

83. Recent unpublished research by the BBC also suggests that viewers of television programmes prefer information about programmes to be delivered to them as clear text messages describing content which may cause offence.

84. In the digital age, viewers and listeners will become ever more reliant on the content provider to offer information about the nature of content. Whilst some information included in labels may facilitate searching, our prime concern is to ensure consistency in presenting information related to possible harm and offence and protecting young and vulnerable people from inappropriate material.

85. Already, however, there is a divergence in the regulatory frameworks and rules that apply and

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3   http://www.kijkwijzer.nl/engels/ekijkwijzer.html
4   Sense & Sensibilities: Public Opinion & the BBFC Guidelines, September 2000

different sectors use different labels and are promoting different solutions. Without some collaboration and planning there is the likelihood that this will result in multiple, conflicting label systems that will confuse.

86. Ofcom has a critical role to play to ensure consistency and accuracy of information about content in order to inform and empower viewers and listeners in the digital future.

Responses to the consultation

87. Consumer groups, many non-industry stakeholder organisations (film, education, academics, libraries and child protection agencies) and individuals supported the proposal.

88. However, the majority of television broadcasters (exceptions include the BBC, SMG and The Community Channel) were opposed to the introduction of a common labelling scheme – at least at the current time. The commercial public service broadcasting (PSB) channels (ITV, Channel 4 and Five) believe there is insufficient evidence showing consumer harm or detriment to justify the possible cost. They are not convinced that a divergence of labelling schemes will be inherently confusing or that a common labelling framework will deliver the type of information required for informed choice. They also argue there is a strong link already in place between viewer expectation and behaviour and the channel or brand (especially with the PSBs). This understanding on the part of the viewer about the nature of the channel concerned therefore reduces the need for a common framework and, furthermore, it is argued such a common framework could weaken the brand.

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

90. A general concern was the inherent differences between broadcast and online material (regulated v non-regulated) and the sense that a common labelling framework could be regulation by another name (ISPA and Yahoo).

91. A common practical concern was the perceived difficulty in getting a workable framework in place for different types of media. However, the Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA) outlined in their proposal how the ICRA label model for internet content could be developed to afford labelling of content on all platforms.

92. THUS noted that a common framework, even if it could be applied to UK originated web material, might actually cause confusion or a false sense of security amongst internet users if non-UK material was not labelled in a similar way.

93. A number of important issues related to labelling were discussed at a stakeholder consultation meeting in July. Members of the media literacy team were in attendance to capture stakeholder's comments.

Ofcom's response

94. Ofcom continue to strongly support the need for providing viewers and listeners with adequate information about the nature of content so that they can make informed choices about their and their family's viewing and listening. We do not underestimate the likely impact of people's changing viewing habits on the industry. The sooner we recognise and begin to prepare for these changes the less impact they are likely to have on viewers and the industry.

95. 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, Ofcom consider that the initial focus of the working group should be to undertake further research.

96. The working group will investigate how viewers prefer to receive information about the nature of challenging content at the point of choice in the digital age. Ofcom 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 working group will consider how people's viewing and listening habits may change in a digital world where multichannel broadcast, personal video recorders and audio-visually rich on-demand services may be the norm. Experience of viewers and industry in other countries where similar labelling schemes are in place will help inform the group's work. The outcome of research will define what needs to be done to allow people to make informed choices in the digital communication age.

Other issues raised in the consultation

Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA)

97. A number of respondents disagreed with Ofcom's proposal not to conduct an RIA. In the consultation Ofcom said that, as it was working with the consent of stakeholders, it did not believe an RIA was necessary as no detailed plans were being proposed. The purpose of the consultation was to seek stakeholders' views on possible ways of fostering initiatives for promoting media literacy.

98. BSkyB argued that any Ofcom 'proposal' could involve a significant impact upon stakeholders within the meaning of Section 7 of the Communications Act. In particular, it argued that Ofcom's "decision that a common labelling system is required" should be subject to an RIA.

99. Internet Service Providers' Association (ISPA) commented that any attempt to force content labelling onto Internet Service Providers would need an RIA. Ofcom would of course give full consideration to the need for an RIA in such a scenario – the consultation was not however proposing to mandate a labelling system.

100. Andrea Millwood-Hargrave and Sonia Livingstone argued that media literacy will have a significant impact upon the general public and that a media literate public will in turn have a significant impact upon businesses operating in the UK.

Ofcom's response

101. As we indicated in our original consultation, our initiatives in this area (such as proposing that through a cross-media working group consideration be given to a possible scheme for content labelling) are intended to stimulate discussion amongst stakeholders with a view to encouraging adoption by the industry of appropriate measures to bring about and improve media literacy. The consultation was not proposing options for implementation by Ofcom.

102. We acknowledge industry concern that even if a proposal is not for regulatory action, it should be subject to rigorous analysis with full consideration given to the range of options available.

103. However, we do not believe the challenge set to industry to consider creating a common content labelling scheme was sufficiently advanced to constitute a proposal that might merit an RIA.

104. Ofcom continues to strongly support the need for providing viewers and listeners with information about the nature of content so that they can make informed choices about their and their family's viewing and listening. We invite the industry to take part in a working group on content labelling. This working group will be asked to consider further research into the issue and Ofcom would expect it to give consideration to a variety of different options.

105. We believe that media literacy as a whole will have an impact upon the general public; however, the other areas of work identified by Ofcom, research and connecting, partnering & signposting, are tools that will enable us to understand what further activity is needed to achieve greater media literacy. For example, our research work may well highlight issues or concerns that could require further action, and it is at this stage in our media literacy activity that we will consider whether or not an RIA might be appropriate; at this point however such an assessment would be premature.

Regulation of the internet

106. 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".

Ofcom's response

107. In the Communications Act, Parliament made a clear distinction between broadcast content, which Ofcom is required to regulate, and internet content, over which Ofcom has no remit. The Ofcom Board believes this was the right approach. However, over time and as new technology enables the delivery of broadcast content over Internet Protocol-based networks, the distinction between broadcast content and internet content will blur. The debate has yet to begin – in society, in industry and in Parliament – over the extent to which it would be appropriate and necessary to try to extend the approach taken in regulating broadcast content to content delivered over the internet.

108. Greater self-regulation will undoubtedly play a role: in the online world, the user has far more powerful tools, such as filtering software and parental controls, than are available to the television viewer or radio listener. However, there may also be some specific areas where self-restraint by providers and caveat emptor by the media-literate user - empowered by innovative technology to search and filter content - is not enough. Where those areas might lie - indeed, whether they warrant definition at all - what should be done to address them and what is feasible should all be central to the debate ahead.

Regulation of press online

109. The Newspaper Society (NS), News International (NI) the Periodical Publishers Association (PPA) and others expressed concern about the possible regulation by Ofcom of online content that was also published in print ('online print material'). The NS and PPA were concerned about regulatory creep. NI share this concern but were more explicit in suggesting that any media literacy activity more generally should not encompass their work, stating "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".

Ofcom's response

110. Ofcom has no intention of regulating online content, whether published solely online or previously or simultaneously in print. (see paragraphs 107-108).

111. However, material published online (in the terms set out in Section 11 of the Communications Act 2003), falls within the scope of Ofcom's duties but no specific activity is proposed in this area.

Respondents to the Consultation

Alliance Against Counterfeiting & Piracy

Banks, David

BBC

BFI

British Music Rights

BSkyB

BT

Capital Radio

Centre for Media Literacy Research, University of Wales

Centre for the study of Children Youth and Media, Institute of Education

Channel 4

Childnet International

Children & Radio

Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety

Christian Broadcasting Council

Churches' Media Council

CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Informational Professionals)

Cirencester College Media Department

Citizens Online

Collins, Professor Richard

Community Media Association

Community TV Trust

CRCA (Commercial Radio Companies Association)

Ellis, Professor John

ELSPA

EM Media

Five

Forest Community Media

Gillespie, Dr M, Hoskins, Dr A Gow, Professor J

Hairnet

Hawthorn High School

ICRA (Internet Content Rating Association)

ICSTIS (Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services)

ISPA (Internet Service Providers' Association)

In the picture

Institute of local TV

ITFC (Independent Television Facilities Centre)

ITV

IWF (Internet Watch Foundation)

Lastfridaymob

Learning Difficulties Media

Manchester, Helen

Marshall, Toby

MeCCSA (Media Communication and Cultural Studies Association)

Media Education Wales

Media Literacy Task Force

Media Literacy UK Consortium

Media Smart

Media Trust and Community Channel

Mediawatch-UK

Millwood Hargrave, Andrea and Livingstone, Professor Sonia

Mobile Broadband Group

Motion Picture Association

MovIES

MTV Network Europe

Museums Libraries and Archives Council

News International

Newspaper Society

NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education)

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission

Northern Film and Media Ltd

Northern Visions (NvTv)

Ntl

Ofsted

Oxford Internet Institute

Peepo.co.uk

Periodical Publishers Association

Premium Rate Association

RNIB (Royal National Institute of the Blind)

RNID (Royal National Institute for Deaf people)

SCBG (Satellite and Cable Broadcasters Group)

SCONUL Advisory Committee on Information Literacy

Scottish Qualifications Authority

Scottish Screen

Sheffield Media and Exhibition Centre

SMG (Scottish Media Group)

South West Screen

Sunday Times

Taverner, Paul

Telecommunications United Kingdom Fraud Forum

Telewest Broadband

THUS

Transact Group Ltd

Tri-vision International Ltd

TruStar Global Media Group Ltd

Ufi Ltd

UK Association of Online Publishers

UK Film Council

Voice of the Listener and Viewer

Ward, Chris

Wilson, Alan R

Wythenshawe Community TV Project

Yahoo!

Section 11 Communications Act (2003)

Ofcom assumed its powers under the Communications Act 2003 (the "Act") on 29 December 2003. The promotion of media literacy is a new duty for Ofcom arising from Section 11 of the Act.

Media literacy

11   Duty to promote media literacy

(1) It shall be the duty of OFCOM to take such steps, and to enter into such arrangements, as appear to them calculated-

(a) to bring about, or to encourage others to bring about, a better public understanding of the nature and characteristics of material published by means of the electronic media;

(b) to bring about, or to encourage others to bring about, a better public awareness and understanding of the processes by which such material is selected, or made available, for publication by such means;

(c) to bring about, or to encourage others to bring about, the development of a better public awareness of the available systems by which access to material published by means of the electronic media is or can be regulated;

(d) to bring about, or to encourage others to bring about, the development of a better public awareness of the available systems by which persons to whom such material is made available may control what is received and of the uses to which such systems may be put; and

(e) to encourage the development and use of technologies and systems for regulating access to such material, and for facilitating control over what material is received, that are both effective and easy to use.

(2) In this section, references to the publication of anything by means of the electronic media are references to its being-

(a) broadcast so as to be available for reception by members of the public or of a section of the public; or

(b) distributed by means of an electronic communications network to members of the public or of a section of the public.

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