National Literacy Trust

Changing life stories

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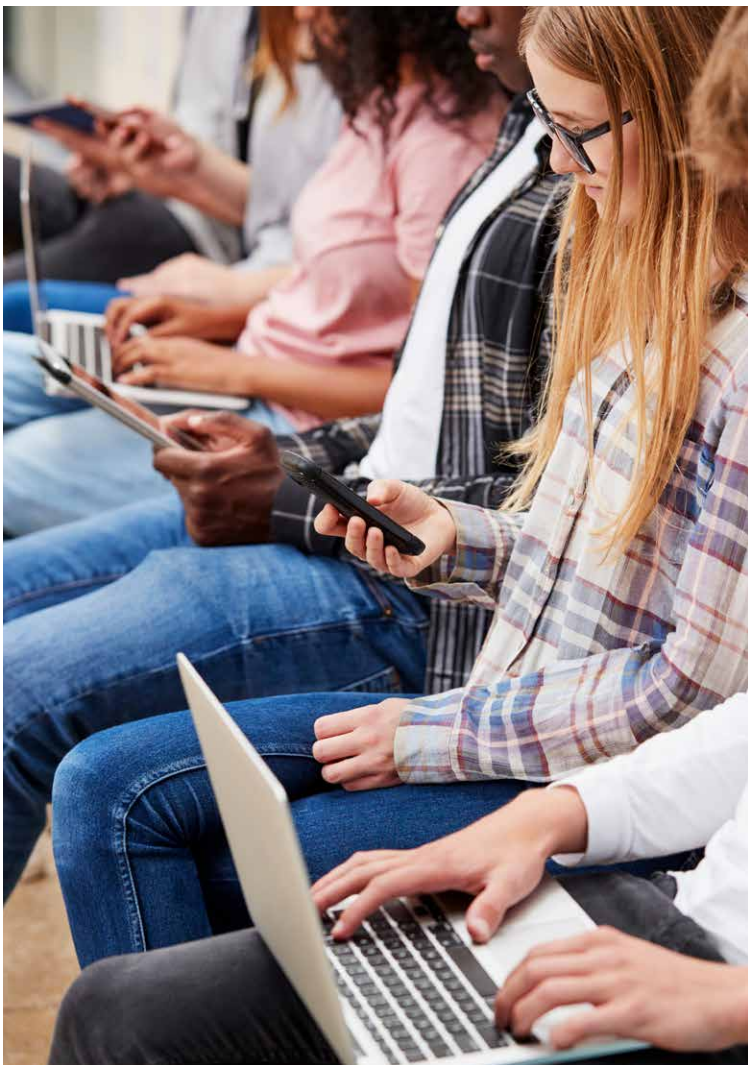
Fake news and critical literacy

The final report of the Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy in Schools

Compiled by the National Literacy Trust



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Foreword

The rise of fake news and its potential to impact on democracy through influencing voter behaviours, has rightly caused alarm. Navigating the news, in a digital media landscape crowded with information and frequent updates, requires each of us to draw on critical literacy skills. These skills enable us to place information in context, to discern fact from fiction, to make an assessment around bias and distortion and to recognise deliberate misinformation when we encounter it.

The new digital media landscape can be bewildering and overwhelming even for experienced adult media consumers. It is even more so for children and young people. We launched this commission through the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy in September 2017, following a report from the National Literacy Trust which stressed that children and young people in England do not have the critical literacy skills they need to identify fake news. Over the last nine months we have collected evidence from children and young people, teachers, academics and media companies.

We have discovered a dangerous lack in the literacy skills that children and young people require to navigate our digital world and identify fake news. Today's children are at risk of exposure to malign agendas and to personal anxiety founded in uncertainty. If we don't take urgent action to bring the teaching of critical literacy into the 21st century, we risk damaging children's democratic futures along with the wellbeing of an entire generation.

The recommendations in this report set out an approach for equipping young people with the critical literacy skills they need to correctly interpret the media in today's constantly evolving digital landscape. We need to dispel anxieties and reverse the decline in trust in the news that we have uncovered. We need to foster the confidence and skills of young people, empowering them to become creators, curators and communicators of news – not just consumers of it.

We are calling on government to take a leading role in enabling schools to embed critical literacy teaching throughout the curriculum. We will also be working with partners in schools, business, media, libraries, communities and voluntary sector organisations to support young people, parents and their teachers. Each has a vital role to play in enabling young people to acquire the knowledge, confidence and literacy skills they need to actively engage with today's plethora of news sources and to thrive in this digital age.

Lucy Powell MP,
Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy

Executive summary

1. Fake news is a serious problem for children and young people, threatening their wellbeing, trust in journalism and democracy itself. News is available through an ever growing range of digital and social media and this proliferation of sources, coupled with their ease of access and shareability has enabled fake news to spread at an unprecedented rate. It has never been more important to ensure that today's children have the literacy skills they need to succeed and thrive in the digital age.

2. The Commission on Fake News and Critical Literacy in Schools found that only 2% of children and young people in the UK have the critical literacy skills they need to tell whether a news story is real or fake. Fake news is driving a culture of fear and uncertainty among young people. Half of children (49.9%) are worried about not being able to spot fake news and almost two-thirds of teachers (60.9%) believe fake news is having a harmful effect on children's well-being by increasing levels of anxiety, damaging self-esteem and skewing their world view.

3. We found that the online proliferation of fake news is making children trust the news less (60.6%). While almost half of older children get their news from websites (43.8%) and social media (49.5% from Snapchat), only a quarter of children actually trust online news sources (26.2% trust websites, 25.1% trust Snapchat). Regulated sources of news, such as TV and radio, remain the most used and the most trusted by children and young people.

4. Children are most likely to talk to their family (29.9%) and friends (23.4%) about fake news and least likely to speak to their teachers (6.4%); yet 98.8% of teachers believe they have the greatest responsibility for helping children develop the literacy skills they need to identify fake news.

5. Children with the poorest literacy skills, such as boys and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, were also found to be the least likely to be able to spot fake news. Indeed, half of teachers (53.5%) believe that the national curriculum does not equip children with the literacy skills they need to identify fake news, and a third (35.2%) feel the critical literacy skills taught in schools are not transferable to the real world.

6. We are launching a Children's Charter on Fake News which encompasses five areas of change, designed to empower young people and give them the requisite skills and knowledge to confidently navigate, analyse and appraise the validity of news; whether accessed online, through print or broadcast media. We propose that children should:

    - Have the critical literacy skills they need to navigate the digital world and question the information they find online
    - Have the right to access accurate news from trustworthy media companies and have opportunities to discuss and contextualise them
    - Be given opportunities to practise their critical literacy skills in real-life digital environments
    - Understand how the news is made in order to develop critical thinking skills and the ability to spot fake news stories
    - Be encouraged and supported to talk about the news that they read at home and with their peers

The commission's recommendations expound upon these, outlining the specific action areas for government, schools, families, media organisations, commercial and third sector organisations and young people themselves, all of whom have valuable roles to play.

Introduction

About the commission

The Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills in Schools is a joint venture conducted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy and the National Literacy Trust.

The aim of the commission is to explore the impact of fake news on young people in the UK and establish what approaches might be most successful in addressing this issue, focusing specifically on how best to support the teaching and learning of critical literacy skills in schools. It was informed by a range of evidence, including:

- A literature review of relevant UK and international research[1]
- An expert witness session involving key stakeholders including academics, educators, policymakers and representatives from the media industry
- Written evidence submitted by a range of stakeholders
- Surveys of 388 primary pupils, 1,832 secondary students and 414 teachers in the UK, designed in partnership with young people's newspaper First News and news service The Day and conducted through the National Literacy Trust[2]
- Group discussions with 25 pupils in Years 5 to 11 (9 to 16-year-olds), two primary school teachers and four secondary school teachers[3]
- A stakeholder event with students, educators, academics, policymakers and media experts to discuss the commission findings and build upon the recommendations

This report synthesises the evidence from these sources and examines how – with the support of the media industry and other organisations – schools, families and young people can work together to develop the critical literacy skills needed to interpret today's much more participatory digital news environment, where people can create and share news easily, and in which there has been a proliferation of news sources. It presents recommendations to government for meeting the challenge of fake news by empowering schools, families and young people to navigate online news effectively.

Children and young people's broader digital literacy skills, such as online safety, are beyond the scope of this commission.

Setting the scene

As many commentators have noted, fake news has been with us throughout history. Misinformation, propaganda and rumour have long surrounded major political events. However, in recent times, technological developments have allowed modern forms of fake news to be created, targeted, consumed and spread with unprecedented ease and speed. The impact of such stories on the democratic process has recently become a focus again, with the US presidential election and the UK referendum on membership of the European Union, both in 2016.

At the same time, these technological developments which have allowed fake news to spread more easily have also caused a considerable change in how we access news. Research indicates that, globally, while older generations continue to source news through more traditional, regulated media sources such as TV, radio and print, younger generations are now more likely to access news through digital and social media (Newman et al., 2017). In the UK, more than half (54%) of 12 to 15-year-olds use social media to access online news and almost

1 https://literacytrust.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/all-party-parliamentary-group-literacy/fakenews/
2 Surveys were conducted online between September and November 2017
3 Focus group discussions took place in early 2018 involving pupils from Years 5/6, Years 7/8, Year 9 and Years 10/11 (c. 25 in total)

half (46%) of those who source news in this way say they find it difficult to tell whether or not a social media news story is true.

Increasing concerns about the impact of fake news on young people and, more widely, on public trust in journalism (Saunders, 2017) and confidence in evidence-based governance (Williamson, 2016), have led to calls for action from a range of stakeholders, perhaps most notably the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee inquiry into fake news[4]. The inquiry, which launched in January 2017, is exploring whether such deliberate misinformation could have influenced voter behaviour in the UK and also seeks to better understand the range of responses to, and impact of, fake news on society.

Amid these concerns, the responsibility of global media organisations to police the content they publish in the 'post-truth' era (e.g. Chichester, cited by Halliday, 2017) is often highlighted alongside the need for children and young people to be taught critical literacy skills suitable for the 21st century (Schleicher, as cited in Siddique, 2017).

Literacy skills, and critical literacy skills in particular, have an increasingly important role to play in helping us interpret the wealth of information available in the digital age. Given the seismic shifts in the digital media landscape, of which the proliferation of fake news is one part, corresponding shifts are needed in our definition of literacy to enable it to be fit for purpose and to equip us with the skills we need to engage effectively with democracy. In turn, critical literacy skills must be recalibrated to help us navigate the digital world in which we live.

1. The issue of fake news for young people

Children and young people today are growing up in a globalised world and are processing information from a wider variety of sources than ever before. Many have grown up with the online world available as a constant, convenient source of information, but they may not necessarily possess the knowledge and skills needed to assess the reliability of what they find there. At the same time, rapid developments in the online news ecosystem, such as the increasing role of advertising and algorithms in determining news feeds and search results, can be difficult even for adult news consumers to comprehend.

Large-scale national survey findings have indicated that a quarter (26% of 8 to 11-year-olds and 24% of 12 to 15-year-olds) of UK children and young people believe that "if a website is listed by a search engine it can be trusted" (Ofcom, 2017), and in a survey carried out by the UK's National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT, 2017) more than a third (35%) of teachers said pupils had cited fake news, or inaccurate information found online, as fact in homework or during class discussions.

As Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education and Skills at the OECD, commented: "In the past, when you needed information, you went to an encyclopaedia, you looked it up, and you could trust that information to be true" (cited in Kershaw, 2017). Professor Sonia Livingstone, an expert contributor to the commission, elaborated further:

4 https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/fake-news-17-19/

> *"In the days when it was clear where authoritative knowledge came from… everybody knew to point children… to official sources and we had a whole host of trusted intermediaries… So it is a very dramatic change where young people are getting their information… primarily from a host of digital media sources which very many folk, especially their parents and teachers, have not paid very much attention to."*

A similar point was made in written evidence submitted to this commission by consultant and information and digital literacy specialist, Sarah Pavey, who further noted students' increasing roles in our changing news and information systems:

> *"Before the advance of online resources… students relied on a handful of books. Now information is made available at an alarming rate 24 hours a day in all types of media format. We have to learn to be discerning about what we use, we have to understand that students these days are also creators and publishers of information too."*

An increasingly collaborative and participatory system of news production and distribution clearly brings great potential benefits in terms of the democratisation of information, and technology has undoubtedly changed the nature of news and information as being something received, unquestioned, from accepted sources of authority.

Such changes require new attitudes, approaches and skills. The following sections discuss definitions of news, changing sources of news, what fake news means for young people and the challenges and opportunities afforded by a recalibration of the notion of 'authority' in relation to news for younger news consumers, distributors and creators.

1.1 Definitions of news and fake news

While the Oxford English Dictionary defines news as "newly received or noteworthy information, especially about recent events"[5], the concept of news can mean various things for different people. For instance, while news used to be thought of as local, national or global stories in printed newspapers or on the radio or TV, there are now many more ways of reading, hearing, sharing and creating news, including online and through social media.

We were interested in exploring this possible generational divide in definitions of news through focus group discussions with students and teachers. This interest stemmed, in part, from almost half (45.9%) of secondary students citing Snapchat as a source of news in our online survey.

In terms of what news is, most teachers considered news to be "daily information", "factual information" or current affairs ("what's happening in the world"). Several teachers felt students might be more likely to show an interest in news about popular culture:

> *"I think they'd be more interested in sort of pop culture… which to me still is news, you know, if you're interested in a celebrity and something's happening with that celebrity, that's still a type of news in your world…We all have our own worlds, that's… how I see it."*

However, no mention was made of celebrities or popular culture by the children and young people themselves in the focus groups. Indeed, teachers' and pupils' definitions of news were similar:

> *"I think of when it's real life things happening locally and all around the world."* (Year 7/8 pupil)

> *"So when there's… for example, a terrorist attack, people… look at the news for information… to basically inform themselves on what's happening and stay up to date."* (Year 10/11pupil)

More difference could be seen between teachers and students in relation to news formats. As one teacher observed:

> *"…they get a lot of news online, especially Instagram and suggested posts and advertisements and a lot of the news comes in the form of that. But they don't really use the word news, I don't think."*

5 https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/news

Students also made some interesting comments about how the type of news and the format they access this news in were associated for them, with certain formats linked with what they'd consider to be more or less 'serious' news. Varying attitudes to different news formats had also been indicated in our survey findings, with Year 7 students more likely to trust news from TV and broadsheet newspapers, whereas students in Year 10 were slightly more likely to say they trusted digital sources such as Snapchat, Twitter and Facebook (see **section 1.2.2**).

Just as the news itself can be defined and viewed in different ways, so too can fake news. It can be described very simply as "completely made up, manipulated to resemble credible journalism and attract maximum attention" (Hunt, 2016) or in much broader terms. For example, the University of Western Ontario's 'deception detector' (Rubin, 2017) includes five types of fake news: intentionally deceptive, jokes taken at face value, large-scale hoaxes, slanted reporting of real facts, and stories where the truth is contentious. When asked for their own definitions of fake news, pupils in the focus groups were generally quite clear and articulate:

> *"...somebody's taken some news but they've changed it... or if they've just completely made something up and... put it out for the world to see and then people think it's real but it's not."*
> (Year 7/8 pupil)

The importance of a more nuanced understanding of what is meant by the term fake news featured in some of the written submissions to the commission. The Association for Citizenship Teaching suggested:

> *"There is a need to be careful... when discussing 'fake news' with pupils and how 'fake' is defined. The notion of alternative facts may be useful here in that it implies teachers and pupils need to critically engage with news, that all news has bias and can be directed to specific audiences."*

1.2 Children and young people's knowledge and awareness of fake news

Children and young people's experience of fake news was something we were keen to explore through online surveys of primary and secondary school pupils, developed by the National Literacy Trust in partnership with young people's news providers First News and The Day, and conducted between September and November 2017.

The surveys aimed to increase our understanding of children's awareness of fake news in the UK and their feelings about it, and to test the critical literacy skills children and young people need to identify fake news through a short quiz. The surveys were complemented by teacher questionnaires, which ran online concurrently with the pupil surveys.

We found that, while most children and young people responding to the surveys were familiar with the term fake news, 1 in 5 (22.2%) secondary students hadn't heard of it[6], rising to 2 in 5 (40.3 %) primary pupils[7]. Primary pupils were nearly twice as likely not to be aware of fake news as secondary students, suggesting they have an increased vulnerability to it.

While fewer primary than secondary school children had heard of fake news, there was less difference between the age groups in relation to their ability to trust the news. In our survey, 3 in 5 children who had heard of fake news said it made them trust the news less (59% primary, 62.1% secondary). These concerns chime with those expressed by many commentators (e.g. Saunders, 2017) around the impact of fake news more generally on the public's trust in the media. In focus groups, children's comments further revealed how reduced trust can lead people to disengage from the news:

6 11 to 16-year olds (N = 1,832)

7 8 to 11-year-olds (N = 388)

> *"It makes me not trust the news as much, making me not want to read more because I don't, I can't trust it, as such, and it's quite off-putting because you don't just know."* (Year 9 pupil)

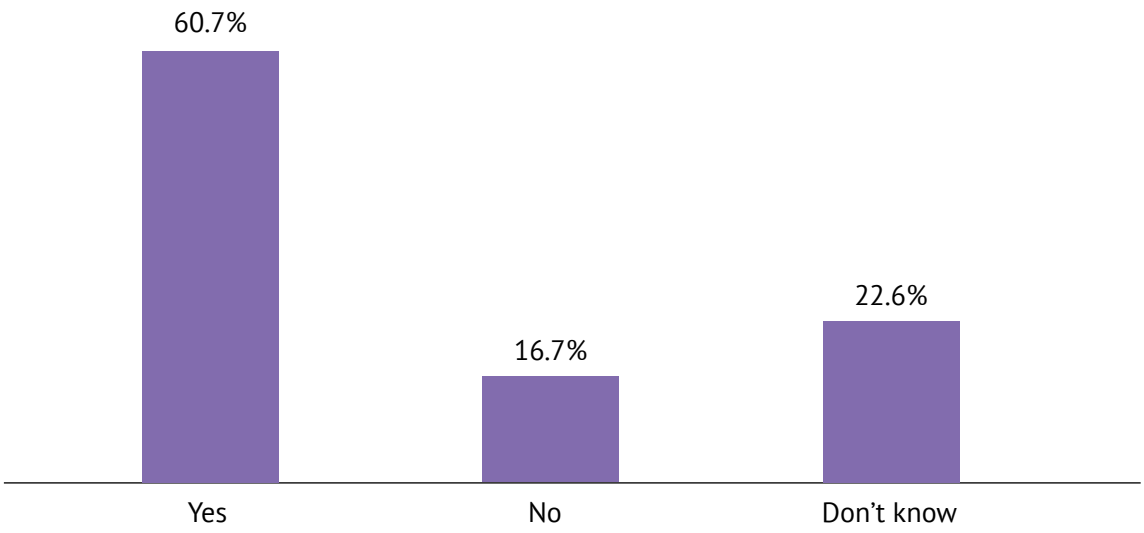
In addition, more than half said they were worried about whether they could identity fake news correctly (52% primary, 47.7% secondary):

> *"Sometimes you can't actually tell when it's real and you never really find out, so you kind of believe it and then... you never really know if it's real, you... have a hint that it might not be but you never fully know."* (Year 9 pupil)

This lack of confidence in their own ability to recognise fake and real news is of great concern, and emphasises the urgent need to better support children and young people's development of strong critical literacy skills.

Furthermore, our online survey of 414 teachers showed that a sizeable percentage (60.7%) were worried about the impact of fake news on pupils' well-being (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Teacher survey: are you concerned about the impact of fake news on pupils' well-being?



Teachers gave numerous examples of why they are concerned about the impact of fake news on their pupils, most often citing how it increases pupils' anxieties and fears, but also how it causes confusion and mistrust and how it allows skewed or exaggerated views to be spread. These can be seen in the following word cloud. In our focus groups, teachers also raised concerns about pupils' tendency to "believe everything without questioning it" and that fake news is affecting pupils' body image and self-esteem.

Figure 2: Teachers' views on why they are concerned about the impact of fake news on their pupils

Links between fake news and pupils' anxiety levels were also discussed in the evidence session. Jessica Theisinger, literacy coordinator at Claycots School, stated:

> *"I've seen the impact first hand in the classroom of fake news turning fiction into fact and creating real panic and anxiety sometimes... Debunking stories such as killer clowns can be difficult when there's fear attached to it."*

Nicky Cox, Editor-in-Chief of children's newspaper First News, also suggested that fake news was having a very serious impact on children's emotional and mental well-being:

> *"The lack of support to help children develop critical thinking skills is undoubtedly leading to increasing levels of mental health problems among young people... Parents, school and the media need to recognise the damaging effect inaccurate and sensationalist news is having on our young people. The mental health of a whole generation is at stake with millions of children feeling heightened levels of anxiety."*

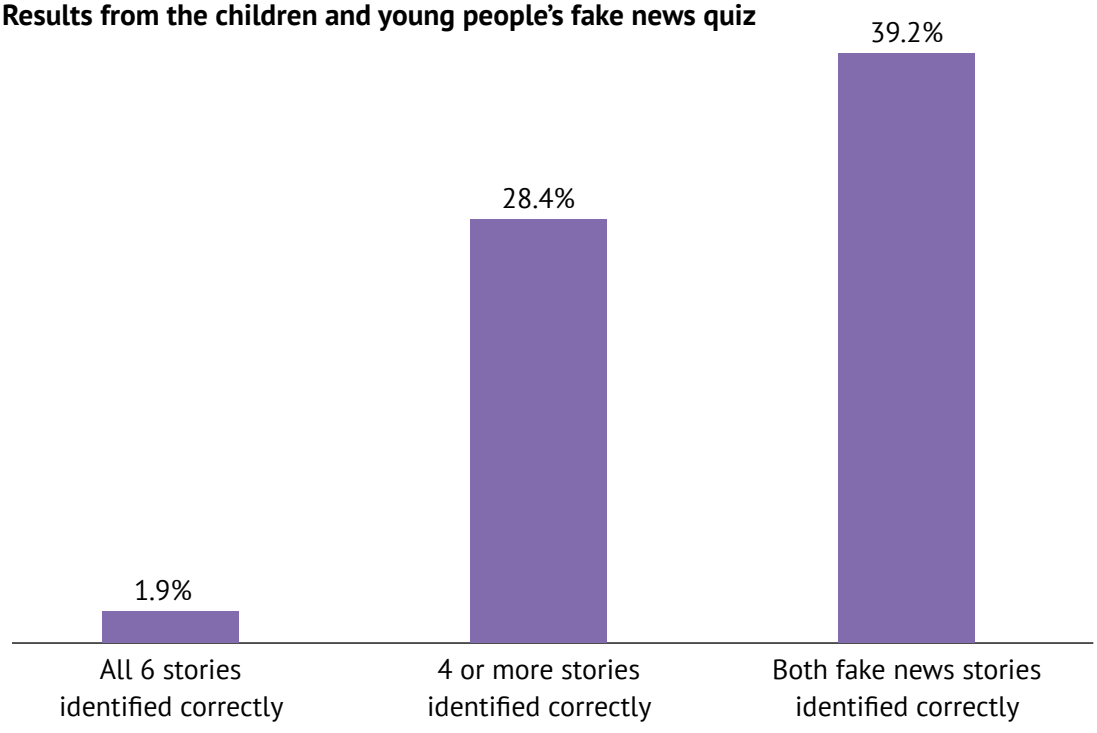
1.2.1 Children's ability to identify fake news

While pupils may have a good working idea of what fake news is, research shows that this may not always correspond with their level of skill in identifying it in practice (Common Sense Media, 2017; Wineburg, 2016). This view was also expressed by some teachers in group discussions, in particular pupils' difficulty in distinguishing satire from actual news:

> *"I think they're not able to filter the news, they sometimes take it as quite factual... There's been a lot on the news about Trump and they take it as completely true – and some of it is satirised, it's not completely true, and they take it as fact."*

Findings from the pupil surveys indicate that many children lack confidence in their ability to identify fake news. This was borne out by the fact that the majority of children struggled to correctly identify whether a selection of news stories in a quiz were real or fake. Separate quizzes were set for primary and secondary pupils in our surveys (intended to reflect likely frames of reference within each age group), each presenting two fake and four real news stories. Children were asked whether they thought stories were true or false based on what they saw on their screen alone[8].

Figure 3: Results from the children and young people's fake news quiz



8 See: https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/fake-news-and-critical-literacy/

As Figure 3 shows, only 1.9% of children and young people overall were able to identify all six news stories correctly as either real or fake[9] (3.1% of primary pupils[10], 0.6% of secondary students[11]). This may seem very low, but is comparable to a Channel 4 survey of UK adults, which found that only 4% of respondents could identify all stories in a selection of six correctly (Channel4.com, 2017).

The difference between the percentage of primary and secondary pupils able to identify the fake news stories in their respective quizzes is perhaps the inverse of what might have been anticipated, as older pupils might have been expected to have better developed skills in this area based on age and greater life experience.

Differences were also noted both within and between primary and secondary pupils in relation to age, gender and socioeconomic background (see Figure 4). Looking within results for primary pupils, older pupils were more likely to correctly identify both fake news stories than younger pupils, with a gap of 11.2 percentage points between pupils in Year 5 and Year 6. A gap of almost 10 percentage points was noted in relation to gender, with more girls than boys correctly identifying both fake news stories. A similar gap was found between pupils from different socioeconomic backgrounds, with a higher percentage of pupils not eligible for free school meals (FSM) identifying both fake news stories compared with those eligible for FSM.

Figure 4: Primary pupils who were able to correctly identify both fake news stories in the fake news quiz by age, gender and socioeconomic background

These findings mirror the literacy gap we find in gender and disadvantage at Key Stage 2 in England. Indeed, looking at the percentage of children who were able to reach the expected standard in reading at the end of Key Stage 2 in 2017, a gap of 7 percentage points was found between boys and girls (68% vs 75%)[12] and a gap of 19 percentage points existed between children eligible for FSM and all other pupils (56% vs 75%)[13].

Contrary to our results for primary pupils, there was less difference between secondary students by age, with similar percentages of children in Years 7 to 10 able to identify both fake news stories (see Figure 5). However, there was a gap of around 5 percentage points between these pupils and the oldest year group (Year 11). Conversely to primary findings, secondary-aged boys were more likely to identify both fake news stories, with a gap of more than 6 percentage points between boys and girls. In addition, the gap between children eligible for FSM and their peers almost disappears at secondary level when compared with primary findings.

9 Whilst primary pupils and secondary students did not take the same fake news quiz, we have combined the results here (n=2,220) on the basis that the two quizzes reflected likely frames of reference for the two different age groups and tested the different skills that are taught at the relevant stages of the national curriculum (i.e. Key Stage 2 for the primary fake news quiz and Key Stages 3 and 4 for the secondary fake news quiz). Both quizzes also contained two fake and four real news stories, so are comparable in this sense.

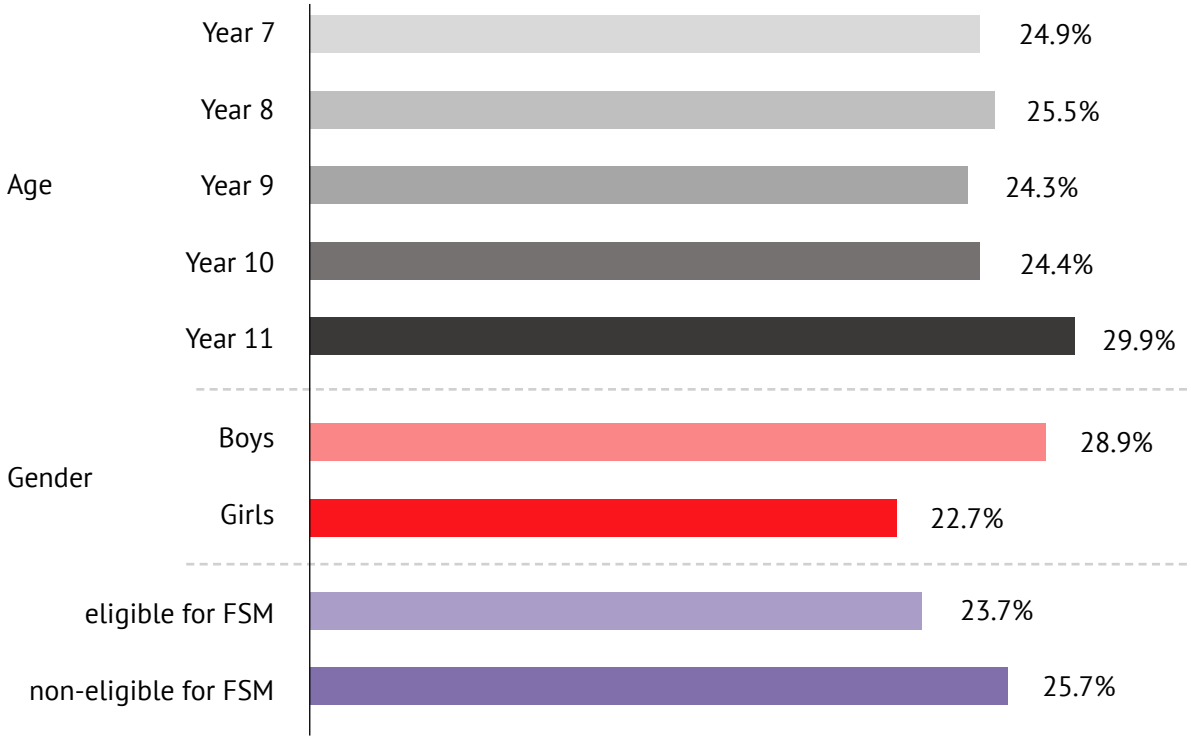
10 388 primary pupils took part in the fake news quiz designed for Key Stage 2. Of these pupils: 12 identified all six news stories correctly (3.1%); 159 identified more than half of the news stories correctly (41%); 205 identified both fake news stories correctly (52.8%).

11 1,832 secondary students took part in the fake news quiz designed for Key Stages 3 and 4. Of these students: 10 identified all six news stories correctly (0.6%); 283 identified more than half of the news stories correctly (15.8%); 469 identified both fake news stories correctly (25.6%). 28.4% of children and young people were able to identify more than half of the news stories in the quiz correctly as either real or fake (41% of primary pupils, falling to 15.8% of secondary pupils). Looking at the two fake news stories in the quizzes in isolation, 39.2% of children and young people were able to identify both fake news stories correctly (52.8% of primary pupils, 25.6% of secondary students).

12 See: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-curriculum-assessments-key-stage-2-2017-revised

13 Attainment data for pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 by free school meal eligibility and local authority was provided to the National Literacy Trust by the Department for Education in December 2017

Figure 5: Secondary students who were able to correctly identify both fake news stories in the fake news quiz by age, gender and socioeconomic background



While the survey findings showed that a significant percentage of children and young people struggled to correctly identify both fake news stories (47.2% primary, 74.4% secondary), focus group discussions with pupils and teachers indicated that many were aware of effective strategies they could use to spot fake news. One Year 10/11 pupil said:

> *"...some of them just do it to clickbait and to gain more popularity. They'll just do it to waste your time, that's why you always double check where the news source is, you know? Who are the sources who made it, where it comes from... you can't really trust... everything you see online."*

Interestingly, when asked where they learned techniques for spotting fake news, one pupil's response was, "ourselves, to be honest". It might be the case, especially for older pupils, that growing up with traditional and newer sources of news has enabled them to compare sources, and this may help them to consider whether or not something is true. A Year 10/11 pupil explained:

> *"Because we have, we use different types of social media quite often, especially this generation, when we look on TV and we see something on BBC News, about 10 minutes later we're going to go on... our Snapchat apps and look at something and realise, like, 'Hold up, there's a difference.'"*

Moreover, it was highlighted in secondary school teacher group discussions that pupils do know how to analyse what they read: "A lot of the kids are wise to the fact... that they should almost analyse where this is coming from... They're smarter... than we give them credit for." However, it is possible that children and young people apply their skills selectively or are not able to transfer the skills from academic work to other things they do, as one of the teachers suggested: "I think in certain areas they can do that, but in other areas... their blinkers are on and they just can't seem to see it."

1.2.2 Children's access to news

Much of the current concern around access to fake news is in relation to digital and social media news sources. Every year, the media use and attitudes of children and young people in the UK are surveyed in considerable depth by the communications regulator Ofcom and annual reports provide a great deal of information in this area (Ofcom, 2017). However, we also included some questions specifically about sources of news, and how much children trusted these sources, in our surveys.

In keeping with Ofcom findings, TV and radio were popular sources of news. Primary pupils were most likely to say that they found out about news stories through TV (72.7%), radio (40.2%) or newspapers (39.4%) and these were also their most trusted sources of news. Only a quarter (24.3%) of primary pupils said that they trusted websites as a source of news.

While secondary pupils were also most likely to find out about the news through TV (76.8%) or radio (49.5%), digital news sources were very popular, and older pupils in particular were more likely to mention digital news formats, such as news and social media apps, as sources of news. For example, nearly half (45.9%) of secondary pupils said they found out about the news from Snapchat.

Where secondary students get their news from, and how much they trust these sources, varies across different age groups: while pupils in Year 7 were more likely to say they found news stories on TV, radio and YouTube, pupils in Year 10 were more likely to say they got their news from newspapers, websites, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram. There was also variation across the different age groups when it came to trust in different news formats, with pupils in Year 7 more likely to trust TV and broadsheets and pupils in Year 10 slightly more likely to say they trusted digital sources such as Snapchat, Twitter and Facebook.

We explored some of these findings in our focus groups. As mentioned earlier, teachers were aware that children's experiences of news were often quite different to their own:

> *"...the kids don't really watch... the format of news as a programme...They can read a lot of stories on Instagram, stories on Snapchat... so their definition is a little bit different...I've never really heard of them saying 'news'."*

Reflecting teachers' comments about how well pupils were able to analyse where their news comes from, in our focus groups several pupils (particularly those in Years 10 and 11) came across as media literate and demonstrated using common sense in their approach to these new and different sources of news. One Year 10/11 pupil described the difference between sources of 'serious' news and 'fun' news and his attitudes towards them:

"...if I'm on Snapchat and I see a source of information or news, I will take it in a more relaxed manner because it's more, social media, I use it for fun and interaction. But if... BBC News pops up, I'll take it more seriously."

A Year 9 pupil explained how they had used several sources to verify a news story before deciding on a personal response:

"... sometimes what the news says is not entirely true and with this age, the news sometimes can be biased and you can't really trust just one source of news... So I'd go on...Google and look up different types of news articles to better inform myself and, you know, make my own opinion, not just listen to what someone else says."

There was a consensus among expert contributors to the commission and participants in the stakeholder event that the most practical way to teach children and young people about fake news is to provide them with opportunities to create, as well as consume, news themselves. It was suggested that empowering children to take responsibility for news creation would naturally allow them to develop their understanding of how news is produced, and to consider people's different perspectives and concepts of truth.

1.3 Impact on society and democracy

The negative impact of fake news on public trust in journalism and the implications for democracy have been raised by many commentators, and was explored in the evidence review which was published by the National Literacy Trust to launch the Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills in Schools in 2017 (Picton and Teravainen, 2017).

The more insidious influences of fake news on the democratic process have been a prominent topic in recent years, particularly in relation to the 2016 US presidential election and UK referendum on membership of the European Union. As noted in the expert panel discussion by Ben Hicks, Executive Director of The Guardian Foundation:

"Without an informed and represented population, you cannot really call yourself a democracy. And... questions do need to be asked. Did the British public have all the information required to make a sound judgement in recent elections and referenda? Was the information they did receive delivered in a voice they understand? Were they able to decipher what was relevant or not, true or not?"

Several commentators have noted that algorithmically-selected news sources may have greater capacity to reinforce existing prejudices (Lewandowsky, as cited in Gray, 2017), often referred to as an 'echo chamber', and the political motivations of groups seeking to infiltrate search engine results with fake news (Albright, 2016) appears to be an increasingly important consideration. Furthermore, written evidence submitted by Dr Mattia Fosci, Director of Yoop Tech Limited, and Esmeralda V. Bon, PhD candidate at the University of Nottingham, suggested that fake news stories with no basis in reality are "largely about undermining trust towards institutions and the media", and that by creating a situation in which "nothing seems true yet anything seems possible" they undermine the "creation of shared reality that maintains social cohesion".

The recalibration of the notion of 'authority' brings both opportunities and challenges for news creators and news consumers. For example, the threat posed by fake news to the work of trained and qualified journalists was highlighted in our expert session by Ben de Pear, Editor of Channel 4 News:

> *"16-year-old kids in Macedonia... can run a news website, can fake the news that we've made and bend it to their own ends and make enormous amounts of money...There is no holding to account of the platforms at the moment, and it is a really serious moment."*

On this subject, there is some consensus that any model of critical literacy skills for the digital age should include an awareness of the methods and motivations behind fake news production. The relationship between advertising revenue and fake news and the need for "...careful, critical readings of internet sites and texts that uncover the politics of representation and commercial sponsorship" (Wohlwend & Lewis, 2011) may be considered a valuable part of any exploration of critical digital literacy in the classroom, particularly for older students.

Indeed, the importance of helping children and young people to better understand the nature of the system within which fake news can operate has been presented as one of the five rights of the 5Rights framework[14] (2014) – a campaign which takes the existing rights of children and young people from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and translates them for the digital world. It asserts that:

> *"Young people... should have the chance to learn about the realities of the digital world, with a grasp of the underlying motivations of actors in digital spaces... It must be right that children and young people learn how to be... intelligent consumers, to critically understand the structures and syntax of the digital world."*

Academic experts have also highlighted the importance of educating children and young people about the wider context within which fake news can operate. In our expert panel session, Professor Sonia Livingstone suggested that children must first understand the digital landscape they are getting their news from before they are able to strengthen the skills they need to navigate it, stating: "You can only become literate in a world that is legible." In addition to questioning whether they trust the news source, children must also start to think about how and why the news article was produced.

The role of the individual was foregrounded in the written submission to the commission by consultant and information and digital literacy specialist, Sarah Pavey, who asserted, "On a wider scale, it is everyone's responsibility to show how information that is shared has been formulated", suggesting:

> *"Just as students are expected to show workings out in a maths problem so we need to show where our information originates. If this becomes the norm in society then we will safeguard the integrity of our knowledge base."*

In keeping with traditions of critical literacy education, several contributors to the commission also emphasised the opportunities for improving society which could be afforded by strengthening children's critical literacy. For example, the UKLA stated:

> *"Critical literacy is not only about defending young people from being duped by fake news but it is also concerned with how we might change and improve the circumstances and environment within which we live; this may include the circumstances which encourage fake news production."*

It is arguably in the interest of social media organisations themselves to ensure that their users have a positive experience of using their product, including better awareness of fake news. Karim Palant, UK Public Policy Manager at Facebook, stated:

> *"Getting this right is potentially one of the most empowering things about getting platforms like ours to have a sustainable, safe and... positive impact on young people."*

Having identified the threats that fake news pose to children, young people and adults alike, the following section explores the role of literacy, and critical literacy in particular, in helping children develop the skills they need to protect themselves from the pitfalls of fake news.

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14 http://5rightsframework.com/the-5-rights/the-right-to-digital-literacy.html

2. Literacy in the digital age

2.1 The role of literacy

Close links exist between an individual's literacy skills and their ability to engage with democracy as an active and informed citizen. Given the shifts in the digital media landscape, of which the proliferation of fake news is one part, corresponding shifts are needed in our concepts of literacy to enable it to be fit for purpose and to equip us with the skills we need to engage effectively with democracy.

An updated framing of literacy skills, and indeed critical literacy skills, that reflects the changing digital landscape is now required. Such an adjustment would be the foundation to enable young people to feel confident when engaging with news sources, to learn new perspectives and information, and to employ those skills in their school work, or in their conversations with peers, family members and teachers.

Core literacy skills, such as good writing, speaking and listening skills, and specific reading skills, such as comprehension and inference, are clearly closely linked with developing the practice of critical literacy. Oracy skills form the basis of effective critical debate and discussion, and strong comprehension and inference practices enable pupils to 'look behind' the text and consider how an author's use of language might position them as readers. Teachers are already adept at developing pupils' advanced reading skills in line with the national curriculum. Embedding critical literacy practices when reading texts will enable pupils to further challenge what they read, building on their existing comprehension skills.

The dual roles of 'basic' and 'specific' skills featured in much of the evidence submitted to the commission. In the expert evidence session, the importance of skills building at the basic level was highlighted by Jessica Theisinger, literacy coordinator at Claycots School, who noted that the curriculum already includes vital building blocks for critical literacy skills:

> *"...some of the actual skills that we're talking about, ...they are there in the curriculum in terms of how we teach children to make inferences in reading and how to compare texts in reading, so some of that is being taught, but not directly relating to news and media."*

Indeed, evidence from expert panels and teacher group discussions highlighted the fundamental role of basic literacy skills in helping children to become more critical:

> *"It's obvious really that one of the most powerful weapons in the battle against fake news is literacy: children need to read widely...* (Anna Bassi, Editor, The Week Junior)

> *"Literacy itself. If their basic – say their reading – is very limited, it's very hard for them to criticise a text when they can barely read what the text actually is."* (Secondary school teacher)

However, as we now go on to discuss, it is clearly not enough to just teach children basic literacy, inferential and text comparison skills if they are to develop strong critical literacy skills.

2.2 The role of critical literacy

The term critical literacy encompasses a broad range of meanings (Holmes-Henderson, 2014). The socio-political concept of critical literacy may be traced back to educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (Freire, 1970, cited by McLaughlin and De Voogd, 2004):

> *"Critical literacy views readers as active participants in the reading process and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the text's message to question, examine or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors."*

In schools, critical literacy can be viewed as a whole-school, cross-curricular approach towards the teaching of literacy that encourages readers to be active participants in the reading process. This approach encourages readers to challenge what they read by asking critical questions which allow them to explore, for example, how texts position them as readers, represent different groups of people or present differing perspectives. In stakeholder discussions, the need for a clear, shared definition of critical literacy, and clear learning outcomes, was called for.

On a practical level, Luke and Freebody's 'Four Resources' model (Luke and Freebody, 1999) may provide a useful basis for considering how critical literacy may be embedded within the curriculum. As UKLA suggests in their written evidence submission, critical literacy can be seen to be integral to the model. In this model, learners are taught to become:

1. Code breakers
2. Meaning makers
3. Text users
4. Text analysts

Updating this model for the digital age, Hinrichsen and Coombs (2013) advocated an expansion of the Four Resources to include a fifth, this is 'Persona' (see Figure 6), suggesting that "more conceptual digital literacy… signals an opportunity for a corresponding shift from a skills agenda to the idea of situated practices".

Figure 6: The five resources model of critical digital literacy

Source: Hinrichsen and Coombs (2013). The model, its elements and diagrams are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 UK: England & Wales Licence.

Evolving definitions of critical literacy provide a context within which critical literacy skills in the digital age may be better understood. Indeed, its influence may be seen in definitions of 'digital literacy'. For example, Hague and Payton's (2010) definition states that digital literacy involves:

"...critically engaging with technology and developing a social awareness of how a number of factors including commercial agendas and cultural understandings can shape the ways in which technology is used to convey information and meaning."

Furthermore, Hague and Payton's model of the components of digital literacy includes both 'critical thinking and evaluation' and 'cultural and social understanding' – foregrounding the important link between critical and digital literacy skills.

Unsurprisingly, digital skills were repeatedly highlighted in our expert witness session and written evidence. The need for developing digital skills alongside others is evident:

> *"We need to empower and inspire children to become active participants in their communities and to tell their own stories, develop journalism and digital skills – those core skills."*
> (Ben Hicks, Executive Director, The Guardian Foundation)

> *"An improved critical literacy, but also first and foremost digital literacy, could aid understanding of what news we are exposed to and why."* (Dr Mattia Fosci, Director, Yoop Tech Limited and Esmeralda V. Bon, PhD candidate at the University of Nottingham)

The different definitions of critical literacy offer a basis for the skills children and young people need to be critically literate. On a practical level, it has been suggested that:

> *"...learners aged 5 to 19 need to become equipped with appropriate tools and techniques to enable them to discern truth from rhetorical manipulation... as well as knowledge and techniques to help them to make informed and ethical judgements. These opportunities to listen, critique, analyse and compose will improve their skills of critical literacy, political literacy and self-expression."*
> (Holmes-Henderson, 2014)

Our evidence review (Picton and Teravainen, 2017) identified several foundation and specific skills in the national curriculum that children and young people need in order to develop good critical literacy skills.

In the primary phase, the curriculum does not specifically address critical literacy. However, many of the components included can be considered foundation skills. Of the two dimensions of reading taught at Key Stages 1 and 2 (word reading and comprehension), comprehension in particular prepares children to become critically literate.

In secondary school, the curriculum builds on these foundational skills and adds more specific critical literacy skills through various subjects such as English, history, citizenship, PSHE and subjects such as philosophy and sociology at A Level. For example, at Key Stage 4, history education aims to ensure that pupils know how to ask perceptive questions, think critically, weigh evidence, sift arguments and develop perspective and judgement, whilst teaching citizenship should equip pupils with the skills and knowledge to critically explore political and social issues, to weigh evidence, debate and make reasoned arguments.

Our online survey of 414 teachers indicates the types of critical literacy skills teachers believe pupils need in order to accurately and confidently identify fake news. In the word cloud below, we see that key skills from the primary and secondary curriculums, such as inference and the ability to distinguish between fact and opinion,

appear. Unsurprisingly, more secondary school teachers mentioned the importance of skills such as awareness of current affairs and the world, as well as understanding of purpose and agenda.

Figure 7: Teachers' views of the skills pupils need to identify fake news

It is worth noting that in our focus groups, several teachers were more confident naming skills they associated with developing critical literacy (such as knowing the difference between fact and opinion and recognising how authors' language influences the reader) than they were in offering an overall definition of the term itself. This may indicate a need to increase teachers' awareness of what they are already doing to support pupils' critical literacy skills, and flag that critical literacy skills, as they appear in the national curriculum, are already being taught and assessed.

In addition, it may be useful to make the potential benefits of a deeper focus on critical literacy on pupils' engagement and attainment (for example, due to stronger inference skills or improved oracy through discussions) more explicit. Discussion is a key aspect of the reading curriculum and also addresses many areas of speaking and listening; asking critical questions of a text can build upon the teaching of reading comprehension skills such as inference and language analysis, and also encourage pupils to justify or explain their ideas using textual evidence to support their answers. It may also be helpful to reiterate to teachers that such critical literacy skills must be applied not just to fiction, but to non-fiction, news and anything that may be found online – making the teaching of critical literacy skills more relevant to children and young people's everyday lives.

As the previous word cloud highlights, teachers also feel that other skills are needed to help children identify fake news. This is corroborated in the written evidence and expert panel discussions where a variety of other skills were discussed. Key skills that emerged from all sources of evidence include critical thinking, questioning, identifying bias, identifying reputable or trustworthy sources, and understanding the context and motivations behind producing the text. As Jessica Theisinger, literacy coordinator of Claycots School, explained in the expert evidence session:

> *"Some of the skills that I think that we need to be teaching are identifying bias and sensational language, identifying reputable or trustworthy sources, if there are any, to compare facts from different sources and to be able to make judgements and to make inferences from texts and pictures about what's being said or implied and to question information by considering the purpose for which it's been written."*

Critical thinking and critical engagement in particular have consistently emerged as key skills. Encouraging critical questioning of all texts across all subjects is an effective way to embed critical literacy practices across the curriculum and, indeed, it is difficult to see how improved critical thinking wouldn't improve engagement with almost any school subject. Our evidence review found that metacognition "facilitates a critical approach to

different texts and is an important aspect of critical literacies perspectives" (Olin-Scheller and Tengberg, 2017). It is evident from the written evidence that teaching these skills is crucial:

> *"It is vital that all students are taught critical thinking, and allowed to experience metacognition that happens when an adult encounters a piece of information."* (School Library Association)

> *"We need to promote evaluative critical thinking and enquiry and dialogue, metacognitive tools, providing children with criteria for effective evaluation of opinions, claims and ideas."*
> (Philosophy for Children)

Evidence gathered as part of the commission highlighted the important role of knowledge and understanding, as well as skills, in developing critical literacy. In particular, knowledge and understanding about media and journalism were seen as particularly significant:

> *"Understanding the news, we need to deepen young people's understanding of how the news is produced, learning the processes of interviewing, constructing headlines, choosing pictures."*
> (Ben Hicks, Executive Director, The Guardian Foundation)

> *"Knowledge is important but understanding knowledge, and understanding, you know, digging deeper, and actually the classic skills of journalism could be applied to almost anything that's being taught in schools about digging deeper, checking facts, finding sources, asking questions."*
> (Anna Bassi, Editor, The Week Junior)

> *"...we must address the issue, not just of fake news but also how real news is covered."*
> (Nicky Cox, Editor-in-Chief, First News)

Indeed, it could be suggested that knowledge lays the foundation for critical literacy skills to be applied, as the following quotes highlight:

> *"Knowledge developed through the citizenship curriculum enables young people to engage with the media critically, and by building a conceptual toolkit for such engagement, their background knowledge enables them to identify the bias or perspective in media interpretations."*
> (Association for Citizenship Teaching)

> *"I also think maybe that critical literacy is really the skill to, is the purpose of, education because otherwise you can teach anyone to repeat back anything. But if you teach them to be their own person and use their knowledge to then build or criticise, you've educated someone, I think."*
> (Secondary school teacher)

> *"...we're discovering that it's not enough to teach children the how, just the how, but also we need to teach the why and I believe this is a wider issue than tackling just fake news."*
> (Ben Hicks, Executive Director, The Guardian Foundation)

2.3 How do children develop critical literacy skills?

A prominent issue arising from the commission is that schools, parents and carers, the government and media organisations have a shared responsibility to support children to develop their critical literacy skills and become able to identify fake news. As Fosci and Bon suggest in their written submission of evidence, collaborations between academia, the technology industry and the media to collectively approach the teaching of critical literacy skills should be fostered.

The following sections discuss the role of the various individuals, organisations and systems around children and young people that can help develop their critical literacy skills, as well as identify evidence to show how this is done in practice.

2.3.1 Critical literacy in the school space

Findings from our teacher survey indicated that nearly all teachers believe it is the responsibility of teachers (98.8%) as well as parents (98.3%) to support children to identify fake news. Fewer, but still a significant number, see this as the media's responsibility (84.5%). Similarly, some of the pupils whose school submitted written evidence felt that it was the responsibility of their teachers to support them in becoming critically literate, although they also welcomed the idea of workshops run by specialist educators, such as people with a journalistic background.

Indeed, there is some consensus that teachers are ideally placed when it comes to supporting the development of critical literacy skills (Hague and Payton, 2010). The second report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications (House of Lords, 2017) recommended that children should be taught "critical thinking skills", including how to assess the veracity of online information, and that this should form part of the national curriculum. At the same time, our teacher survey findings showed that only half (50.0%) of teachers say they explicitly teach critical literacy, while 4 in 10 (41%) say they do not teach critical literacy (see Figure 8). Moreover, as Figure 9 shows, only 3 in 10 (29.6%) of those who teach critical literacy say they do so very often.

Figure 8: Do teachers teach critical literacy?

Figure 9: How often critical literacy skills are taught by the 50% of teachers who say they explicitly teach critical literacy

Moreover, our survey findings indicate that nearly 6 in 10 (57.0%) primary school teachers and half of secondary school teachers (52.9% in KS3 and 50.7% in KS4) believe that currently, the curriculum does not equip pupils with the skills they need to be able to identify fake news. Nearly two-thirds of teachers (64.8%) feel that the critical literacy skills taught in school are relevant to the real world, yet over a quarter (26.4%) are not convinced this is the case. This theme was also picked up in stakeholder sessions, in which the importance of "making the political personal" was emphasised by Livity, a youth-led creative network.

Curriculum integration emerged as one of the key themes for teaching critical literacy skills in schools, both in the sense of where the skills should be taught but also as a solution for raising the profile of teaching critical literacy skills regularly in schools. As written evidence from UKLA suggests:

> *"...critical literacy is not something to be added to the literacy curriculum, but a lens for learning that it is an integral part of all classroom practice."*

Similarly, written evidence from the Economist Educational Foundation suggests that:

> *"... it's important to embed the teaching of critical thinking skills throughout the curriculum rather than trying to 'tack on' critical news literacy as something new. The teaching of these skills is most effective if it's consistent, and not at odds with what children are being taught elsewhere."*

Previous evidence suggests that critical literacy can be integrated into the curriculum teaching to be developed alongside the subject knowledge in all classrooms (e.g. Hague and Payton, 2010). As OECD Director Andreas Schleicher (as cited in Siddique, 2017) argues, teaching critical literacy is:

> *"...not a matter of schools teaching a new subject, but of building skills to help discern the truth into all lessons, from science to history."*

Evidence collected from the expert panel discussions echoes this. As the following quotes highlight, the question of critical literacy might not be in which subject it should be taught but instead how we enable teachers across the curriculum to teach it:

> *"...because we need it to be foundational also, so that people are critiquing sources in history, so that they're questioning the kind of videos that they're shown in geography [...] so that across all the kinds of information that they engage with, questions about sources, about critical engagement, about ways of checking, about judging the veracity of information, would be absolutely crucial."* (Professor Sonia Livingstone)

> *"...it's about embedding and integrating news literacy across the school curriculum and how do we do that to make it easy to teachers?"* (Ben Hicks, Executive Director, The Guardian Foundation)

More prominence of critical literacy in the curriculum, particularly within the digital landscape, needs to come from the government. Some of the expert panellists felt that the issue is about a "systemic review of teaching" where critical thinking is embedded into the curriculum both in primary and secondary schools, and consequently reflected in inspection frameworks and exam content. A system change is also needed inside schools. Our expert panel discussions with teachers and academics indicated that the culture of schools needs to change towards actively encouraging thinking and away from cultures that are overly reliant on ensuring compliance through control, and result in children feeling inhibited and unable to express themselves confidently.

Another key theme emerging from the evidence in terms of pedagogy is linking critical literacy to the real world and making it relevant for children and young people outside the classroom. Pupils who submitted written evidence highlighted that they would like to see critical literacy integrated into more lessons across the school with real life links to online and social media. They also suggested learning through reading news articles in lessons and having an opportunity to evaluate them independently. Modern day relevance and examples were also mentioned by several teachers in the surveys:

> *"Linking it to a practical or real world context is...essential."*

> *"Real world examples from social media, online news sites."*

> *"Articles and 'news stories' that the pupils have brought in are particularly relevant."*

The importance of real-world connections and relevance was also highlighted in the expert panel discussions, both by teachers and academics, with media experts highlighting the importance in the written evidence. It was generally felt that real world news, and involving children in the production of news, is an efficient way to teach these skills effectively:

> *"I think teaching the skills by referencing real-world situations makes it engaging and relevant for children but also helps to broaden general knowledge..."* (Jessica Theisinger, literacy coordinator, Claycots School)

> *"We need more high-quality news content for young people, to support them in learning how to engage critically from a young age."* (The Economist Educational Foundation)

"Teachers can help pupils develop critical literacy skills by using the same devices the pupils use to consume information in the first place; removing any separation from the classroom and out-of-school life." (Dr Mattia Fosci, Director, Yoop Tech Limited and Esmeralda V. Bon, PhD candidate at the University of Nottingham)

"My team and I always strive to deliver the facts to children (...) and we know that when they're armed with the real story, they can process the information more effectively and less anxiously."
(Nicky Cox, Editor-in-Chief, First News)

In addition to teaching critical literacy across the curriculum and with real-world links, critical literacy could also be taught through socialisation. Written evidence submitted by Fosci and Bon highlights that children and young people learn through socialisation, and communication plays a mediating role in this learning process. The recommendation from this includes teaching critical literacy through self-learning and socially reflective activities. Indeed, discussion, debate and dialogue have featured in many of the practical strategies and techniques suggested for developing and supporting critical literacy in the classroom (Comber, as cited in Bishop, 2014).

However, it is clear that none of this can be achieved without teacher training and sufficient time and resources provided for teachers. Furthermore, teachers need support to learn the tools and techniques of critical literacy themselves before being able to teach such skills effectively.

Our evidence review showed that there is agreement that teacher training is central to the success of any plan to boost critical literacy. For example, Holmes-Henderson (2014) states that learners deserve to be taught by confident teachers who receive support in their delivery of critical skills across the curriculum. This is supported by evidence from our expert witness panel discussion and written submissions:

> *"Teachers themselves need to be in a better position to identify when what children say is mistaken, inconsistent or wrong in two senses: 1. to do with truth and facts, and 2. to do with structure and validity."* (Philosophy for Children)

> *"And the recent announcement of the primary English hubs could potentially be used to provide professional development and support to teachers in those areas but again, without careful consideration about how to equip teachers with further subject knowledge in this area, I think there's a potential that children would leave school not armed with those vitally important skills."*
> (Jessica Theisinger, literacy coordinator, Claycots School)

> *"...teacher training's absolutely essential, you couldn't start doing any of this without teacher training being at the absolute centre of it."* (Ben Hicks, Executive Director, The Guardian Foundation)

In addition to teacher training, it is clear that schools and teachers need to be given time and resources to focus on critical literacy:

> *"The barriers that teachers face are a lack of resources and time. Schools are asked to do far too much, teachers are stretched too thinly, and they don't have enough funding for additional resources or training. Instead of giving teachers a new thing to do, we should give them the time and resources to do more of, and develop in, what they're already doing."*
> (The Economist Educational Foundation)

"Time. I think an hour-long lesson isn't long enough. I'm sometimes struggling to squish it in. Sometimes [the barrier is] the actual, well, resources, but we're all in the same boat as far as resources are concerned. But it's the time to pick apart the lesson and make sure you've covered all those things and you've given time for speaking and listening, time for analysing questioning, pushing them forward, time to record in books." (Year 5 teacher)

"So it's not a lack of will, I would say, from the teaching profession, that not enough is done about this, it's about not enough space because schools are not incentivised, in fact they may be disincentivised from actually spending the appropriate amount of time and resource and energy on empowering teachers to do this work." (Liz Robinson, Headteacher, Surrey Square Primary School)

With such pressures on teacher training, time and resources, as experts such as Alison Tarrant of the School Library Association emphasised to the commission, it is particularly important that the essential role and contribution of school and public librarians to support children and young people's information literacy skills is given full consideration.

The role of the school librarian has the potential to play a foundational role in any whole-school approach to critical literacy, where librarians in schools are able to offer an effective point of contact to support busy teachers with projects and resources relating to critical literacy (see also comments from the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians, section 2.3.3).

2.3.2 Schools' current solutions

As section 2.3.1 shows, many of the skills needed to be critically literate are already featured in the curriculum and most teachers are already teaching them. Teachers might also be developing their pupils' critical literacy skills but they might not be aware they are doing so.

Through our survey, teachers provided us with a wealth of examples of strategies they are already using to teach critical literacy. These can be roughly categorised as: using modern day sources; discussion and debate; developing particular frameworks for classrooms based on research or developed by practitioners; and critical examination of sources and evidence in the classroom. Some mentioned a thematic approach working well, especially at primary level, with topic-based work helping to build in cross-curricular skills linking fiction and non-fiction. Others suggested that regular, informal discussions and debates about the news (for example, during form time) were a practical way to involve real world examples. Some examples of strategies teachers described included:

"I deliver a workshop on 'understanding the media' where students look at key things to consider when reading media sources. This uses current news stories."

"Class discussions on stories/films and current news; identify the issues and prepare a number of points arguing for and against them."

"In IT we have a 'Google' rule - if you look something up on Google, we have a rule of three. So three websites agree – if so there is evidence to show it is probably true. Two websites agree and one is different – look at the integrity of the website – can it be trusted? Which ones do we trust? All three have a different answer – perhaps there is not enough evidence or scientists have not come to a conclusion."

"I created a programme based on SCONUL's Seven Pillars of Informational Literacy model."

"Through science lessons we regularly look at bias in news reports (recent sugar tax news) – emphasising the need to focus on the source: who is saying this and why might they be saying it?"

Teacher interviews revealed the high value of discussion and debate in improving critical thinking skills:

"...recently we started a new scheme, ...and it... seems to be really positive. It's all book based, there's loads and loads of speaking and listening, lots of questioning, lots of deeper thought processing going on." (Year 5 teacher)

"I discuss it a little bit in the classroom in terms of looking at a source of information, whether it's a source, a video or whatever, you can't just trust it's true, you've got to kind of look underneath it." (Secondary school teacher)

Strategies teachers and schools are already using were also discussed in the evidence sessions:

"So more specifically, in Years 5 and 6, what we do at Surrey Square is that we have a daily news slot which is our specific bit of teaching around this and we very explicitly explore the issues around critical literacy in that slot. But it's a marginal activity, I would say, in terms of the core curriculum content." (Liz Robinson, Headteacher, Surrey Square Primary School)

In evidence sessions, some academics and teachers suggested that unless critical literacy is more explicitly foregrounded in the national curriculum, Ofsted inspections and assessment frameworks, there may be little effective progress. At the same time, focus groups indicated that, regardless of the lack of formal assessment, teachers are already using a number of ways to assess their pupils' critical literacy skills:

"To me, the ongoing assessment within a class, you understand what a child is saying, you can pick it apart more. That's very hard to formally assess." (Year 5 teacher)

"…if they're explaining it, if they're able to analyse it and you know they've understood it and they're critically saying, 'Well, I don't think this is the main reason, I think this is the main reason.' So you're using that evaluation and generally it's more marks on a mark scheme for that, so that'll give you some helpful hints." (Secondary school teacher)

2.3.3 The vital role of parents

As discussed earlier, children and young people learn through socialisation and family has been identified as the main socialisation agent during childhood. Therefore, the role of parents and carers cannot be underestimated in supporting children to develop critical literacy skills.

Indeed, our surveys of children and young people showed that more children speak to their family and friends than to teachers about fake news. A quarter (24.6%) of primary school pupils said they talk about fake news to their family and 14.9% said they speak to their friends. Only 4.8% said they speak about fake news to their teacher. An even greater percentage of secondary school pupils said they speak to their family (35.1%) and friends (31.9%) about fake news, while only 7.9% said they speak to their teacher.

Similarly, the Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes report by Ofcom (2017) shows that nearly half (48%) of 12 to 15-year-olds interested in any type of news found out about it through friends and family. This may reflect the greater likelihood of children and young people encountering news outside the school setting (for example, on the TV at home, on the radio on the way to school, reading print media, or when using social media) and the naturally increased opportunities to discuss news with those around them during these times.

The group discussions with children and young people support these findings. None of the children mentioned speaking about fake news at school, apart from specific occasions, such as watching Newsround on Fridays, and none of the teachers provided evidence of specifically addressing issue of fake news with their pupils. However, children and young people in all year groups gave accounts of speaking about these issues with their family and friends:

"It's mainly my dad... he like gets into like a whole argument and stuff on the news and he's either happy about it or not happy about it, so he kind of like asked me for my opinion. And then he also like tells me that I've got to be careful of what's real or fake or not because you never know what's going to happen." (Year 7/8 pupil)

"I do as well [chat to parents about news and fake news], I do with my mum, because she watches the news in the morning and she shows me some of it and like, and sometimes we just try and figure out if it's true or not." (Year 5/6 pupil)

"Yeah, me and my parents talk about it sometimes, if there's, again, big headlines and we talk about them and the impacts that they've had on the communities that it's happened in. Yeah, so it's quite interesting to talk about it." (Year 9 pupil)

"...we do watch just a morning news show, normally, just in the background. And if we do hear something, we will have a discussion about it probably." (Year 10/11 pupil)

Interestingly, some of the young people in the group discussions also felt that there is more freedom at home to have a discussion about news, to express their opinion and not be judged or mocked by their peers:

"...it's easier to speak to my parents about what I think and what my views [are] than in school because I feel like it's hard to have an opinion here in school without getting judged. Like if you have a certain political view or you think, you have a certain opinion or view on something, that you'll get picked on, people just make fun of you." (Year 10/11 pupil)

The vital role of parents in supporting their children's critical literacy was also evident in the expert panel discussions and written evidence submitted. In the expert panel discussions, it was felt by some that there is a gap between school and home, and that parents could benefit from additional support as well:

"A lot of parents are looking for support and tips on how to discuss the event with their children."
(Anna Bassi, Editor, The Week Junior)

"I think there is a gap with parents where, especially the parents in some of the more deprived schools, ... a lot of them don't have those skills and the kind of support they need is not there."
(Liz Robinson, Headteacher, Surrey Square Primary School)

The crucial role of parents was also evident in the written submissions of evidence. Pupils in the school who took part in the written submission of evidence felt that parents should receive information on critical literacy and fake news. They also felt that parents should be encouraged to read and evaluate sources with their children. Another piece of written evidence highlighted that there is a role for parents and carers to help children to develop their critical literacy skills and that libraries might be ideally placed to provide support:

"Parents and carers should play a key role in helping their children to develop these skills. As indicated in point 1 public and school libraries and Schools Library Services can support parents and carers to gain the knowledge and the information they need to confidently assist their children."
(The Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians)

At the stakeholder event, experts from the fields of education, academia, policy and the media discussed what support for parents might look like, including the need for advice for parents who are not confident themselves about how to spot fake news. Strategies to help parents facilitate conversations about the news with their child at home, for example while watching or listening to news together, and guidance on how to talk to children about upsetting news items to help them process and rationalise the news was felt to be important. It was emphasised how key it is for parents to understand their children's online behaviours as well as personally experience the sites and apps their children are using and the games that they are playing. Whilst online safety and support around discussing challenging topics which come up in the news are not in the remit of this commission, it was thought that parents could benefit from signposting to helpful websites and resources in these areas.

2.3.4 The social space: peers

While the previous section shows that more children and young people speak to their parents rather than friends about fake news, and that some young people feel they might be mocked by their peers if they express their opinion, the influence of their peers should not be underestimated. The evidence shows that pupils in secondary school in particular discuss fake news with their friends, which is likely to have a positive impact on their critical literacy skills as discussion is crucial for developing these skills. The surveys of children and young people showed that while 14.9% of primary school children talk to their friends about fake news, twice as many (31.9%) secondary pupils discuss the issue with their friends.

2.3.5 The role of media companies

Finally, the role of media and social media companies has been a prominent part of the discussion around developing children and young people's critical literacy skills. Indeed, as mentioned previously in this report, teachers indicated in our survey that the media should play its part in supporting the development of children's critical literacy skills – alongside schools and parents.

Evidence from the expert panel discussions finds critical literacy and fake news to be a societal issue about which media companies have a huge responsibility to do their part:

> *"There's a huge responsibility on the media industry... to produce all this content so they're also responsible for the effect it's having on children and so... [the media industry] has a responsibility to support schools and parents as well."* (Ben Hicks, Executive Director, The Guardian Foundation)

> *"More representatives from media companies...should go into schools and discuss the issues because it shouldn't be just down to teachers..."* (Nicky Cox, Editor-in-Chief, First News)

> *"So it's critical that publishers like us, all of us media news journalists, are committed to not only providing high-quality content but... [also to] help our readers develop a depth of knowledge to fully understand world events along with the skills they need to critically assess what they read."*
> (Anna Bassi, Editor, The Week Junior)

Pupils who submitted written evidence felt that, while teachers are responsible for teaching critical literacy, they could also benefit from workshops run by specialist educators, such as people with a digital or journalistic background. This shows how the involvement of people and organisations from outside schools could not only take some of the pressure off teachers but also be welcomed by children and young people.

Furthermore, written evidence submitted by Facebook highlights some of the ways they are working to limit the spread of fake news as a response to the growing problem. These include reducing news stories on their platform from sources that consistently post clickbait headlines and working with independent fact-checking organisation, Full Fact, on a campaign to provide tips to spot fake news. The role of regulation and the responsibility of media companies was discussed at our expert panel session. As Lord Knight surmises:

> *"I think our conclusion of the debate, as far as is possible to have a conclusion in such a debate, was that we did need some new regulation [of social media platforms, like the traditional media platforms have,] but just imposing the old regulation of publishing media is the wrong answer."*

3. Conclusions and a vision for the future

Children and young people today are growing up in a globalised world and are processing information from a wider variety of sources than ever before. It is essential to ensure that they are given the opportunity to develop the appropriate critical literacy skills to be able to navigate the world around them effectively. It is every child's right to be able to acquire the critical literacy skills they need to navigate the potential pitfalls when consuming news, particularly when using online sources and social media.

The commission has brought to light the significant role social media is playing in defining and driving the way young people experience the news. Just as rapidly as our news environment is changing, so too must our definition of the skills we need to navigate it. Today's children are not only consumers of news, but they are also creators and communicators of it. This means that the critical literacy skills they need to survive and thrive in our digital age must move beyond reading and come to embrace all facets of literacy, including writing, speaking and listening.

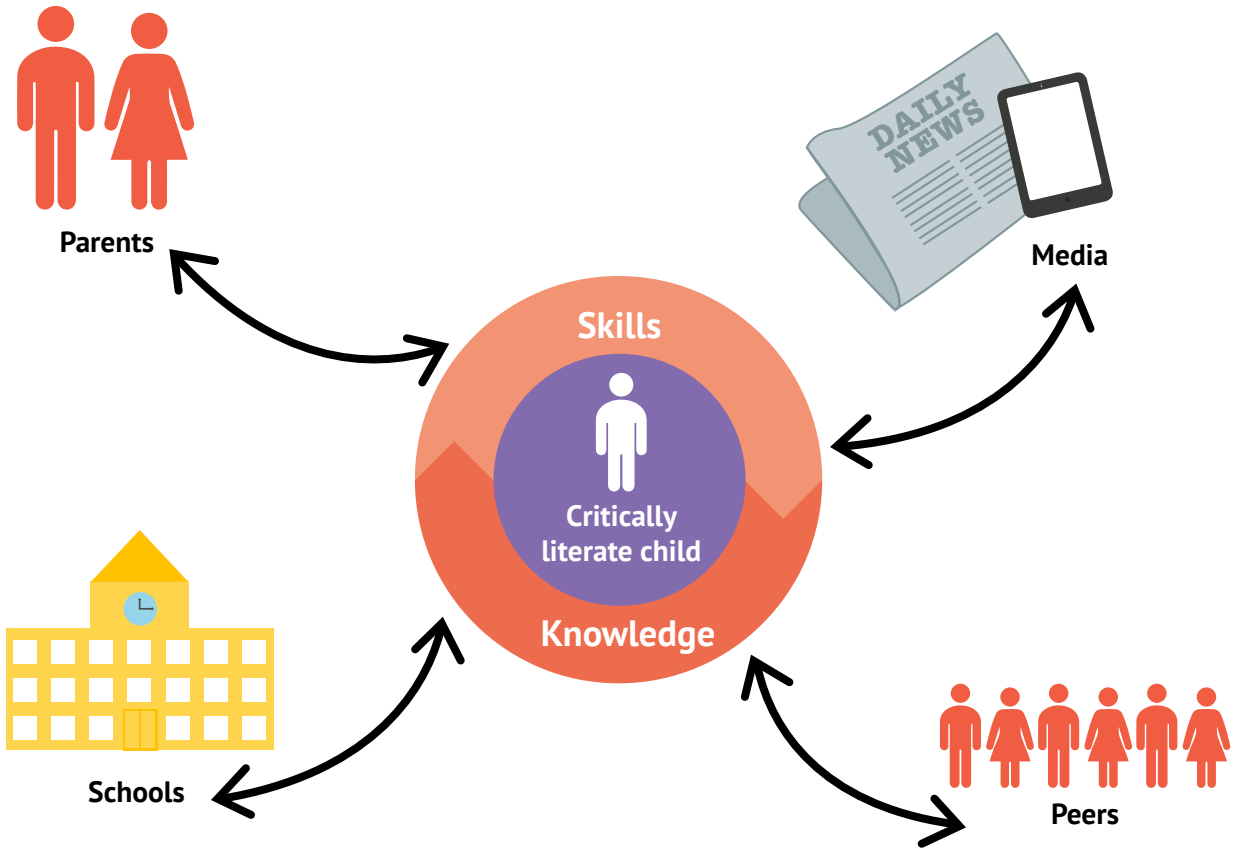
While teachers and pupils both recognise that young people are becoming increasingly media literate (e.g. able to differentiate between 'serious' and 'fun' news and check sources to distinguish between more and less trustworthy stories), the commission also found that children lack the confidence and conviction to identify fake news.

Fake news is a serious issue. The commission found that half of children and young people are worried that they won't be able to tell whether or not a news story is true, which has subsequently diminished their trust in the news and confidence in their own ability. This issue also has the potential to increase children's anxieties and fears, and skew their world views. Furthermore, it is not simply an issue for children and young people on a personal level but it also has an impact on society as a whole. We therefore have a shared responsibility to support children and young people in developing the skills they need to become critically literate and be able to identify fake news.

While schools are well placed to help children become critically literate, they cannot do it alone. Families, public libraries, commercial, non-commercial and media organisations, as well as children and young people themselves, must work together. Anything that happens in school occurs within the wider context of voluntary and potential regulatory actions in the spheres of industry and policymaking, but alongside this, there is a need for good-quality, expert-led resources to help schools and families support children's critical literacy in the digital age. Indeed, a 2018 survey for the European Commission found that, from a long list of possible actions that online platforms could take to address the spread of disinformation, the highest proportion (71%) of respondents favoured "investment in educating and empowering users for better assessing and using online information" (European Commission, 2018).

With this in mind, we have developed the following model (Figure 10) which proposes a more holistic view of how children acquire critical literacy skills. In order for a child to be critically literate, they need a balance of knowledge and skills, both basic (such as literacy) and specific (such as critical thinking). Development of these areas is largely influenced by a number of different spaces around the child: parents, peers, schools and the media.

Figure 10: Holistic approach to the acquisition of critical literacy skills



It is vital that we place the child at the centre of our efforts to address the issue of critical literacy and fake news. As Ben Hicks, Executive Director, The Guardian Foundation, stated in the expert panel discussion:

> *"Finally, the most important people in this are children. They'll be consuming and interacting with news in a way that we've never understood."*

4. Five areas of change: The Children's Charter on Fake News and our recommendations

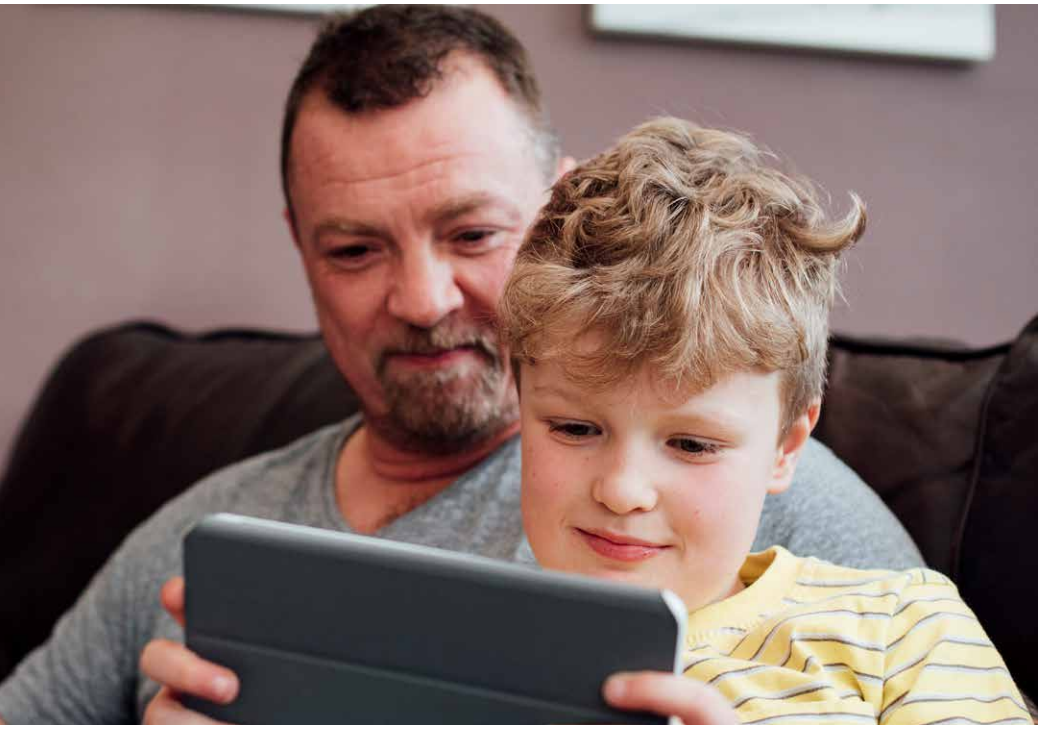
The commission has identified a range of unique challenges that today's children face in relation to fake news. Many pupils lack the skills they need to identify fake news, meaning that they may experience increased anxiety due to stories that are deliberately meant to frighten people or sensationalise issues, they may mistake false news for fact, and they may be negatively influenced by hateful agendas promoted online. All of this impacts on young people's well-being, and leads to a reduced level of trust in news, which can pose a threat to democratic engagement.

Our recommendations, as outlined overleaf, set out five areas of change which are designed to enable young people to acquire the knowledge, confidence and critical thinking skills they need to engage with different sources of news and to employ these skills effectively.

Critical literacy skills hold the key: our recommendations focus on supporting the acquisition of critical literacy in schools, in the home and in the community, so that we can equip children to confidently navigate the news and our changing digital media landscape.

Our thanks go to all those who gave evidence to the commission and shared their viewpoints, insights and expertise. The views of children have been particularly important to us. In drawing on their evidence we have seen the need to protect their rights and our response has been to use their perspectives to draw up a 'Children's Charter on Fake News' which you can see below and which also provides a framework for all the recommendations that follow. We are particularly grateful for the collaboration of students from St Michael's School in the wording and intent of the Charter.

Everyone has a role to play in protecting children's rights around fake news. Our recommendations support this, outlining specific action areas for government, schools, families, media organisations, business and the charity sector.



The Children's Charter on Fake News

1. We should have the critical literacy skills we need to navigate the digital world and question the information that we find online.

2. We should have the right to access accurate news from trustworthy media companies. We should not have to read or hear news stories that will scare us or cause us anxiety without having opportunities to discuss them and put them into context.

3. We should be given opportunities to practise our critical literacy skills by looking at news stories we find on TV, on the radio and online, including websites, apps and social media.

4. We should understand how the news is made to help us become critical thinkers and spot fake news stories.

5. We should be encouraged and supported to talk about the news that we read online at home and with our friends.

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Our recommendations

1. We should have the critical literacy skills we need to navigate the digital world and question the information that we find online.

• The Department for Education should ensure that the teaching of critical literacy relevant for the digital age is included within Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD), equipping teachers with the relevant subject knowledge and enabling them to be confident with the pedagogy to embed it across the curriculum.

• The assessment framework needs to be updated to position critical literacy skills more explicitly, reflecting the changing digital landscape and the threats posed by fake news, especially within the Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 frameworks.

• The Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund and Strategic School Improvement Fund should both recognise the value of, and give support to, CPD addressing critical literacy.

• A whole-school approach to teaching critical literacy is essential to embedding critical literacy across the curriculum. Teachers and schools must be provided with the necessary CPD and resources to enable them to teach critical literacy actively and explicitly within the teaching of any and every subject.

• Working together is vital. A great many organisations and individuals have shared their expertise to inform this commission – including educators, policymakers, media, commercial and non-commercial organisations. The commission should continue to engage with these stakeholders, signposting their work and resources, collaborating to develop robust and effective solutions, developing funding and programme delivery partnerships, and evolving our collective understanding and approaches to tackle this issue.

2. We should have the right to access accurate news from trustworthy media companies. We should not have to read or hear news stories that will scare us or cause us anxiety without having opportunities to discuss them and put them into context.

• Media organisations should recognise their responsibility and take appropriate actions to ensure accurate reporting of the news and invest in programmes and resources to equip young people with the critical literacy skills needed to navigate the increasingly complex digital world.

• Media organisations and government need to work together to identify and enforce appropriate regulatory options, whether through self-regulation or legislation, and ensure that digital media platforms are effectively tackling the proliferation of fake news.

3. We should be given opportunities to practise our critical literacy skills by looking at news stories we find on TV, on the radio and online, including websites, apps and social media.

• Teachers and schools should ensure critical literacy teaching utilises texts from a range of news sources, including online, that encompass a spectrum of journalistic approaches and viewpoints, to enable pupils to understand political bias. Constructive dialogue, in a non-judgemental learning space, can help pupils to gain confidence in their views, as well as an increased awareness of the motivations behind fake news production and improved ability to identify such stories.

• Children and young people should be given regular time to read, hear and see current news stories in the school environment (for example, during PSHE or watching BBC's Newsround during form time) and at home. As stated by the young people informing our commission, "practice makes perfect".

4. We should understand how the news is made to help us become critical thinkers and spot fake news stories.

• Media organisations and businesses should take an active role in building the critical literacy skills of young people, supporting initiatives with schools and communities, and improving awareness of the methods and motivations behind news production.

• Children and young people should be supported to develop their knowledge and gain practical experience of the methods of journalistic enquiry and responsible news creation. This process demystifies how news is made, empowers young people and encourages active engagement over passive consumption.

5. We should be encouraged and supported to talk about the news that we read online at home and with our friends.

• Parents and carers should be given support, advice and resources to help facilitate conversations with children about the news and fake news, to evaluate them together, and have conversations with their children about the motivations behind news production. Schools can facilitate this by encouraging children and parents or carers to look up articles together. This may also bridge the gap between what's being taught at school and continued learning at home.

• Children and young people should feel that their experience and knowledge of using different formats and sources of news is respected, and that their understanding can be used to inform both their peer group and older family members. Dialogue and discussion between young people, their peers and family members should be encouraged.

In response to the commission's recommendations, the National Literacy Trust has produced a suite of teaching resources, lesson ideas and activities for primary and secondary schools, as well as directories signposting schools to key organisations and additional fake news and critical literacy resources. The charity has also produced advice for parents and carers. These can all be downloaded for free from the National Literacy Trust website: **literacytrust.org.uk/fake-news-resources**.

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