

**Dr Steven Buckley, Lecturer in Media and Communication, City,
University of London—written evidence (FON0001)**

**House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee inquiry:
The future of news: impartiality, trust and technology**

My name is Dr Steven Buckley and I am a lecturer in media and communication at City University London.¹ My area of research focuses on how digital platforms such as YouTube contribute to the public sphere as well as how American cable news attempts to influence user engagement with their digital content (My PhD research can be found [here](#)). Before my current position, I taught both journalism and media production at Cardiff University and the University of the West of England respectively. My research has led me to deal with issues such as the impacts of bias, transparency and accountability within digital journalism, all of which are seemingly very pertinent to your call for evidence. Additionally, having taught thousands of young people wishing to enter into the media and journalism industries, I have extensive knowledge regarding how young people's views on the industry have changed over the past 10 years and where they both see the industry heading as well as where they want to head.

I have many thoughts around the questions your call for evidence poses and whilst I can elaborate on all of them at length, here are a few that I will briefly specify.

How is generative AI affecting news media business models and how might this evolve?

The rapid growth in large language model AIs (LLMs) will have a devastating impact on the business models of both prestige news media organisations as well as smaller more niche ones. One key change will be that organisations will be able to outsource basic reporting functions such as on sports fixtures to these AIs, which are able to auto generate a match report without any human input. News rooms, particularly in America, have begun to do this and in the process have begun to lay off staff who are no longer needed.² AI's capacity to rapidly produce 'news' content cheaply will ineluctably cause many newsrooms to direct resources in this direction, likely at the expense of not only jobs but more importantly of investigative teams in newsrooms. Investigative journalism is oftentimes some of the most impactful, however it is also some of the most expensive work in a newsroom. The pursuit of cost cutting in newsrooms, which can be done by investing in relying on AI, will likely lead to an overall decrease of investigative journalism being done in the UK. Therefore it is paramount that public service broadcasters such as the BBC ringfence funding for their investigative units and programming.

¹ University profile: <https://www.city.ac.uk/about/people/academics/steven-buckley>

² Recent mass layoffs reported at The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Time, Condé Nast, Sports Illustrated, Business Insider, New York Daily News, National Geographic and The Baltimore Sun for example ([Hollywood Reporter](#))

Another way that AI will affect news business models is that due to the proliferation of 'fake' AI generated images and audio, the public is likely to become more sceptical of the content they see online. Whilst this point also addresses one of your other questions, it is vital to understand the link between the rise in non-human generated content and the public's trust in the news content they consume.

'What factors affect trust in news and how might this evolve?'

There is a plethora of academic literature around this issue, but I believe that two of the most important factors are transparency and authenticity. Linking transparency to your question of *To what extent is trust linked to perceptions of impartiality?* a good illustration of this is the political diversity of guests on premier debate shows such as BBC's Question Time. Through my own content analysis ([Found here](#)), the show clearly invites more right-leaning or pro-business guests than those from other corners of the political spectrum. As media literacy is relatively poor in the UK,³ many viewers may not know how the background of many of these guests will influence what they say. Because audiences don't know or understand the motives of the organisations that are being represented, they are more likely to be sceptical of the views being presented on the show. This then has a trickle down effect where when these representatives appear elsewhere in the media, as they often do, the public is likely to be more sceptical about whatever issue is being discussed. Greater transparency around people from think tanks invited on news and current affairs shows I think is critical to helping the public better understand the views that are being presented to them.

On the issue of authenticity, I think a crucial way to increase trust in news content is for news organisations to engage with and utilise the expertise and voices of academics. By bringing on an academic who studies criminology and has published research in the field to discuss the issues around knife crime for example, rather than just relying on the views of a newspaper columnist or random podcaster, this would likely help with levels of trust as academics convey a sense of authenticity as they often do not have any financial incentive to push any particular narrative beyond what their own expertise tells them. We saw evidence for this during the Covid pandemic where the public trusted the scientists/academics far more than any other voices that were being presented in the media. The utilisation of academics by the media needs to be extended beyond just medical issues and into more sociological issues such as crime, housing, education etc.

How adequately are UK news organisations providing impartial and trusted news? What actions are needed to address any shortcomings? And How well is regulatory oversight working?

On the whole, I would assess that members of the public who have a wide diet of news are adequately being served. However there are certain news organisations

³ Whilst the UK ranks 11th out of 41 European countries in the 2022 European media literacy Index, my use of the term here is in a far more narrower sense regarding the public's understanding of issues around use of sources, primary definers and the political economy of news production

that are in my expert view clearly failing to provide impartial and trustworthy news. The two most obvious examples would be GB News and Talk TV, both of which employ either current or very recent Conservative MPs as main hosts. GB news also has the leader of a major UK political party as one of its current hosts. Members of the public who only consume content from either of these two organisations are simply not being provided with a fair and balanced presentation of current affairs. OFCOM has already made several judgments about them, many of which frankly have not gone far enough in order to prevent these organisations from further distorting the public sphere. GB News for example still employs a host who regularly promotes dangerous conspiracy theories.⁴

Given this is an election year, it is critical that OFCOM more rigorously and diligently police the content of these two channels. Organisations like the BBC have had a long history of covering elections with impartiality, whereas given the newness of GB News and Talk TV, they have no experience of covering such an event and are thus far more likely to make inappropriate mistakes.

One suggestion I have for actions to prevent shortcomings is that OFCOM mandates that currently sitting MPs or members of the House of Lords or leaders of national political parties are prohibited from hosting news and current affairs shows. Not just during election years, but permanently. Ideally they should not be employees of a news organisation in any capacity. Even in the far less regulated world of American broadcast news, it is seen as wildly inappropriate to hire a sitting politician as the host of a show.⁵ Our politics has already become heavily mediated and allowing sitting politicians to have their own news shows further progresses this process.

Are there any actions the Government should take to address concerns around due impartiality, trust, and the influence of technology platforms?

One action I would strongly recommend the government take in this area is to ensure that all major technology platforms, particularly social media, have a dedicated team that each political party can contact immediately when fake news is being spread during a campaign. Currently the party in power has far more leverage over a social media platform when it comes to requesting the flagging or removal of content. During election campaigns all parties should have equal ability to quickly remove fake and fraudulent content

I know that most platforms do have some processes in place and that in America, companies like Meta offer to embed some of their staff within campaigns to help quickly address issues and I believe this should be required in the UK during election cycles so as to help minimise the spread of fake news during a politically sensitive time.

⁴ See the multiple news reports about Neil Oliver pushing anti semitic tropes or anti vax content.

⁵ On Fox News they will sometimes have a sitting politician as a guest host on a 5-person show, but I still feel this is inappropriate for any serious news organisation to do.

Conclusion

As I said in my intro, I have a number of views regarding the questions posed in this call for evidence and have kept my written comments brief. The current state of UK news media is very precarious and organisations that do not adapt quickly to the changes in technology as well as the values of the public will quickly become insignificant in the public sphere. Authenticity is arguably the key currency in today's media ecosystem and for younger generations this is even more pronounced. How news organisations strike a balance between being authentic and some of their other long held values is a difficult task. Impartiality can often come into conflict with authenticity but I believe that so long as news organisations and their employees are honest and transparent about their biases, this would lead to a healthier media ecosystem and thus a less cynical public. I would be more than happy to discuss my views around other areas raised by you call for evidence via oral submission to the committee should you so wish.

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