Baffled by the new digital world?



Something vital is being debated in the corridors of power. It's called 'media

literacy' and it's changing our lives — though few know what it means. Robbie Hudson seeks your help to find out



ave you noticed the renewed excitement about "new media" this year? It's all because the digital revolution which never went away, by the way — has moved into its next phase ... legal music downloads, television through a computer, up-to-date news on your phone, video on demand. You may well have got to grips with e-mail and txt msgs but, ding-dong, boys

and girls, another wave of super advances needs your urgent attention. "The status quo is not an option,"

Michael Grade declared when launching the BBC's manifesto for the "new digital age of plenty". The trouble with such crackerjack soundbites is this: if you're not "literate" in new technology, it's all too easy to feel left behind. So Doors is launching a campaign to Get Digital.

We want to know how abreast of current developments you are and, as voters, how informed you feel on burning issues such as the digital curriculum for schools — even what the phrase "media literacy" actually means. Is it how we protect our children from the wolves prowling dark corners of the web? Is it



£50 FOR **YOUR VIEWS**

fcom is seeking ideas for improving people's confidence in using new technology as we face an ever more perplexing choice of digital media. What are the issues and where do we turn for answers? Doors invites you to air your views,

which we shall ultimately submit to the Ofcom consultation on media literacy (www.ofcom.org.uk/ consultations/current).

In an e-mail of no more than 200 words, or on a postcard, please respond to one, or at most two, of the questions below - or propose your own topic. We shall put your ideas to key decision-makers, publish the 10 best and reward the readers who submit them with £50 each. The closing date is Tuesday, July 20.

Credit will be given for providing examples to illustrate your points, and for explaining how they relate to your own experience. Mention your age and sex, if relevant. And own up to how well or badly you fared in our dongle quiz (see box at left).

HOW TO ENTER Please include your name, address and daytime

telephone number. Either send your e-mail (200 words maximum) to doors.campaign@sunday-times.co.uk or print your views clearly on a postcard and address it to: Doors Campaign, The Sunday Times, London E98 1ST. Your copyright is assumed to be relinquished, unless specifically retained. The editor's decision is final.

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Your guide to the internet

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creating a video CV to win a new job? Or gran knowing how to "plug and play" her online album of snaps from that kayaking holiday?

Here's one answer from Ofcom, the UK's energetic new communications watchdog: a media-literate person should be able to use electronic guides to find a television programme, watch it critically and respond to its producers via e-mail. Ofcom has another criterion: the ability to "read" and "write" audiovisual information rather than text.

That may sound all geek to some of us. Media literacy is the kind of catch-all expression that bedevils any attempt to involve ordinary people in the discussion. This is a tragedy, because Ofcom's dream is to "inform and empower the citizen-consumer in the digital age", and to that end is inviting full public consultation. This is where you come in.

The Sunday Times's 3.4m readers are exceptional for being early adopters of technology. Set beside readers of other national newspapers, you own more computers, mobile phones and DVD players, and are the most connected to the internet, both at home and work. What is crucial about the dawn of so-called "rich" media is that it proceeds only if people participate. Literacy means being able to decide, to create, to take control.

There are two main issues, in the opinion of Richard Allan, MP for Sheffield Hallam, Liberal Democrat spokesman on information technology. One is access to digital information. This wins politicians the headlines, but it is pointless without the second: the skills needed to exploit the opportunity that access provides. Allan believes that government has placed too much emphasis on such high-profile initiatives as the nationwide online learning centres that offer free training, but which, he says, have reached few Britons and seem — after a flurry of publicity — "to have disappeared into the ether".

The government's goal of a digital connection in every home has relied on digital television, yet the high-speed internet is rapidly overtaking the telly for sheer versatility. Stephen Carter, head of Ofcom, is adamant: "Television cannot deliver a digital society. Only broadband can do that.'

In endorsing the Doors campaign, he adds: "The move to digital broadcasting and to broadband means that media literacy depends in part on a willingness to embrace new technology. That can be a challenge for many people. Changes often bring great benefits, but they can also bring added complexity. Ultimately, the real value of technology is what it can add to our daily lives."

What, though, is a digital society? And do we have the nous to handle it? John Fisher, chief executive of the national

FUN QUIZ: TRY TELLING YOUR MP3 FROM YOUR DONGLE

Here's a quiz to test your new-media mettle. A recent VIPer survey of senior managers and administrators aged 25-54 found that although 13% have Bluetooth, 42% "have no idea what it is"; 5% have DAB radio, but 46% have no idea what it is; 2% have 3G mobile phones, but 54% have no idea what it is. This is between you and your conscience, so if you're stuck, seek guidance from Google.com.

1 Ashley Highfield, the BBC's head of new media, believes that we are entering the age of "martini media". What does he mean?

a) Any time, any place, anywhere b) Crystal clear and intoxicating

2 What is a blogger? a) Someone who writes an online iournal b) Someone who talks on their mobile phone while jogging

3 What can an Mpeg4 file do that TIF can't? a) Show video b) Connect to the internet

4 Who has the higher bandwidth? a) Someone with a camera phone b) Someone with a broadband internet connection

5 "Rip, mix, burn". What's that? a) Turn CDs into music files, fiddle

around with them and create new CDs b) The classic e-business plan: take the money, get the contacts, then run for the hills

6 Do you know your MP3 from your dongle? a) One is a female connection; the other is the male

b) One is a computer file for listening to music; the other is a handy gizmo that plugs directly into a PC

charity Citizens Online, says that there is by all this talk of switchover to DTV." "not enough attention on developing the skills, confidence and motivation that more than 53% of non-adopters cite as the real barriers to getting online". The the new media, you are cut off from more Conservative peer Lord Renfrew of and more things," he says. "These skills Kaimsthorn, a patron of the Westminster are crucial for jobs and, increasingly, for Media Forum — a lively talking shop for keeping up with our children. It is much all things digital — agrees that "many older people don't use these media not computer literate, you cannot be fully because they are not familiar with them". This year, in a DTI survey of consumer out that the government has recognised attitudes towards digital television, three this by making information and communipeople in 10 admitted: "I am confused cation technology (ICT) fourth on its list

Chris Warren, the BBC's executive editor of life skills, warns of the looming digital divide. "If you are not literate in the same as general literacy — if you are involved in their education." He points

of basic skills, after numeracy, literacy and spoken English. Though ICT is winning in the classroom, where does that leave adults who want to coach their children, and care for their online safety?

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 (see right). 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.

Q Who is the

in your home?

internet gatekeeper

Richard Allan MP,

Liberal Democrat

Which single technology has most helped change your life? How?

□ Who is the internet gatekeeper in your home: you; your ISP; your kids; who should it be?

• On a scale of 1 to 10, rate the state of media literacy in your workplace. Who is responsible?

□ "One day, all music will be delivered on the internet," claims Apple's boss, Steve Jobs. Have you started downloading music yet?

U Which aspect of using online services concerns you most?

Every UK household must switch to digital television by 2010, and 53% have done so. What about people who cannot afford the move?

□ Should science classes in schools deal with issues such as possible radiation risks from mobile-phone transmitters? Could you have been better taught?

□ New formats, new media – how do you future-proof your next home-entertainment system?

□ Nearly half of all UK adult web surfers visited BBC Online in March. Does it provide a vital service or is it crowding out commercial rivals?

□ The provider of your internet connection may give you free web space. Do you use it? If not, why not?

□ How do you feel about the "converged media world" descending upon us? Are you marginalised, treading water, or in control?

NEXT WEEK: BUZZ WORDS FOR THE RICH-MEDIA AGE

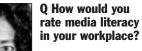
GAMES: the latest games for computer, console and mobile phone are reviewed each week in Culture

WEB DIRECTORY appears in The Magazine

Solutions from those in the front line



"With the increasing emphasis on ICT [information and communication technology] in the national curriculum. those most in danger of computer illiteracy are adults. The first step is by far the hardest. Many people, especially older folk, lack confidence and think that computers are something that only young people can manage. They think using a computer is complicated and that it is getting harder to become computer literate, when actually it is getting easier all the time. It is vital to get people to think of the computer as a tool."



Heather Rabbatts. managing director of 4Learning

"Awareness of internet scams and lies lags behind people's awareness of such issues on television and in print, but this is changing fast. Technical literacy is very mixed. We have 15-20% who are very knowledgeable, another 50-60% with a basic understanding of e-mail, the web and the like, and the rest with simply no idea. I don't particularly buy into the idea of a digital divide in Britain, by the way. Use of mobile phones and digital television cut across the social spectrum. There will be a quantum leap over the next five years."

Q How has the digital revolution changed your life?

Lord Renfrew, patron, Westminster Media Forum

"I find e-mail and the internet indispensable. Yesterday, I was unable to attend a Commons debate on the Lords' amendments to the Higher Education Bill, but this morning I could read every word online. I appreciate how lucky I am, though. Many people are simply excluded from this whizz-bang society we are supposed to be part of. I fear that the same people who are underprivileged in traditional literacy terms - the lowest income groups and least educated - will be the most underprivileged in terms of internet access as well.'

