

Professor Stephen Cushion and Emeritus Professor Richard Sambrook—written evidence (FON0003)

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

We have co-submitted evidence to the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry about the future of news: impartiality, trust and technology because of our professional and academic background and expertise. Over the last decade or so, we have collaborated on several studies about the impartiality of broadcast news in the UK, including conducting impartiality reviews for the BBC Trust (the BBC's former media regulator), as well as producing reviews about news standards for Ofcom. We most recently produced an essay for Political Quarterly, *Impartiality in Public Broadcasting*, which will be published online shortly and is available on request:

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/1467923x>

Summary

Taken together, our submission draws on a range of our own studies and secondary material to explore the future direction of news in the UK. We raise questions about 1) how the quality of news will evolve as media platforms change and trust in them varies across different age groups; 2) how AI will reshape how people are informed by the news in both positive and negative ways; 3) how perceptions of impartiality are changing and why more research is needed to understand public engagement with news; 4) how trust is intrinsically tied to impartiality, which has been diminished over time as more people rely on unregulated content across online and social media platforms; 5) how mis/disinformation is not only a threat from alternative online sources, but can be inadvertently spread by mainstream media, although a majority of the public still trust mainstream media such as the BBC; 6) how new tech platforms create new challenges for media business models and new innovations at a local level are needed; 7) how mainstream broadcasters have sought to report impartially, but research has identified where coverage could be strengthened; 8) how broadcasters are responding to disinformation by the use of fact-checking, which is broadly supported by the public; 9) how the public deserve more serious debate and scrutiny about the impartiality of broadcasters, how they are regulated, with more transparent and accountable decision-making by regulators; 10) how independent systematic and longitudinal research can better inform regulatory and editorial decision making; and finally, 11) how changes to media policy and media literacy could enhance public engagement with broadcast media in the UK.

Biographies of authors

Stephen Cushion is a Professor at the Cardiff University School of Journalism, Media and Culture and Director of Research Development and Environment. He has written four sole authored books, the latest was entitled *Beyond Mainstream Media: Alternative Media and the Future of Journalism* (2024, Routledge), and has authored over 100 articles, book chapters or research based reports.

Stephen has led several BBC Trust impartiality of news reviews (in 2007, 2009, 2015, 2016) and two Ofcom commissioned studies about the Range and Depth of BBC News (2019) and Reporting the nations and devolved issues on network news: An analysis of television and online coverage (2022).

Richard Sambrook is Emeritus Professor of Journalism at Cardiff University. He has contributed to numerous research papers on impartiality in the media and the BBC in particular. He has written and spoken frequently on editorial standards and the future of journalism. For thirty years he was a BBC journalist culminating in a decade on the Board of Management as Director of News and Director of Global News and the World Service. He has been a Research Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University and is currently UK advisor to NewsGuard – a US company which rates the trustworthiness of news media globally.

Key questions

Trends over the next 12 months and 5 years

1. What impacts (positive and negative) do large technology platforms and online news aggregators have on the UK's news environment, including media plurality? And how might this change?

There has been a major switch in strategy by the large technology platforms in respect to news over the last year. Whereas at one point Meta (Facebook) Google and X (Twitter) sought to support news on their platforms they have all to some extent turned away with a withdrawal of financial support and changes in their algorithms cutting referrals to news sites. Chartbeat, which measures online activity, reports that referrals to news sites from Facebook were down 48% in 2023, with referrals from X (Twitter) down 27% and Instagram 10%. Publishers report fewer referrals from Google Search. This comes at a time when particularly, but not exclusively, younger consumers are relying more than ever on these platforms for news. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University reports two key shifts underlying these declines: the toxic nature of online discussion about news driving many users to private spaces such as messaging apps and the strengthening of video led platforms such as YouTube and TikTok which are growing rapidly particularly as sources of news for younger users (see for evidence: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2024>).

Some young news commentators on TikTok for example have many times the followers of major news publishers combined.

The consequence for many established and accountable news organisations is to make their business models even more challenging – particularly in light of the continuing downturn in advertising. Strategically, many are seeking to strengthen their premium, subscription or membership models and look at forms of mutual collaboration beyond the major tech platforms. Many are looking to bundle services together to provide greater value to subscribers (for example adding puzzles, reviews, cookery to news).

There will also be renewed focus on channels in messaging apps like Whatsapp and on developing short form video. These changes may produce sustainable futures for the biggest news operators but less well resourced ones will struggle or fail. News organisations are minnows compared with streamers and tech. The continuing rapid shift to digital consumption is likely to hasten the end of print. Some commentators have suggested this may be the start of the end of “mass media” with the route to success being finding a niche audience and providing as much value to them as you can. This is obviously a challenge to traditional broadcasters in particular. It can be argued that GBNews and TalkTV are the start of this trend in TV news – a point we develop further below.

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

There is concern that the integration of AI into search engines and other gateways will further reduce referral traffic. Major AI applications have been trained on content from across the internet including news websites and yet AI generated search can remove or reduce referrals to sources or attribution. As AI assistants, often voice activated, are integrated into phones, tablets, cars and more chatbots will produce summaries of answers to queries rather than links to source sites. Many major publishers are already challenging tech companies over copyright and use of their material. This is likely to increase in the year ahead and publishers hope it could lead to a new and fairer financial partnership between publishers and the tech giants – although history is not encouraging.

However there are opportunities, in backroom automation (for example in data processing) and some are experimenting with AI content creation – recognising risks of inaccuracy, inadvertent plagiarism or misinformation.

According to LSE research, 73% of news organisations believe generative AI presents opportunities for journalism (see evidence here: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2023/i-September-2023/Nearly-three-quarters-of-news-organisations-believe-generative-AI-presents-new-opportunities-for-journalism>). The research concluded that “ Our survey shows that the new generative AI tools are a potential threat to the integrity of information and the news media. But they also offer an incredible opportunity to make journalism more efficient, effective and trustworthy.”

3. How are perceptions of due impartiality evolving and what challenges do news organisations face around impartial reporting?

Over recent years, debates about public perceptions towards the UK’s ‘due impartiality’ regulatory guidelines have been often informed by the number of complaints Ofcom receive about a particular broadcaster. But, in our view, this is not a reliable or representative measure of public opinion – in fact, it can paint a highly misleading picture of how much faith the public have in a broadcaster’s impartiality. A case in point is the public’s perception of the BBC. While Ofcom received more complaints about the BBC’s impartiality than other broadcasters, the polling data has consistently shown over many decades that, above all, the BBC that tends to be considered the most impartial and trusted broadcaster. Moreover, while Ofcom have rarely found the BBC in breach of impartiality over

recent years, other far less watched broadcasters – such as GB News – have had more complaints about their impartiality upheld.

There have even been misrepresentations of public attitudes towards BBC impartiality by Ofcom in its annual survey. Its 2020 poll included a two-page section titled: “Audiences continue to rate the BBC lower on impartiality”, which made headlines in rival media ideologically opposed to the BBC. But the methodology used to compare the public perceptions of impartiality between news organisations across nine different criteria – including impartiality - was flawed. As Steven Barnett (2020) has pointed out, Ofcom assessed different news organisations based on the number of regular users, but these wildly differed. He observed that:

On every single attribute, CNN (222 regular viewers in the Ofcom sample) emerged as top. Meanwhile, on impartiality, al-Jazeera (153 regular viewers) was second only to CNN, with 69%. The equivalent BBC figure was 58% – but on a sample size of 2,754 because BBC news is the default choice for most TV viewers and commands huge audiences.. Ofcom did not acknowledge the vast differences in base sizes for their data, nor did it make any mention of either CNN or Al-Jazeera as the highest rated channels for impartiality (evidence here: <https://theconversation.com/public-broadcasting-does-the-uks-regulator-have-the-public-interest-at-heart-159717>).

In short, the narrative that trust in BBC impartiality is declining while increasing for rival media is highly misleading and not supported by credible evidence.

In our view, the most reliable way of interpreting public perceptions towards due impartiality is to first consult representative surveys and then turn to specific qualitative analysis of people’s understanding towards due impartiality and media bias. The annual Reuters representative survey over many years has shown BBC News to be the most trusted news organisation in the UK, followed by other broadcasters, notably ITV and Channel 4. Indeed, Ofcom’s annual news consumption survey has consistently shown that news produced by broadcast media – which is legally required to be accurate and impartial – is more trusted than news reporting operating on other media platforms, whether online, social media or the printed press. In other words, far from perceptions towards impartiality radically changing, there is clear and consistent pattern spanning many years between high levels of public trust in impartially regulated news media, especially the BBC.

From a quantitative perspective, it is difficult to assess changing perceptions of how people understand what is meant by due impartiality. This requires more qualitative examination. Ofcom, for example, commissioned focus group and interviews public perceptions towards due impartiality and identified four overlapping characteristics. First, that because the news landscape has dramatically changed over recent decades, with audiences able to access more information sources, they judge impartiality differently and may believe there is bias by omission if some mainstream media do not cover what they see across alternative media sources. Second, while the public can interpret impartiality according to a similar set of attributes, they can differ when watching news in practice and across different news formats. Third, public perceptions of due

impartiality can be informed by wider cultural factors, such as accusations about media bias, often launched at the BBC by commercial media. Fourth, the degree to which due impartiality is measured differs according to the specific news organisation, with the BBC held to higher account than other media. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the public understand core aspects of impartiality, but changing formats and conventions of news can reshape perceptions (evidence found here: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0027/239175/4-Drivers-of-perceptions-of-due-impartiality-the-BBC-and-the-wider-news-landscape.pdf).

Our own research, in respect of the use of new reporting conventions, explored how the public felt – in a survey of 200 people – about impartial broadcasters fact-checking politicians more regularly in news bulletins, with examples from coverage so they can judge for themselves.

The study can be found here:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2022.2097118>

Contrary to suggestions that fact-checking would undermine public trust in news, we found overwhelming support for holding politicians to account more robustly by prominently fact-checking any dubious or misleading claims in news reporting. More broadly, our study demonstrates the importance of conducting research with the public that includes specific instances of reporting so responses are based on real-world examples rather than abstract notions of impartiality.

Against this backdrop, broadcasters face many challenges of remaining impartial according to audiences. Above all, they need to report accurately and fairly, such as ensuring their reporting covers a range of topics and perspectives, and adapting their conventions and formats to sometimes new audience demands.

Yet many broadcasters face new challenges in the current regulatory environment. While the UK has historically required broadcasters to abide by a strict set of “due impartiality” guidelines set out and policed by media watchdogs, which is now the responsibility of Ofcom. These have long been designed to prevent the kind of partisanship that has long characterised American media. Yet there is growing evidence UK broadcasters are effectively free to pursue a style of opinionated and partisan journalism familiar to viewers of US broadcast news and current affairs. We refer to this evidence in question 2 of the evaluation section below.

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

a) To what extent is trust linked to perceptions of impartiality, or to other trends in online news?

Trust is intrinsically tied to impartiality. After all, if the public does not trust a journalist or media organisation – for whatever reason – they are unlikely to consider them impartial sources of news and analysis. Trust, in most cases, is something that is earned, a relationship that, over time, is cultivated and, once accepted, rewarded with loyalty. But there has, in recent decades, been a shared acknowledgement that trust, generally speaking towards the media, is on the

decline. This should, of course, be seen in the wider context that public mistrust of many institutions and professions is generally in decline. This, in our view, extends to more public scepticism in the impartiality of journalists and news organisations.

Needless to say, there are many complex factors that involve falling levels of trust in the media and society more broadly. One macro change has been the changing news landscape from the late 20th century into the 21st century. Most Western countries have moved from having a relatively small number of regulated broadcasters and newspapers to a much larger digital ecology of broadcast and press, alongside a largely unregulated online and social media sector. Since online media operate in a mostly unregulated environment, they do not have to follow editorial standards such as reporting impartiality. In our view, this informs perceptions of impartiality across different media sectors. As already pointed out, Ofcom's annual news consumption survey has consistently shown that news produced by broadcast media – which is legally required to be accurate and impartial – is more trusted than news reporting operating on other media platforms, most especially online and social media. Of course, almost all broadcast news is produced by recognised brands – the BBC, ITV and Sky News for example – whereas the public may not be able to identify the source of news and opinion they encounter online and across social media networks. In doing so, they are less likely to trust online news and consider it as impartial as broadcasters with a known brand. This was on display during the coronavirus pandemic when disinformation was rife online and across social media platforms. In need of reliable and trusted news and analysis, the public overwhelmingly turned to broadcasters – notably the BBC – for impartial information about what was happening during the health crisis.

We would like to make a final point about how trust in impartiality is threatened by the constant stream of criticism mainstream media routinely receives online, especially across social media platforms. To illustrate our point, we would reference a study we produced about the growth of new alternative media in the UK. New alternative media have undoubtedly brought greater editorial choice and diversity to political coverage in many advanced democracies, including the UK. But their editorial agenda has largely focussed on the value and editorial standards of mainstream media and professional journalists. We conducted a study to explore the extent to which alternative media focussed on mainstream media. It involved carrying out a longitudinal content analysis of UK alternative media between 2015 and 2018 (N = 3452). It found that mainstream media was regularly criticised – particularly by left-wing sites – and that disapproval of professional journalism intensified over time, most strikingly during the 2017 general election campaign. We also discovered that BBC news was often singled out for its political reporting, with criticism directed at its perceived bias and lack of impartiality. The study can be accessed here:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1893795>

While we would welcome debates about upholding high standards of impartially produced news, the relentless focus on mainstream media across social networks – with often baseless allegations of political bias – risks undermining public confidence in all journalism, especially the BBC. In short, trust towards

impartiality can be undermined by the public being exposed to media that is highly critical of professional journalists and their impartial coverage of politics.

b) What impact do concerns around disinformation have on trust in the information environment? (And to what extent does this differ between different sections of society?)

We believe the growing concerns about disinformation have had a major impact on trust towards the information environment generally. But the overwhelming focus of these concerns have tended to relate to the harmful influence of alternative online and social media sites rather than mainstream media, including their digital and broadcast platforms. An extensive body of evidence has grown cataloguing conspiracy theories and fabricated reporting across fake news sites. But, in our view, the potential impact of disinformation – a deliberate intent to deceive people through nefarious sources – has marginalised debates about the importance of inadvertently spreading misinformation. Many more people will be more exposed to dubious or misleading news and claims across broadcast, online, print and social media than highly blatant acts of disinformation across a wide range of sources. A study in the US by Allen et al (2020: 4) concluded that public consumption of fake news sites makes up a miniscule level of news consumption when compared with the public's reliance on mainstream broadcast and online media. While the influence of disinformation should not be downplayed across online and social media, we would argue that the impact of misinformation spreading across mainstream media should also be taken seriously (see evidence here: <https://www.science.org/doi/pdf/10.1126/sciadv.aay3539>).

For example, since the start of the coronavirus pandemic many academic studies have focussed on interpreting disinformation online and across social media networks. There have been very few studies investigating whether mainstream media have inadvertently spread misinformation from either re-reporting instances of 'fake news' or by their own coverage of the pandemic, such as how governments have taken measures to mitigate its impact. This is important because our research shows the public associate disinformation with mainstream media, which can then influence the level of trust they have with different sources of news, whether, broadcasters, the press, or across online and social media platforms. In other words, the threat of disinformation is not consigned to conspiracy websites and suspect social media accounts, but can shape public understanding of mainstream journalists and journalism more generally.

Evidence can be found here:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14648849221114244>

While concerns about not alienating particular sections of society are important to take into account, we believe they can be overplayed. For example, while the BBC is often subject to fierce criticism from some sections of society, Oxford University's Reuters 2023 Digital News Report – that featured a representative survey of the UK population – found that the majority of virtually every demographic group in the UK rated the BBC trustworthy including 57% of those who identify as being politically on the right, 56% of those who voted Conservative in 2019, 51% who voted leave. In other words, while there is never going to be complete agreement in how broadcasters report impartially or

counter instances of disinformation, the evidence shows a majority of the public still value and trust independent journalists that strive to be impartial.

Evaluation

1. How well are news organisations responding to factors affecting their business models, and are any changes needed?

As noted above it is a volatile environment as tech platforms shift priorities or adjust algorithms in ways which can have a major impact on business models. Bigger organisations with institutional strength and strong brands and strong relationships with their readers or audience are responding reasonably well. However smaller organisations, and those struggling for revenues are facing a very challenging future. We have seen in particular the impact on local newspapers both in the UK and the USA where classified advertising has moved online leading to cost cutting in newsrooms and what have been called “news deserts”. The Cairncross Review in 2019 (see evidence here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c6bfcd4e5274a72b933311d/02_1919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf) put forward a number of practical proposals for supporting local news in particular, many of which have not been adopted. In particular intervention to ensure fair dealing between publishers and tech platforms, a news quality obligation, promoting media literacy and critical thinking in schools and an innovation fund to support small and struggling organisations adapt to the rapidly developing digital environment.

A crucial element of a healthy news eco-system in future will be small community-led news operations delivering local accountability but they need support to develop and to collaborate. The Future News Fund announced by the DCMS in 2019 (following the Cairncross review) and the establishment of the Public Interest News Foundation (<https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk>) were small steps in this direction – more is needed. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/2-million-future-news-fund-to-boost-local-public-interest-journalism>)

2. How adequately are UK news organisations providing impartial and trusted news? What actions are needed to address any shortcomings? a) How should news organisations balance competing demands to provide content that aligns with particular values on the one hand, and provides trusted and impartial news on the other?

We have conducted many academic studies that have explored issues of impartiality and accuracy on the BBC and other UK broadcasters (we have not examined the press, or their online and social media platforms because there is no legal requirement to be impartial).

In most cases, we believe mainstream broadcasters strive to report impartially. But we have identified areas where the impartiality of reporting could be enhanced. We draw on a few examples here, including coverage of the BBC specifically, the reporting of the nations and devolved politics, and during the pandemic, as well as how impartiality is defined interpreted differently across media platforms and political contexts.

In the case of the BBC, the evidence shows there is no systematic evidence to support the claims made (usually by vested interests) of a left-leaning bias reporting. Indeed, over recent decades, there is more evidence to indicate the BBC has tended to favour Conservative or right-leaning politicians than Labour or those on the left. So, for example, purely in terms of weight of voices, conservative politicians have been *much* more likely to appear on BBC news outlets than Labour politicians. During the Brexit campaign, Conservative/UKIP voices were more than four times more prominent than members of all other political parties combined. While this is partly because they have been the party of government, we found a level of disparity that is far greater than during the Blair/Brown era, when Labour and Conservative voices were given much greater equality of access (the evidence to support this can be found in the following studies):

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1389295>

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0267323117695736>

In respect of reporting the four nations of the UK and devolved politics, we have over two decades of research that has highlighted areas where the impartiality and accuracy of broadcast news could be strengthened.

Our analysis is informed by a range of studies commissioned by both the BBC Trust and Ofcom. The central focus was to explore how well UK news media reflect the reality of devolved responsibility for many areas – like health and education – of UK social and political life. In short, in our devolved democracy, how well do our news media communicate where power and responsibility actually lie?

A number of these studies were summarised in our academic study entitled 'Why context, relevance and repetition matter in news reporting: Interpreting the United Kingdom's political information environment'. It drew on research produced between 2007 and 2016 and included interviews with news audiences. The full study can be found here:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1464884917746560>

The article examined the United Kingdom's political information environment, where significant power is devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with different political parties in control. Drawing on a content analysis of 17,765 news items, a representative survey of 3272 respondents and 15 semi-structured interviews, it explored the dominant information sources about UK politics by longitudinally tracing coverage of devolved issues from 2007 to 2016, and gauging how well it was understood by television news viewers.

The results suggested that while BBC news is more sensitive to communicating the devolved relevance of news than more commercial outlets, there remains a democratic deficit in the supply of political information and audience understanding of where power and responsibility lies. If news coverage more regularly communicated the relevance and context of devolved issues, we argued that it could open up democratic opportunities for citizens to consider a wider range of policy options debated in all four political institutions.

Our research for Ofcom reported similar finding. Our latest study published in 2022 concluded that:

The content analysis study found that UK network news providers have enhanced their coverage of devolved issues compared to previous findings in 2015 and 2016. This was largely as a consequence of Covid-19, which brought devolution to the fore of UK politics. The analysis showed there was more news that was potentially relevant to devolution – approximately 40% of the news agenda - because of a focus on Covid rules made by devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as by the UK Government about England. Interviews with senior news editors revealed that newsrooms have become increasingly conscious of reporting devolved policy differences in network news. The study identified roughly 60% of news items potentially relevant to devolution that included some form of reference to one or more of the four nations. This meant around 40% of items did not include any signposting about the relevance of devolution, such as stating if a policy related to England only. When a devolved issue was covered, our analysis revealed few items compared Government decisions across the four nations. So, overall, while the study found more coverage of the devolved institutions, it also identified missed opportunities to explain different Government decisions across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Taking into account all the studies, we concluded that BBC generally did a better job than most news outlets in reflecting the devolved nature of the UK, but it is still often Westminster or England centric in its coverage. For the impartiality of devolved political news to be strengthened, it needs to re-balance coverage of the four nations with a greater focus on understanding and explaining the powers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and their differences with the UK government's decisions over England.

The 2022 network news report can be found here along with a more focussed journal article examining coverage of devolution during the pandemic, specifically explaining where the impartiality and accuracy could have been enhanced when reporting the relevance of health guidance and rules about lockdown across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0012/233031/Network-News-Content-Analysis-Report.pdf

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/19401612221075571>

In terms of the threat to impartiality posed by relatively new broadcasters, notably GB News and News UK, we did not have systematic evidence. But we have written about possible breaches of impartiality and where Ofcom have begun to uphold complaints against GB News in particular. Above all, we believe new broadcasters such as GB News, UK News, LBC and Times Radio, have pushed the boundaries of the UK's rules on impartiality. They have pursued more opinionated and partisan journalism than has traditionally been tolerated by broadcast regulators, undermining the credibility of impartial journalism generally and creating new challenges for Ofcom to deal with. In our view, they

have been slow to react to blatant instances of bias journalism or the spreading of disinformation.

Our analysis can be found here:

<https://theconversation.com/how-uk-broadcastings-key-principle-of-impartiality-has-been-eroded-over-the-years-202762>

<https://theconversation.com/news-uk-tv-and-gb-news-new-channels-stoke-fears-of-more-partisan-journalism-154514>

Finally, we would like to draw attention to a study we produced that suggests “due impartiality” is applied differently according to different media platforms (e.g. television and online coverage) and the political context being reported. We developed a nuanced quantitative analysis of BBC journalist interactions (N = 967) with claims made by the four main party leaders during the 2019 UK and 2020 US elections. Overall, we found BBC reporting robustly challenged claims by US politicians, whereas coverage of UK politicians often only conveyed claims and counterclaims with limited journalistic intervention, particularly on television news. This amounts, in our view, to a ‘he-said-she-said’ style of reporting compared to the reporting of the US election where political claims were more directly challenged. Journalists reporting on UK politics appeared more concerned with constructing balance when interpreting rules about impartiality, drawing on other parties to challenge the claims of political leaders. Without interviewing journalists or editors, we cannot establish whether this was due to external influences, such as the greater party-political pressure they may receive when reporting domestic rather than foreign news issues. Despite their being a fixed definition of “due impartiality”, our study suggests impartiality is interpreted differently across media platforms and the political context journalists operate.

The full study can be accessed here:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2173956>

3. How adequately are news media organisations ensuring that efforts to provide trusted information and tackle disinformation do not alienate some sections of society in the process?

Our recent analysis about the news coverage of Covid-19 and audiences responses to it demonstrates the extent to which, during times of national crisis, the BBC is seen as a key and trusted news and entertainment provider - one that reflects life in the UK across all its programming in a way that global commercial providers – like Netflix – simply cannot. This can be found here:

<https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-bbc-news-is-uniquely-placed-to-serve-the-nation-how-it-does-so-will-define-its-future-135265>

Our research has shown support for news organisations offering more robust journalistic ways of countering false or misleading claims, particularly from politicians. For example, our studies with audiences have shown most people

value the role of dedicated fact-checking – such as those produced by the BBC’s Verify team – and, irrespective of their political beliefs, would welcome them becoming a more prominent part of how broadcasters report the news and hold politicians to account. A relevant academic study and two shorter blogs exploring our evidence-based arguments can be found here:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2022.2097118>

<https://theconversation.com/people-trust-tv-journalists-and-want-them-to-scrutinise-government-coronavirus-policy-new-research-137620>

<https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-people-want-media-to-ramp-up-factchecking-and-question-dubious-claims-138456>

4. How well is regulatory oversight working? Are any changes needed, for example:

a) In the way Ofcom oversees due impartiality and the extent of its remit?

In our view, the public deserve more serious debate and scrutiny about the impartiality of broadcasters and how they are regulated. If the public is to remain confident in broadcast journalism, it is essential Ofcom is transparent about how it applies editorial standards of impartiality. Equally, greater transparency around governance is overdue. Too much of the oversight of public broadcasting is conducted behind closed doors. Public support for impartiality remains high, and research also shows people expect broadcasters to be fair and balanced rather than opinionated and partisan. Ahead of the next general election, voters need to have confidence not just in the broadcasters that inform them, but in the regulator that polices them.

Above all, the public, policy makers, and regulators need to recognise the dangers of a polarised media environment, thick with ever more sophisticated forms of disinformation. In such circumstances, properly impartial and accountable public broadcasters play an increasingly vital role for ensuring rational public debate and democratic choices and Ofcom must ensure they meet their responsibilities. It is a mistake, sometimes made, to equate impartiality regulation with the prevention of free speech. The opposite is true. Properly managed, the regulation should facilitate a greater range of voices being heard thus extending free speech rather than limiting output to a narrow or sometimes single political perspective.

In recent years, Ofcom has promoted free expression as a core responsibility sometimes apparently above regulating impartiality in UK broadcasting. But free speech is not “free and easy speech”. Free speech does not mean allowing conspiracy theories free reign, or vitriol on our airwaves. It has a price, despite its name, which is the continual observance and questioning of both the media and the regulators actions by editors, audiences and civil society. As such a culture of greater transparency within Ofcom can only help drive similar transparency through broadcasters to the benefit of all.

Greater independence, open accountability and transparency in operations are hard things to deliver. But they can reassure the public and build trust, they are increasingly recognised as core elements of the impartiality expected of a public broadcaster, and needed to insulate them from any accusations of political influence. These are principles that apply equally to the regulator.

b) In the way Ofcom oversees media plurality?

We believe Ofcom could commission content studies that systematically examine the impartiality of broadcast news over time. At present, Ofcom tends to stick to internally producing close-textual analysis of possible breaches of impartiality after they receive sufficient amount of complaints about a particular story or period of coverage. Our own experience of conducting impartial reviews with regulators and broadcasters has proven constructive, allowing editors to reflect on the evidence and respond accordingly.

We would also note that the BBC has introduced new thematic reviews of impartiality that were supposed to be informed by systematic content analysis studies of particular issues. The first review about taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt produced some thoughtful analysis, but – contrary to the terms of reference to the review – they were not informed by a systematic and comparative content analysis. There was almost no data informing it, but instead relied on the impressions of the authors. There are lots of good examples which highlight how a comparative content analysis can provide more detail about changing journalist practices. For example, the authors claim assert – without any evidence – that the BBC draws on a narrow range of largely political sources to inform output. A systematic analysis of sources would actually reveal what, precisely, the BBC (across different platforms, programmes and other competitors) typically drew in on coverage of taxation, public spending, government borrowing and debt. Another examples includes our study of devolved politics for the BBC Trust from 2007 to 2015 showed how it tended to be the UK government of the day (Labour and Conservative) was the most sourced in political coverage. This could also be compared across BBC and commercial TV coverage to identify differences. Indeed, comparative content analyses can help demonstrate important differences between platforms, programmes and competitors. For example, in a 2022 Ofcom review of network news coverage it found that BBC News online and BBC News at 10 provided far more context and explanation about the relevance of devolved nations than other broadcast forms and rival commercial broadcasters. In identifying differences, editors can then pinpoint specifically areas of news content that may need more context and explanation on certain issues/topics rather than applying a uniform approach to all broadcast, online or social media output. For example, in an Ofcom review of the range and depth of BBC News it showed that BBC News at Ten had a far more international agenda than other BBC programmes and commercial network TV news bulletins. By quantifying the proportion of news, it actually roughly tallied with the amount the editor of the BBC News at 6 and 10 thought they routinely dedicated to international news – something revealed by an interview supporting the content analysis study.

Another part of the same study examined the role of hyperlinks in UK online media – including the BBC. It found while the BBC included a lot of hyperlinks,

the vast majority were internal links to the BBC when – as Ofcom flagged up – a public service obligation should be to link to more external sites. We would argue having an objective evidence base would provide impartiality reviews with more credibility and better inform editorial judgements about output produced across different programmes, platforms and by competitors.

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

a) Are changes needed to the Media Bill?[10]

As indicated by the Policy and Evidence Centre of the Creative Industries, the four proposed PSB requirements, whilst simpler, do not capture the full range of benefits that the British public expects from public service broadcasting. It proposed that: "Audience research has shown that the public recognises and values the unique role of PSBs in offering 'something for everyone' across the full range of the public's needs and interests. By removing Ofcom's responsibility to monitor the delivery of content in education, science, arts, culture and other socially and culturally significant genres, the Media Bill risks enabling PSBs to reduce their investment and production of vital public service programming while still ostensibly fulfilling the aims of the remit." (<https://pec.ac.uk/blog/the-media-bill-and-the-future-of-public-service-broadcasting-policy>)

The shift towards digital access and on-demand services is inevitable, but the government must recognise the risk that crucial PSB content will not reach substantial British audiences who primarily still use linear formats unless PSB accessibility is fully protected. Universality of UK PSB services remains a core and essential principle.

The Bill will determine how UK radio, TV and online services operate for the foreseeable future. The public deserves to have a voice in the debate over the future of UK media. scrutiny and debate about the bill should be informed by evidence and public views rather than simply a debate within Westminster.

b) Are changes needed to the way the Government addresses mis- and dis-information?

Since debates about mitigating the impact of mis/disinformation are associated with mainstream media, we believe the regulation of broadcasting should be independent of the government of the day. Our academic studies have raised important and undeniable weakness in the current model of BBC funding in which the BBC is periodically dependent on UK Government approval for its licence fee settlement. Regardless of the BBC's undoubted commitment to impartiality, when it is under frequent attack by the Government of the day – who, at key moments, effectively determine its budget – this is bound to put a public broadcaster on the defensive and weaken its ability to be robust in holding that Government to account.

The scale of mis and dis information enabled by technology and AI is likely to be beyond any organisations ability to control. Education, and particularly critical thinking in relation to media literacy, will be vital in the long term to protect the

public from being seriously misled. Scandinavian countries, particularly Finland (https://kavi.fi/sites/default/files/documents/mil_in_finland.pdf), are leading the way in recognising this and building it into curricula. We believe the UK needs to recognise the risks of the new information environment and recognise the need for a new approach in education to help mitigate them.

February 2024