

## **Lord Strathcarron, Chairman, Unicorn Publishing Group—written evidence (FOJ010)**

### **House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital: inquiry into the future of journalism**

- 1) How should journalism be defined and what is its value to society? What is the difference between 'citizen journalism' and other forms of journalism?

The way in which journalism is practiced is such a fast moving feast that any definition is almost immediately out of date. Broadly, it means the gathering of any form of information, or the formulation of an opinion, by one person and the dissemination of these by that person to a wider audience.

Its value to society is directly related to its quality. A well-informed public is better able to form collective decisions than otherwise, thus keeping those who govern less able to deceive them; on the other hand, a public fed on a diet of journalistic bread and circuses only attracts more bread and circuses and so more bad governance.

Citizen journalism, a kind of guerrilla journalism, is open to anyone who wants to practice it; it could be said that every Twitter user is a form of guerrilla journalist. It occurs when those previously on the receiving end of information chose to spread the news themselves. As more or less anyone can set themselves as a citizen journalist, it's a crowded market and so the more successful ones entertain as well as inform, often visually on YouTube, so giving us infotainment.

It's not hard to foresee that guerrilla journalism in all its spreading forms will soon overtake traditional journalism as consumers find one trusted source for news or opinions and, like a favourite bar or restaurant, frequent that one alone. This is already happening in an area of journalism where I am particularly involved at the moment, critical reviewing, especially if one includes bloggers on YouTube.

- 2) How have digital technologies changed the consumption of journalism?

I can best comment as a consumer, I'm sure typical of the trend as a whole and certainly of other people in the media I work with. The answer is 'totally'. I subscribe to half a dozen magazines and two daily newspapers and consume them all digitally. I don't suppose I buy an actual newspaper more than once a fortnight. Additional to this is all the news we now download through social media, which is editorially a totally new form of marketing-led journalism. Print runs have halved in the last decade and by the end of the next decade it's hard to see any printed news at all.

Having gone from paper to screen, the consumption of journalism has been completely changed by the phenomenon of clickbait. Outlets such as BuzzFeed and HuffPost derive nearly all their advertising income from the proceeds of clickbait and journalists are specifically encouraged, in fact instructed, to write their copy to encourage clickbait. Clickbait is a particularly pernicious form of advertising.

- 3) How can public policy improve media literacy, particularly among those who have a low level of digital literacy?

If 'media literacy' in this context means the ability to differentiate between the different types of media and 'digital literacy' is that part of media literacy received via the internet

and smartphones, public policy has a part to play in encouraging digital awareness and safety.

It could and should be possible to make all social media users identify themselves; at a stroke this would put an end to trolling. There are transnational problems insisting on this, but various carrots and sticks could be brought to bear.

Additionally, in the same way that alcohol and gambling danger awareness programmes are paid for by the related industries, digital platforms could be 'encouraged' to do the same. But unlike with alcohol and gambling, the digital message could be positive too. 98% of the digital output is creative and beneficial; it's the tiny rogue element that gives digital a bad name.

- 4) How have digital technologies changed the production of journalism? Do journalists have access to the training necessary to adapt to the digital world?

As an editor, the biggest change I have noticed is in productivity. On the one hand, traditional media no longer have the budget to employ sub- and copy editors, let alone proofreaders, on the other hand dictation software means that a journalist can submit multiple times more copy in any given period of time than before. For example this whole paragraph has been dictated in the same amount of time that it has taken you to read it. I've just checked, and it's right first time full stop (only joking).

Clickbait, as mentioned above, has changed the production of journalism enormously on those outlets that require advertising rather than subscriptions to pay for themselves. About the training, I don't really have enough knowledge to comment productively.

- 5) What qualifications do professional journalists need? How could public policy better support non-degree routes into journalism?

The qualifications needed are directly related to the issues being reported on. It's a classic dilemma which editors-in-chief face: whether to send a good reporter to cover a story he knows nothing about or a specialist reporter who can't write good copy. Over and over again I found the editor's role to be just as important as the journalist's.

As far as non-degree routes to journalism are concerned, I have observed the problem (if it is one) just sorts itself out. I'm not really sure that good journalism is subject which can be taught; a person either has an eye and ear for a good story or does not. In any event, the level of literacy required in most journalism is easily self-taught, should the practitioner really want to learn it.

- 6) What are the main challenges for freelance journalists? How could public policy better support them?

The overwhelming challenge is financial. There are just so many bloggers and stringers out there willing to work for the fun or vanity of it that freelancers have a real struggle to make it pay. I'm not sure how public policy could better support them, or indeed if it should even try as it would probably make matters worse.

- 7) Why is the journalism profession not more representative of the population? How could this be addressed?

I'm not really sure if what may be the premise behind this question is really valid. In all my years in the media I have never come across any discrimination at all based on any of the usual criteria; the only discrimination is if the person is any good or not. Having just spent a short and rather wonderful stay in a National Health hospital, it is true to

report that the majority of staff are female and not white, but that doesn't imply that white male nurses, for example, are discriminated against; it's just that this category of people have chosen not to be nurses. In the same vein, sports journalism attracts predominately white males, but equally non-white females would have no barriers to entry should they choose to practice that part of journalism. How could this be addressed? Leave well alone, let people sort themselves out and don't go looking for problems where none exist.

- 8) Why has trust in journalism declined? How could it be improved? How can journalists better understand and convey the concerns and priorities of people who do not live in London or other metropolitan hubs?

I think trust has only declined in tabloid journalism, where it was at such a low level anyway that I'm not sure it could have declined any further. The difference in standards seems to be related to the source of revenue, whether from advertising or subscription. In advertising it's all about circulation numbers, now frequently expressed with clicks as much as display or classified advertising, and low standards are only getting lower. The subscription model on the other hand demands high standards of work and trust, otherwise the model fails. Interestingly, The Spectator's circulation is at an all time high, proving that quality sells in spite of all fears to the contrary.

Provincial or regional journalism is becoming increasingly hard to sustain financially and it's hard to think of a solution, beyond subsidies which are themselves fraught with the law of unintended consequences, to the problem.

- 9) How can innovation and collaboration help news providers of all types to maintain sustainable business models and adapt what they produce to audience demand? What lessons can be learnt from successful innovations, including in other countries?

The answer has to be in subscription models which are self-financing and self-policing, editorially. It's also the only viable future for the BBC, but that's a whole different question.

- 10) Are there any other ways in which public policy could better support journalists and news organisations, now and in the future? Are there examples from other countries from which the Government could learn?

Public policy must be firmly in support of free speech, which is under threat from the new form of McCarthyism which seeks to stifle any individual or media outlet who disagrees with the liberal-left orthodoxy. The 'cancel culture' and the accompanying Twitter-mob witch hunts of anyone expressing an opinion that isn't recognisably 'woke' is an ever-growing threat to not just free speech but free thought as well. The police in particular must be immediately discouraged from pursuing thought crimes.

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