

# **Media Literacy in Northern Ireland**

## **Policy Briefing Document No. 2**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The policy strand of the Centre for Media Research (CMR) seeks to inform and critique contemporary media and information policies from a Northern Ireland perspective.

Of late media literacy has received much attention from policy makers both centrally and in the nations and regions in the UK. This is in part stimulated by Section 11 of the Communications Act (2003) which established the Office of Communications (OfCom) and also placed a duty on that office to promote media literacy and to 'bring about, or to encourage others to bring about, a better public understanding of the nature and characteristics of material published by means of electronic media.'

In the past year OfCom has launched a number of public consultations, published a strategy document and published a number of literature reviews.<sup>1</sup> In a recent document OfCom defined three key priorities for action: conducting research into emerging media literacy issues/ measuring media literacy levels, connecting existing stakeholders and promoting common labelling systems.<sup>2</sup>

CMR is part of the [UK Media Literacy Consortium](#) which is composed of one university in each of the regions which wish to conduct empirical research into current media literacy issues.<sup>3</sup> A key concern of this group is that current media literacy policy fails to take account of the different histories, structures and initiatives which already operate at a regional level throughout the UK.

This document has been developed to inform both local and national policy makers about the history and current policies and initiatives which operate in Northern Ireland. The document provides an introduction to the development of media studies and media literacy in Northern Ireland, an overview of current policy documents, an overview of current projects and initiatives, an analysis of key cultural and regional specificities in Northern Ireland and finally some conclusions and suggestions for future research in the Northern Ireland context.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> See Ofcom (2004) 'Ofcom's Strategy and Priorities for the Promotion of Media Literacy. A statement.' London, Ofcom Office of Communications.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://users.aber.ac.uk/lmg/MediaLiteracyUK/>

## **2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDIA STUDIES AND MEDIA LITERACY IN NORTHERN IRELAND.**

Media literacy initiatives in Northern Ireland have a relatively long history. The first media studies course in Northern Ireland was established in a Further Education College in 1983/84.<sup>4</sup> The precursor to the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission, the Northern Ireland Film Council, set up an education committee in the 1980s which Paul Moore, Lecturer at the University of Ulster and now a member of the CMR, chaired for many years. This committee strengthened links with the British Film Institute (BFI) and in 1991 negotiations started with the Curriculum Council in Northern Ireland to have media studies introduced as a subject at GCSE level.

Over the past decade, and despite the growth of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in media studies at the University of Ulster, the numbers taking media studies courses have .....

Indeed key stakeholders found that media studies was often viewed in largely negative terms. Media Studies as a subject was perceived as only of interest to those who wanted to work in the media and there was a perception that third level institutions view an A level in Media Studies as less acceptable than an A level in other subjects and thus colleges are reluctant to offer, and students to take, the subject. In secondary and primary schools media studies were integrated into the English curriculum but had made little impact on the approach to teaching and assessment elsewhere in the curriculum. Finally, media studies courses themselves had tended to remain relatively specialised and concentrate on the mass media of radio, television, print and the cinema and to ignore the development of new and alternative media.

In 2000 the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission (NIFTC) and BFI established an Education Policy Working Group. Between 2000 and 2004 this group, which included representatives from various government departments, government agencies, educational bodies and independent training providers, developed a common vision for media literacy in Northern Ireland. This work culminated in the document 'A Wider Literacy. The Case for Moving Image Media Education in Northern Ireland', published in 2004 and the appointment of a full time Head of Education to the NIFTC to co-ordinate the implementation of the vision. This organisation is currently running a number of media literacy pilot projects in formal and informal contexts, teacher training initiatives and curriculum reform.

The move from a discourse of media studies and media education to one of media literacy, which builds upon a rights and entitlement discourse, is seen as important by key stakeholders. The focus of policy documents and initiatives now has shifted from specialist training and critical courses for a few to the need for everyone to be able to critique and produce media on a wide range of platforms i.e. to knowledge, skills and critical understanding and to discussions of what this might mean for the formal educational curriculum at all levels and for assessment methodologies.

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<sup>4</sup> James Curran notes that the first media studies degree in Britain was established in the Polytechnic of Central London in 1975. See Curran, J. (2004). *The Rise of the Westminster School. Towards a Political Economy of Culture. Capitalism and Communication in the Twenty-First Century*. A. Calabrese and C. Sparks. (Eds) Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: 13-40.

### **3. CURRENT POLICY SITUATION**

Despite the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly a number of plans and policy documents have been produced in the recent past which relate to media literacy and media education policy in Northern Ireland. This section will provide an introduction to these documents.

In summary the approach to media literacy in these documents is that it should:

- \* be an entitlement, not a luxury
- \* be integrated across the curriculum, not just in English or Media Studies
- \* include print, film, television, radio/sound, multimedia, the Internet and digital games
- \* adopt a competency/skills based approach focussed on doing and not just knowing
- \* be introduced at the earliest level of education, i.e. Foundation level (3-4 years)
- \* be supported by a sustained teacher training programme (initial and in-service training)

#### **1. 'A Wider Literacy. The Case for Moving Image Media Education in Northern Ireland' NIFTC/BFI Education Policy Working Group 2004.**

The Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission/BFI Education Policy Working Group, published this document in 2004. It has been supported by locally elected representatives but it is not 'official' government policy.

The 'Wider Literacy' document argues strongly that contemporary literacy includes the moving image in the broadest sense. It states that 'although print literacy is immensely important, it is no longer enough to ensure our full participation in culture, social life and politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (2004:6). It goes on to argue for the inclusion of television, film, radio and the Internet and the need for children in schools to develop an understanding of how the media work, to learn about their moving image heritage and to acquire the skills for digital creativity in a variety of media, including Internet and multimedia.

The key needs are identified in terms of skills, knowledge and critical understanding – the concept of competencies is used throughout the document. The document also argues that 'everyone in Northern Ireland should have opportunities to learn about these media, starting in primary school and continuing through lifelong learning' (2004:4).

This document outlines seven objectives (2004:5):

1. From Foundation Level to Key Stage 1 all teachers should have the competence to encourage pupils to talk about their television, video and film viewing experiences and reflect upon their preferences, interpretations and responses.
2. Schools and cultural organisations should collaborate to ensure that all young people have regular opportunities to see a wide range of moving image media, including media made in Northern Ireland, media from the past and examples of world cinema.
3. From Key Stage 2 on every child should have access to moving image software in the classroom and at least one experience of practical video production during the school year.
4. Schools in the post-primary phase should recognise moving image education as a key element applicable in all subjects.
5. All institutions in the formal and non-formal education sectors should recognise the value of, and offer opportunities for, practical work and screenings to achieve social inclusion, understanding between culturally diverse communities and remotivation of disaffected young people.

6. Specialist courses such as Media Studies, Film Studies and Moving Image Arts will be available to all young people who want them.
7. For those young people who wish to move on into careers in the moving image media industries appropriate and up to date study and careers advice should be available, as well as a full range of appropriate and high quality training.

Following the publication of this document the NIFTC Education Working Group became an implementation group under the chairmanship of Dr. Roger Austin from the University of Ulster's School of Education. They meet quarterly and along with the Head of Education from the NIFTC they coordinate and work with other stakeholders to achieve the aims of the wider literacy document.

While all the objectives are seen as important a key focus at the moment is initial teacher training and professional development. The NIFTC is currently working with the Education Library Board curriculum advisers, Department of Education Northern Ireland CCEA, the creative learning centres in Belfast, Derry and Armagh, Regional Training Units and the teacher training colleges to deliver a range of teacher training initiatives.

**2. 'Unlocking Creativity: a Creative Region' 2000. Policy document produced by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in Northern Ireland in association with DETI, DOE and DEL.**

Media literacy in Northern Ireland needs to be seen in relation to the broader policy focus on creativity and innovation. The 'Unlocking Creativity' document outlines a range of education and innovation policies and schemes. In particular it talks about the importance of 'moving image education' including moving image heritage, understanding how media work, and the need for people to acquire skills. The document notes that DCAL will continue to support the work of the NIFTC and through the commission provide funding for education projects. It is also supporting curriculum reviews and the introduction of an A level in Moving Image Arts.

See also <http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/allpages.asp?pname=creativity>

**3. 'The Way Ahead – Primary and Secondary Curriculum Reform' – Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).**

In 2005 various educational bodies in Northern Ireland will begin to implement new primary and secondary curricula following a period of consultation and pilots.

A key change will see the introduction of 'Moving Image Arts' at AS and A level. Developed by the CCEA and the BFI in conjunction with the NIFTC and the Nerve Centre, Derry this course was piloted in 10 schools with 60 students in 2004/5. The course introduces students to a variety of moving image material, coursework includes the production of a digital video and exams are conducted online.

Further changes will see the introduction of 'Local and Global Citizenship' as an overarching curricula area and as a subject from 2006/07 at post-primary level.

#### **4. CURRENT INITIATIVES IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

In May 2004 a major international conference 'Media Education in Europe' was held in Belfast. This was part of the EU e-learning project Media-Educ. (see [www.media-educ.org](http://www.media-educ.org)) and was attended by media educators from 23 countries. A DVD of the proceedings is available.

There have been a number of 'Lead practitioner' pilot projects run in primary and secondary schools across Northern Ireland. This involves media experts going into schools and demonstrating what can be done with the existing technology which is available. In 2005 the Education Library Boards and the Arts Council are funding Dr. Paul Moore of the Centre for Media Research at the University of Ulster to work with teachers from 3 schools to develop media literacy projects and to evaluate their effectiveness.

The development of a new policy focus on creativity across government departments has led to seed funding being distributed for a range of creativity projects in the arts and education. The South Eastern Educational Library Board (SEELB) has partnered with the Nerve Centre, Derry to develop a range of programmes in new media and creativity for teachers, youth workers and young people at a dedicated creative learning center at Studio On, outside Belfast. Co-funders include the NIFTC and the Hamlyn Foundation. The Southern Education and Library Board's (SELB) AmmA Centre, (Armagh Multi-Media Access) is also developing similar programmes for school and community based groups in Armagh. The Nerve Centre in Derry has been working with the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) and the NIFTC for a number of years in delivering a wide range of media and creativity programmes for schools and community groups. Further, NESTA has funded pilot projects with the NIFTC and CCEA to develop learning resources based on the NIFTC's Digital Film Archive and projects at the Nerve Centre.

#### **5. REGIONAL SPECIFICITIES**

It may be useful at this stage to outline some of the regional specificities pertaining to Northern Ireland.

##### **1. The Northern Ireland Assembly:**

The Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Oct., 2002 and direct rule reinstated. As a result ministers have responsibility for a number of departmental portfolios. For example, Barry Gardiner MP, has responsibility for the Department of Enterprise, Technology and Investment, The Department of Education and the Department of Education and Learning. The other department of relevance to this document is the Department of Culture, the Arts and Leisure at which Angela Smith MP is the relevant minister. She also holds responsibility for the Department of the Environment, the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety and she has responsibility for Victims and Reconciliation. The current governance system in Northern Ireland makes official policy development and funding decisions extremely slow and developments are highly politicised.

OfCom has an office in Northern Ireland and is charged with regulating communications and promoting media literacy. Locally OfCom's input into local media literacy initiatives is minor. Indeed local stakeholders are quiet disappointed with the rather limited role and funding that OfCom can contribute to this area. OfCom has regional offices in each of the nations and has

appointed regional advisory committees comprised of local individuals which meet quarterly.<sup>5</sup> Minutes from these advisory committee meetings can be accessed from the OfCom website.

The NITFC has responsibility for the development of the film and television production industry in Northern Ireland and these activities are funded by DETI through Invest NI and comprises the largest part of their annual spend. The NITFC's exhibition, cultural and educational activities, including media literacy and media education, are directly funded by DCAL. Media literacy activities are directed by the Head of Education and their work is informed by the Education Policy Implementation Group which is comprised of key stakeholders in Education and training across Northern Ireland.

There are no formal links between OfCom and NITFC.

## **2. The Education System**

The education system in Northern Ireland is strongly divided along religious lines. Thus there are state/controlled schools, including grammar schools which are predominantly Protestant as well as Catholic maintained schools. Approximately 40 percent of children attend grammar schools having sat their 11+. There are also a very small number of integrated schools (accounting for 4 percent of the school population) and there is one comprehensive school.<sup>6</sup>

The issue of community relations cannot be divorced from any examination of education policy in Northern Ireland. Segregated schools are a feature of the educational system and integrated schools are a relatively recent phenomenon, having only received full state funding from 1990. A number of curriculum and other cross-community educational schemes have been introduced to try and improve community relations but the need for teacher training and support in this area is still seen as an obstacle (DENI, 1999). The available evidence would suggest that teachers are relatively reluctant to tackle issues related to identity and citizenship in the Northern Ireland context and this is likely to have a significant impact on the success of the revised curricula at all levels and to impact upon the teaching of media literacy.

The wider literacy document noted that 'In relation to Northern Ireland it is noteworthy that many of these initiatives see media literacy as a means for developing understanding in environments where there has been cultural and identity conflict. A substantial body of moving image products and resources exploring aspects of identity (political, social, cultural and religious) in Northern Ireland has been developed...much of this work is motivated by the belief that moving image education has a unique contribution to make in Northern Ireland. The ability to make sense of conflicting images and representations is a critical survival skill that moving image education can provide' (NITFC/BFI, 2004:7) Bernard McCloskey, current Head of Education at NITFC, sees media literacy as playing a vital role in relation to citizenship education.

## **3. Irish-Medium Schools**

In 2002 there were 25 Irish-medium primary schools with 2,000 pupils and 3 post-primary schools with 1,000 children in Northern Ireland. A survey of teachers and principals in these schools noted that most of the literacy materials and resources which they were provided with

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<sup>5</sup> For info on the Northern Ireland advisory committee see [http://www.ofcom.org.uk/about/csg/adv\\_cmmt\\_nations/acni/biogs/?a=87101](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/about/csg/adv_cmmt_nations/acni/biogs/?a=87101)

<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.deni.gov.uk/about/d\\_history\\_2.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/about/d_history_2.htm)

were in English and they had to translate them themselves before they could use them in the classrooms. Some of these issues will be dealt with as the new curricula is rolled out.

Following the Good Friday agreement the CCEA has been working with Irish and Ulster-Scots bodies to develop initiatives, training and resources to promote awareness and to support the use of these languages in the Northern Irish context.

#### **4. Availability of Media Studies, Film Studies and Moving Image Arts in the formal education sector**

Media and Film Studies are available in 19 percent of NI schools and colleges (2004:5).

Moving Image Arts was piloted in 2004/5 and 60 students, of which two thirds were female, took the option.

[further statistics to be added]

#### **5. Geography and Size**

Northern Ireland is only 5,500 square miles and the primary and secondary school population was 350,000 at the turn of the century. The small size of Northern Ireland means that communication between stakeholders and the rollout of technology and new curricula to schools is relatively easy. The ICT strategy Classroom 2000 (C2K) has meant that all schools have broadband internet access and broadband availability in the region more generally is very high. 'Learn NI' was also developed by CCEA and is a customized online learning environment for schools.



## **6. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK**

This document has provided an overview of current policy and practical initiatives to define and promote media literacy in formal and informal sectors in Northern Ireland. Interestingly while most people are very positive about the promotion of 'media literacy' there is little critical public discussion about the current OfCom definition and its adequacy. In Northern Ireland people are content to broaden current conceptions of literacy to include the moving image and to conduct pilot projects to inform future initiatives rather than to define exactly what media literacy means. These activities proceed with little input from OfCom or the current care taking administration.

It is clear from this overview that a number of research issues and challenges remain. The following are a number of points which emerge from this review and may provide avenues for future work.

Firstly, both continuing and initial teacher training is needed to support these new policy developments and objectives. This involves both technical and critical skills education as well as dealing with a cultural reluctance to deal with identity and citizenship politics in the classroom. The latter may prove more intransigent and difficult than the former given the segregated nature of the school system. The Creative Learning Centres are currently active in promoting community relations and cultural diversity but training may not be the only requirement. This is clearly an issue which requires more research and attention.

Secondly, moves to introduce moving image literacy into school curricula at primary and secondary level has implications for curricula at third level also and both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in universities may need revision to take account of the new skill, knowledge and critical levels of future students. 'Creative Production' is not necessarily a part of traditional media studies courses and the current approach to assessment is still largely dependent on written assessments and exams.

Thirdly, while the focus on primary and secondary level schools is commendable little is known about the level of media literacy more generally in Northern Ireland. There is clearly a need for more research to be conducted into the media literacy of adults and older people who may potentially face an even greater range of barriers to access and use, particularly of the newer media. A policy focus on the formal sector to the detriment of informal sectors may actually widen the divide between young and old and has clear implications for 'citizenship' and 'creativity' more generally in the context of post-ceasefire Northern Ireland.

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## INTERVIEWS

A. Mr. Bernard McCloskey, Head of Education, The Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission (NIFTC)

B. Dr. Paul Moore, former chairman of the NIFTC/BFI Education Policy Working Group, lecturer at the University of Ulster and media practitioner.

## WEBSITES

Centre for Media Research, University of Ulster - <http://www.arts.ulster.ac.uk/media/cmr.html>

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment - <http://www.ccea.org.uk/>

And <http://www.rewardinglearning.com/development/qualifications/statistics/statistics.html>  
pgs 81 and 88.

Department of Education Northern Ireland - <http://www.deni.gov.uk/>

Department of Arts, Culture and Leisure - <http://www.dcalni.gov.uk/>

Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission - <http://www.niftc.co.uk/>

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