



MEDIA LITERACY STATEMENT: 2001

A general statement of policy by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on Media Literacy and Critical Viewing Skills

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

The 1998 joint report of the BBC, the Independent Television Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Commission, *Violence and the Viewer*, recommended that the Government should take the lead in co-ordinating a national strategy for media education. In late 1999, in response to this, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) hosted a Media Education Seminar. The seminar was designed to examine current initiatives on media education and assess the scope for a more coherent approach to critical viewing in an age of digital broadcasting and technological convergence. To that end senior people in broadcasting, broadcasting regulation, parenting support and educational theory were invited to attend. A report of the seminar was subsequently issued by DCMS. This report promised that DCMS would issue a Media Literacy Policy Statement intended to act as a general statement of what DCMS understands by media literacy and as a point of reference for future endeavour. The seminar also informed the development of policies in the White Paper *A New Future for Communications*, published on 12 December 2000, which proposed a role for the projected new regulator - the Office of Communications - in the promotion of media literacy.

The genesis of this paper was therefore primarily in a debate on audio-visual communication, but there are increasing opportunities for people to learn to understand and manipulate multiple digital media (eg. graphics, text, animation and audio, as well as the moving image) in ways that benefit from a similar understanding of their power and use.

Chapter 2: Media Literacy - Why?

2.1 What is Media Literacy? Why is it important?

All relevant studies indicate that the moving image, particularly but not exclusively television, is now as central to young people's cultural and intellectual development as traditional print (books and magazines). With increasing technological convergence (computer games and other CD-ROM's run through the TV set, convergence of broadcasting and the Internet) the place of such media in national life can only increase.

A recent and authoritative academic study (*Young People, New Media* : Sonia Livingstone & Moira Bovill, LSE, 1998) found that nearly all households with children have a TV and a video recorder; two thirds have a TV-linked games machine, and nearly half have cable or satellite TV. This is just the tip of what has been called a "media rich" bedroom culture in the UK, in which many children have in their bedrooms a variety of electronic media, including screen entertainment, music systems and PCs. Although there are class and gender differences in the relative priority given to certain types of media, a general trend is observable. Converging screen technologies will increasingly contribute to the blurring of boundaries between information, education, work and entertainment.

The LSE study concludes that "*To take their place in the twenty first century, children must be screen-wise as well as book-wise*". Amongst other necessary skills, it recommends that children will need to appraise critically, and assess the relative value of, information from different sources, and gain competencies in understanding the construction, forms, strengths and limitations of screen based content.

2.2 Education and Citizenship

The Government's Communications White Paper (published December 2000) recognised that the expansion and interpenetration of the modern media can be a positive force. The White Paper says "*The explosion of information has fuelled a democratic revolution of knowledge and active citizenship. If information is power, power can now be within the grasp of everyone. No government can now rely on the ignorance of its population to sustain it. We are richer as citizens thanks to the expansion of modern media*".

This Statement builds on this conclusion, and seeks to identify the appropriate skills and attitudes that viewers and users should develop to make the most of this information and entertainment explosion. It recognises that much excellent research work has already been done on media education and cine-literacy. The British Film Institute, in particular, has led the field in this area. In 1998 DCMS asked the BFI to convene a Working Group to consider a possible film education strategy. The resulting report, *Making Movies Matter* (BFI, 1999), asked education

policy makers to recognise that “critical and creative moving image skills will be a key element of literacy in the 21st century”, and made a number of proposals to advance this agenda.

In the last few years many teachers across the UK have developed imaginative and positive activities and approaches to media education, and elements of media literacy are already taught within the English curriculum. Although this Statement focuses on media literacy primarily from the standpoint of the receiver and consumer of audio-visual media, we also recognise the need for educational emphasis on the learner as a creator of digital media. For example, pupils will increasingly need to learn how to use multiple media to create their own resources or projects and how these might become more freely disseminated and shared.

From September 2002 the National Curriculum in England will include Citizenship as part of the statutory curriculum for secondary schools. Education in citizenship is designed to provide greater coherence in the way in which pupils develop a full understanding of their roles and responsibilities as citizens in a modern democracy. There is also, for the first time, a national framework for the teaching of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). Recognising this, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has said that “... education is about helping pupils to develop the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to live confident, healthy, independent lives as individuals, parents, workers and members of society” (National Curriculum Key Stages 3-4).

The Citizenship Curriculum recognises the importance of the media in society and requires that pupils be taught about these issues at both Key Stages 3 and 4. Furthermore, the guidance recognises that the informed and creative use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) will play an increasingly important role in helping pupils (and adults) attain the skills and knowledge that the Citizenship agenda promotes. Specifically, the Citizenship guidance issued by DfES recommends that pupils be taught to develop their ideas using ICT tools to amend and refine their work and enhance its quality and accuracy. They should be able to select and synthesise information to meet their needs, whilst also critically assessing that information for its accuracy, bias and plausibility. The Government believes that media literacy, if properly integrated into children’s basic education, can make an important contribution towards the development of adult citizens who better comprehend a democratic society, including the role of the media, and are therefore more active participants in that society.

These are specific examples of how a critical awareness of the media and the literate and self-aware use of ICT could enhance wider educational objectives across the whole curriculum, but fully developed critical viewing skills can and should be applied to other areas of social, educational and cultural life. Given inevitable developments in electronic media and broadcasting, they will become increasingly necessary for the health of society and the protection of citizens.

2.3 Technological convergence : the future of content regulation.

A paper produced for the June 2000 Communications White Paper Seminar (*Scenarios for Convergence and the Internet - Implications for content and content providers?* : Mark Oliver) said about convergence “*In the end, the only relevant distinction to be made between consumer*

equipment types, content types and distribution means will be the purpose and intention of the user - the home entertainment centre, the home information centre and the personal receiver will replace the TV, PC and mobile phone.....There is no doubt that convergence over the next decade will see a rapid expansion in non-linear access to material where the user decides his or her own schedule, can select items and stories from within a programme or rewind and replay a specific scene over again”.

Clearly there is some way to go before this scenario becomes a reality, and an uncertain transitional stage to be gone through, but the trend of technological convergence is broadly clear and probably inescapable. New technology will challenge the old channel/time/medium framework within which people have traditionally formed their expectations of what they will watch and listen to. A future system of regulation must take account of differences between media and have different sets of rules which can be adapted to different circumstances. This will involve a greater degree of self regulation on the part of viewers and parents.

There are clear implications here for traditional forms of content regulation such as the 9pm “Watershed” on “free-to-air” television channels. Given the Government’s aim that every citizen should have access to the Internet by 2005, where such arrangements cannot apply, new tools are needed to allow users to manage their experience on such delivery platforms. The Office of Communications (OFCOM) that is proposed in the Communications White Paper will have a multi-tier and flexible system of regulation, with an emphasis on co- and self-regulation that is designed to adapt itself to the changing environment it will oversee. Whatever the precise mechanisms of regulation thought best for the future, it is governments’ responsibility to prepare for and assist this transition in the most socially beneficial way. Promoting greater media literacy and critical viewing skills must be one important response.

Chapter 3: Critical Viewing Skills

3.1 Critical Viewing - what is it?

Critical viewing encompasses a wide variety of different and interlocking skills, ranging from a swift, dexterous ability to identify different platforms and means of delivering content to a critical appraisal of that content. In some ways it is analogous to the critical reading skills which underpin all good teaching of English; in other ways it requires a whole new range of responses.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of critical viewing is the ability to *think critically* about viewing - ie to understand why one likes or dislikes certain programmes or genres and relate such preferences to moral and intellectual reference points; and, having done so, to take greater responsibility for viewing choices and the use of electronic media, for both oneself and one's children. Specific "skills", in this sense, might include :

- The ability to distinguish fact from fiction. Although there is welcome evidence that children, especially, are capable of many subtle distinctions here, developments such as the "cross-over" of soap opera characters to other media still make this a potentially problematic area, as new technologies enable more sophisticated levels of user interaction with favourite characters.
- The ability to identify and appreciate different levels of realism (eg. between "realistic" and cartoon/exaggerated "Action movie" violence) both within and between genres.
- A better understanding of the actual *mechanisms of production and distribution* of TV programmes, CD-ROM games, films, interactive software, web sites etc, enabling finer judgements of quality and context, and firmer intellectual self-defence against varieties of manipulation, invasiveness and propaganda.
- The ability to differentiate reportage from advocacy. Identifying different levels of non-fiction (eg. high quality historical documentary from sensationalised discussion of "issues" on day time chat shows) and to weigh evidentiary standards within them.
- Awareness and assessment of commercial messages within programmes (product placement etc) and a critical approach to advertising. This is likely to become more important as new technology allows viewers to "skip" advertisements, forcing

advertisers to respond with new ways of placing and advertising their products within and between a wider variety of media.

- An awareness of the economic and presentational imperatives that underlie news management; developing an understanding of the often tacit commercial and cultural pressures which dictate choice of stories (eg. preferences for coverage of “celebrities” and “human interest” stories etc, as opposed to political or environmental issues that can have a direct impact on people’s lives).
- The ability consciously to *explain and justify* media preferences, enabling wider perspectives of choice and critical distance from a plethora of media options.

This is a brief summary of some of the key skills and aptitudes of genuine critical viewing skills. It is not meant to detract from the many exciting challenges and possibilities that the new multi-media environment opens up for all users, especially young people who are perhaps most alive to the creative possibilities. On the contrary, the suggested range of critical viewing skills is intended to underpin and develop those possibilities towards the most beneficial ends for both individual and society.

Real media literacy would consist of these skills (which are primarily to do with approaches and responses to *content*, across a number of media) and other, equally necessary, “navigation” skills across the electronic media landscape. With technological convergence, boundaries between hitherto distinct media (the net, TV, films, etc) will increasingly erode, and linkages and cross-references be quicker and easier. It will be essential for viewers (especially younger ones) to be able to identify quickly which environment they are in and what they can expect there.

To do this, of course, providers of services will need to make clear what standards are being applied to what service and when a user is passing from a well-regulated to a less-regulated sector. The clear identification of “portals” through which users gain access to different media, and the “domains” that they are in or can access, will be a necessity, as will some form of media literacy education in schools, teaching pupils to be sceptical of the trustworthiness of some online and other content.

3.2 Critical Viewing - learning

There are a number of ways that critical viewing and media literacy more generally could be promoted. There are obvious links to the Government’s “Citizenship” agenda and the PSHE initiative. Consideration of how media literacy might be covered within these initiatives must be left to DfES and teachers, but there are already some useful materials and publications in this field which could be made available to teachers (and parents) at minimal cost (the most recent and comprehensive of which is the BFI’s *Moving Images in the Classroom : A Teaching Guide*, September 2000).

There will be increasing scope for creative inter-activity with new technologies in classrooms in the next few years. At present 86% of schools are hooked up to the Internet; it is planned that by 2002 all schools will have the facility. With an increased awareness of the importance of media literacy, there is an environment developing that should be more receptive to a structured learning programme designed to inculcate critical viewing skills.

Beyond these, broadcasters and other service providers need to start thinking about their own responsibility to foster well-informed and critical viewers, not least to protect themselves and their reputations in a competitive, and possibly more litigious, market place (there are already some useful existing initiatives such as Childnet International and the BBC's Webwise).

DCMS sees great benefit in the promotion of media literacy in the next decade, as new forms of electronic media emerge and public interaction with them develops - niche markets and channels, "menus" of broadcasting options, universal net access, etc. Hence the White Paper proposal that OFCOM should have a duty to promote media literacy, working with DfES, the industries and educators. Whilst there will still be a regulatory structure for much of traditional broadcasting, most especially for the "benchmark" public service channels and content providers, at the same time there will be an expectation that people will themselves take greater responsibility for their use of these media. That expectation will be a fair one only if people have the tools (both material and intellectual) with which to make those informed choices. That demands a greater degree of media literacy and critical viewing skills than is apparent at present. It is DCMS's hope that this Statement will add momentum to the process of achieving these goals.

DEPARTMENT FOR CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT