

VOICE FOCUS



MEDIA AND POLITICAL LITERACY ARE VITAL – ESPECIALLY NOW

By Matteo Bergamini, CEO & Founder, Shout Out UK

The current COVID-19 crisis has showcased many issues that we, as a society, must work on. From how the UK Government reacted to the initial outbreak, to how we consume news, and our heavy distrust in British political institutions.

Amidst the growing number of coronavirus cases in Europe, democracy is becoming another victim. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has passed a law which allows him to rule by decree for an unlimited period, without any checks and balances from a legislative body. This has officially made Hungary the first non-democratic country in the EU.

Other policies, around restricting individuals' freedom of movement and their rights to gather, have also been implemented in numerous other European countries, including in the UK with the emergency Coronavirus Act.

Whereas the current environment necessitates such measures, it is vital to remember that they provide political representatives with immense powers. If kept for a longer period of time, this could potentially result in an eroded democratic system, without any real political accountability.

This period requires extraordinary measures, however, it's important for us all to not lose sight of democracy out of fear, and ensure that we stay critically engaged to ensure that the powers and

policies that are required to mitigate the crisis don't erode democracy in the future.

Mixed with the possible erosion of democracy, COVID-19 has also created a wave of misinformation, conspiracy theories and disinformation around the origins of the virus and how it spreads.

British citizens, including young people, have been susceptible to claims that the virus and 5G are linked, with early studies showing that 8% of surveyed individuals believed the theory and 19% were uncertain. Such claims spur even more distrust towards our democratic institutions and the Government as a whole.

Media and political literacy education

For this reason, it is vital that media and political literacy education are as widespread as possible and available to all citizens in and out of school, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicity or gender. This will ensure that we have a general public which understands how they can hold their political representatives to account, but also has the critical thinking and analytical skills, as well as the confidence, to challenge any information aiming to deepen societal divides.

We at Shout Out UK are on a mission to help schools and colleges implement media and political literacy in the easiest and most cost-effective way possible, whilst providing young people with a platform to share information, debate and discuss issues they are passionate about.

With a growing network of over 700 schools, our E-Platform is at the forefront of democratic engagement, political literacy and media literacy. Since 2016, our Political Literacy course and workshops have been run in schools and colleges across the country. Our programmes cover an Introduction to British Politics (voting, Parliament, local government), International Relations, Media Literacy (how to critically analyse the media and deal with misinformation) and Employability Skills (debating and public speaking).

During this epidemic, we have also begun releasing weekly media literacy resources which can easily be downloaded from our website (www.shoutoutuk.org/covid-19) helping teachers, parents and young people get the right information and not be tricked by false information.

The world as we knew it has changed. We must take all that this epidemic has taught us and aim to improve society for the better. This includes building a healthy and inclusive democracy, which is not susceptible to populist and antidemocratic acts and decisions.