

Jeremy Hunt's vision for media literacy

By Richard Wallis

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Making the UK a bigger player in the digital marketplace, getting grannies (and others) online, and keeping pedophiles offline (or at least away from the kids). In essence, this is the vision and purpose of media literacy according to Culture Secretary, Jeremy Hunt.

Hunt's recent [letter to Sonia Livingstone](#) attributes four functions to media literacy:

- 'enhancing people's engagement with digital media';
- 'helping to promote the UK's digital economy';
- 'securing suitable uptake of the online delivery of public services'; and
- 'addressing concerns about potentially harmful media impact'.

His letter also admits to a 'phased reduction' of support for Ofcom's media literacy work.

This is not particularly surprising. Hunt is simply articulating a policy-lite version of the direction in which the previous administration was already traveling. The most telling aspect of his letter is the fact that half of its content concerns, not his Department, but rather the Department for Education (DfE).

This is significant, and indicates a perennial problem at the heart of media literacy policy in the UK. Any coherent strategy for promoting media literacy must inevitably have the education of children as a priority. Yet the legal responsibility lies with Ofcom. The DfE (in its four iterations since the turn of the century) has been conspicuously absent from any serious engagement with this issue. With faint praise presumably unintended, Hunt demonstrates the DfE's current commitment to media literacy by making the following claims for it:

- media literacy skills can already be found in history, geography and English;
- schools are 'free to develop media literacy' (as indeed they're free to teach the lost language of Koro);
- the current national curriculum review has undertaken a consultation, and any views on media literacy were welcomed;
- the policy team responsible for technology will be 'working on a new strategy' following the shut-down of Becta;
- the Wolf Review included 'exploring the role of media literacy' (although Alison Wolf fails to mention this); and
- support will continue for Media Smart – a schools initiative focused on advertising.

In the run-up to the Communications Act 2003, the White Paper and the policy narrative produced with the Bill, explicitly stressed the importance of Ofcom working together with the Education Department. This essentially educative project was to include the development of media literacy 'through course materials for use in formal education' (Draft Communications Bill, 2002, Policy Narrative para.2.6.5.3).

At the same time however, this was not reflected within the legislation itself – how could it, coming as it did from DCMS and the TDI? And of course, it's the legislation that remains when policy narratives have been long forgotten.



This is the discontinuity that lies at the heart of UK media literacy policy, and an issue that continues to be a source of frustration for all those whose vision for media literacy is bigger than Jeremy Hunt's.

May 27th, 2011 | [Guest Blog, Media Literacy](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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