BU Bournemouth University

Briefing paper

Media literacy: The UK's undead cultural policy

Richard Wallis and David Buckingham, International Journal of Cultural Policy 2016.

The Communications Act of 2003 required Ofcom – the new media regulator – to promote media literacy. The continuing shift in policy focus, however, has meant that the idea of media literacy then changed over time. At the point at which it was enshrined in law, it was primarily intended to inform and empower consumers. Yet today, a succession of other notions of what media literacy was supposed to imply, have rendered it as a 'zombie policy'.

Outline of research

The aim of this research was to investigate the ambiguity of media literacy since 2003. It explores Ofcom's continuing shift of focus in dealing with the policy. As the Communications Act opened up the British media to market forces, and to roll back centralised control Ofcom had to consider future market research in the policy development, so media literacy became a tool for stakeholders. Ofcom supported a taskforce to promote media literacy; this included the UK Film Council and the British Film Institute, who attempted to broaden the educational and critical dimensions of the policy. The research draws attention to the taskforce, and the researchers were in direct contact with its members in order to present a first-hand experience. The purpose of this research is to ultimately understand who was liable for the responsibility of promoting the concept of media literacy and the role which Ofcom played in its current zombie status.

Key findings and impact

- The ambiguous purpose of media literacy policy before 2003 somewhat undermined its future development.

- A taskforce was responsible for developing the Media Literacy Charter, policy work, organising projects to promote media literacy and hosting the Digital Media Literacy Conference in 2010.

- By the end of the Blair era digital technology heavily influenced policy thinking. Therefore during the Brown administration disturbing internet content (especially content accessed by children) became a huge concern and media literacy aligned itself with the promotion of online safety.

- Tanya Byron's report from 2008 assigns responsibility of e-safety directly to the Education Department. Byron stated that media and technology have the potential to be a positive influence.

- Carter's report Digital Britain (2009) contained the proposal for 'National Plan for Digital Participation' as opposed to the National Media Literacy Plan, leaving those working on promoting media literacy with a sense of ambivalence.

- A letter from Jeremy Hunt in 2011 suggested that media literacy skills were found in the existing curriculum and schools were free to develop these skills further. He also stated that media literacy had helped to make the UK a bigger player in the digital market.

- Ofcom's model of media literacy has continued to be influential on an international level.

Read the full paper here:
www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10286632.2016.1229314

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Conclusion

Media literacy was initially developed in media policy as a response to the perceived problem of media violence. By the time the ambiguous policy was established, however, the focus of the policy was directed towards consumer awareness and responsibility. The lack of a clear definition of media literacy from the outset meant that the policy became flexible and hovers within current media policy with no distinct physical form.

Next steps

This is a summary of the second of two articles that, together, have traced the origin and development of media literacy in UK cultural policy. The first of these examined its journey into law (http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0267323113483605); whilst the second (summarised here), its journey since (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10286632.2016.1229314). And this is where the story (and therefore our research) is now paused. The apparent abandonment of media literacy may seem a very strange policy decision in the light of such developments as Leveson, the problematic aspects of social media, and increasing worries about 'fake news': media literacy surely has a role to play in our new era of 'truthiness'. As we ask in our conclusion, should the zombie of media literacy not be prodded back into life?