

The Rt Hon the Baroness Stowell of Beeston MBE
Chair, Communications and Digital Committee
By email

Dame Melanie Dawes
Chief Executive, Ofcom
Email: ChiefExecutive@ofcom.org.uk

27 January 2025

Dear Lady Stowell,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide both written and oral evidence to your Future of News inquiry. We have since read your report, which we thought was a thorough, thoughtful and considered contribution to this important debate. I wanted to write to respond to the recommendations for Ofcom and the Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum specifically, and also to mention some of our recent research and reporting on this topic which we have published since your committee's report was finalised.

As the Committee says, it is essential that people in the UK can easily find high-quality, accurate news that they trust. We have a vibrant media landscape in the UK, with a variety of news providers across a range of platforms, keeping citizens well-informed and providing access to a plurality of viewpoints. This is the cornerstone of a well-functioning democratic society.

News and information remains critical to support our understanding of the world around us and to help shape our views and discourse about local, national and international events. In December, Ofcom published the first phase of our [review of Public Service Media](#), looking back at how the broadcasters performed during 2019-2023. We said that it is becoming more challenging for the PSBs' news content to cut through in the crowded online environment, where audiences are more likely to be exposed to misinformation and disinformation. Online sources and intermediaries such as social media, search engines and news aggregators are now widely used for news in the UK, and have significant influence over the news that users consume.

Last September, Ofcom's news consumption survey showed that, for the first time, adults are now using online news sources (71%) as much as TV news (70%). More than half of UK adults (52%) now use platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram to access news, up from 47% in 2023.

We are now working on the next phase of the PSM review, considering possible remedies to the issues we have identified. The Media Act 2024, which we are currently implementing, updates the regulatory framework and addresses some important issues, but given the pace of change we believe it is important to keep looking at what more might be needed. We called for input and ideas on this in September 2024 and will publish some proposals for consultation in the summer.

The rest of this letter addresses the Committee's recommendations to Ofcom.

Ofcom should engage with tech platforms at pace to align content moderation policies with Ofcom’s broadcasting codes and the duties contained in the Online Safety Act 2023. When implementing the Act’s protections for news publishers, Ofcom should pay particular attention to grey areas where content is not blocked but subtly downranked to minimise user engagement. (Paragraph 83)

In response to the first part of the recommendation, while a common purpose of Ofcom’s regulatory regimes is to protect audiences and users from harm, the legislative frameworks for each regime as established by Parliament are separate and conceived with differing services and objectives in mind. As a consequence, the way in which we regulate broadcast media and online service providers is different.

Our broadcast standards regime is structured as a complaint-led process in which our role is to set standards for broadcast content in the Broadcasting Code, to consider individual pieces of content against the Code post-transmission, and to take appropriate regulatory action where necessary. The Code applies to Ofcom licensed broadcasters, the BBC, and S4C.

Under the Online Safety Act, our role is to ensure that services have the appropriate systems and processes to protect people from harm. Where protections for users are inadequate, services must improve the systems and processes they use to keep users safe. It is not our role to take down individual pieces of content or block specific accounts, and the Online Safety Act does not place any requirements on online platforms with regard to accuracy, impartiality or offence. Therefore, we do not think it would be within the scope of our powers as the online safety regulator or the broadcasting regulator to apply the Code to online services.

We do, however, appreciate where the Committee is coming from. As audience behaviours and preferences are changing, and news content in particular is increasingly consumed online, it is essential that we ensure that high-quality news is available and prominent. News forms a key theme of our current review of Public Service Media, and we will be considering some of these issues through that work.

With regard to the second part of the recommendation, as set out in our evidence to the Committee, we recognise that the prominence given to news stories on online platforms does have a bearing on their reach. Ensuring prominence for PSBs on connected TVs is a central part of the Media Act 2024.

The Online Safety Act provides some protections for recognised news publisher content on online services such as social media and search, exempting it from the illegal harms and child safety duties. Some providers of services in scope of the Act have additional responsibilities to protect recognised news publisher content, and we expect to consult on our approach to these duties in the first quarter of 2026.

The Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum should establish a dedicated workstream examining areas of regulatory crossover, conflict and collaboration that will affect the news sector—focusing in particular on privacy, advertising and competition. (Paragraph 104)

The Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum (DRCF) was formed in 2020 and brings together the CMA, the ICO, the FCA and Ofcom to collectively drive greater regulatory cooperation and deliver coherent approaches to digital regulation. Through the DRCF, Ofcom has consulted with the CMA, the ICO and the FCA on this section of our response to the inquiry.

Each year, the DRCF engages across its members and with external stakeholders on its plans and publishes an annual workplan. It also publishes an annual report on shared activities which can include updating on areas of joint work that arise during the year. For example, in 2021, Ofcom and the CMA provided advice to the Secretary of State on how the financial relationships between the largest online platforms and news publishers could be made fairer using provisions contained in the proposed DMCC Bill (which has since passed into law). Cooperation on this response was underpinned by the DRCF, and it was reported on in the [DRCF's annual report for 2021-22](#).

The [DRCF's annual plan for 2024-25](#) includes the DRCF's three-year vision to guide its longer term aims during 2025-26 and 2026-27. Current areas of work include cooperation on privacy, competition and advertising issues, including in relation to Google's commitments to the CMA on the Privacy Sandbox, harmful online design practices and promoting user choice, although not currently focussed solely on news publishers. The DRCF will publish its annual plan for 2025-26 in April this year.

Alongside this work, the Committee may be interested in Ofcom's work on digital markets. On 5 December 2024, Ofcom [published an update on our areas of focus](#) for digital markets issues that relate to communications and media ('Digital Markets Strategy update'). One such area is the impact of large digital firms on the UK's media sector. There are longstanding concerns among news publishers and other content creators about the bargaining power of some online platforms, in particular Google, due to its market position in search, and Meta from its position as a social media provider.

It is important for the delivery of Ofcom's wider goals in the media sector that competition works effectively in the digital markets that supply news and other content that audiences value and rely on. On 14 January 2025, the [CMA launched its first strategic market status \(SMS\) designation investigation](#) under the new digital markets competition regime which came into force on 1 January 2025. The investigation will assess Google's position in search and search advertising services and how this impacts consumers and businesses including advertisers, news publishers, and rival search engines.

As set out in our [Digital Markets Strategy update](#), we will continue to collaborate with the CMA to help to ensure that the digital markets regime secures good outcomes for the future of quality news creation and the future of public service media in the UK.

[Ofcom should conduct more thorough longitudinal audience research with consistent metrics and more granular audience profiles, focusing both on the drivers of trust and confidence in due impartiality being upheld. This could include more detailed assessments of audience views about using politicians as presenters. \(Paragraph 163\)](#)


We welcome this recommendation. Ofcom collects and publishes data on a range of areas across the sectors we regulate, and we are keen to better understand factors influencing how audiences and users perceive content.

Our [news consumption survey](#) measures audience attitudes to trust, accuracy and impartiality of different news platforms and sources. This is published annually, which allows us to compare changes to attitudes over time, while we are also able to analyse differences in these metrics across various demographic groups. We also carry out periodic deep dives into areas of interest, and you will be aware that last year we published research into [audience attitudes to politicians presenting programmes on TV and radio](#).

Our research programmes are refreshed on an annual basis and we will consider the Committee's recommendation as we develop our research programme for the coming financial year.

I hope this information is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Melanie Dawes". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M' and 'D'.

MELANIE DAWES