

National Union of Journalists—written evidence (FON0005)

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

1. The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) is the voice for journalism and journalists in the UK and Ireland. It was founded in 1907 and has more than 30,000 members working in broadcasting, newspapers, news agencies, magazines, book publishing, public relations, photography, videography, and digital media. The union is not affiliated to any political party.

Technology platforms on the news environment

1. There is at present, a significant imbalance between large technology platforms and news publishers regarding benefits reaped from news content. The NUJ has welcomed the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill's aims to address this issue by ensuring publishers receive fair payment for the use of their content on platforms. Online news aggregators and technology platforms allow for large scale reach to audiences and for a range of news content and views to be presented but benefit disproportionately from advertising revenue, without providing a fair share of profits back to journalists and publishers. Platforms hold huge power through their control of algorithms, meaning when decisions are taken to deprioritise news content, limited action can be taken by publishers to increase their revenue. Google's plan to remove third-party cookies from Chrome browsers is another blow for publishers reliant on advertising, using information about users accessing sites.
2. By requiring large technology platforms to adhere to conduct requirements, the Digital Markets Bill will have considerable impact on the UK's news environment, with publishers able to invest in journalism using revenue obtained from deals made between platforms and publishers. Staunch opposition to the bill from large firms must be resisted by government to prevent outcomes like that in Canada, where Meta has ceased to offer news content on platforms to avoid adherence with the Online News Act.
3. The scraping of unauthorised copyright works including that of news publishers to train generative AI is harming media business models and credible journalism. GenAI's ability to present content without attribution to original sources who remain unremunerated for their works, means publishers do not benefit from user clicks to news stories, obtaining financial gain in ways they usually would. Where links are included, these can be in footnotes avoiding a prominent position and thus reducing the likelihood of an improved click-through rate. As news publishers benefit from advertising on their sites and the ability to promote subscriptions if offered, the decline in traffic is of huge potential harm to the sustainability of news, media plurality and journalism more widely, if developers can continue to pursue the use of GenAI (including large language models) in the ways they currently do.

Impartiality and trust in news

4. The BBC is the most trusted and widely accessed traditional news source in the UK. Despite this, attacks by political figures have increased in recent months. Baseless comments by Lucy Frazer, Culture and Media Sport Minister accusing the broadcaster of bias were rightly criticised for her failure to evidence the claim. Last month, Transport Minister Huw Merriman singled out a journalist accusing him of biased reporting at the BBC whilst failing to accurately name him in the process. Such public attacks directly contradict the perception and feeling among audiences who continue to engage with the broadcaster both on and offline for its impartial, principled journalism. More broadly, this type of behaviour by politicians or others in position of public influence run counter to the wider governmental work on journalists' safety and the collective effort to tackle endemic rates of harassment and abuse. Impugning the work of journalists in this way further weakens public trust in journalism.
5. Transparency on editorial decisions contribute to public understanding on decisions taken by news organisations and boosts trust in news. Whilst it is right for public service broadcasters (PSBs) to be held to high standards this must extend to all broadcasters ensuring rules on due impartiality are observed. Political interference within governance structures and of independent regulators are ill-placed and risk undermining journalism by organisations.
6. The importance of impartial news content and trusted news is higher than ever, with an upcoming UK general election. Audiences are reliant on accurate information and trusted sources to access party positions from parliamentarians and for information that shapes their decision making on voting. Teams such as BBC Verify, proactive in demonstrating new techniques to counter disinformation and fact-checking information relayed to audiences, will continue to play a crucial role amid advances in artificial intelligence. Such initiatives build trust among audiences battling against deep fake images and rising misinformation and disinformation whilst allowing for the provision of wide-ranging news to audiences.
7. Large tech platforms have a role to play too, in ensuring information designed to deceive is swiftly taken off sites where this occurs. Examples of deep fake technology altering the voices and images of political figures had already been viewed by thousands before being identified and removed. As social media platforms prove increasingly popular for news among younger audiences, enforcement of the Online Safety Act by Ofcom will be essential in maintaining trust in news whilst tackling inaccurate and harmful content.
8. Last year, evidence of party political campaign materials disguised as newspapers deceived members of the public into believing they were reading their local titles. Regulator Impress wrote to parties urging them to review the practice and its harm including to journalism and democracy.

Regulatory oversight

9. The NUJ has called for greater action from government on artificial intelligence, ensuring developers adhere to regulatory frameworks and legislation with sanctions in place where breaches occur. Voluntary codes

risk offering insufficient protections to journalistic content used to inform systems, but also on the oversight of output from AI technologies where “hallucinations” occur. Examples of generative AI providing inaccurate responses with falsified footnotes only serve to worsen trust in journalism.

10. Many would argue Ofcom has failed in its role as regulator to ensure the protection of programmes audiences value, while ensuring its decisions support media plurality. Last year, the NUJ campaigned extensively against BBC proposals to cut linear local radio output in half. With over 2.2m listeners including those from disabled and marginalised groups, the case to keep local radio local was clear. The NUJ called on Ofcom to urge the BBC to change its plans and enforce its remit to licence fee payers but despite extensive efforts that secured widespread engagement from the public and hundreds of community organisations and charities, the watchdog allowed proposals to proceed and has since advised it will simply monitor local radio – action that has little impact once cuts have been made.

Despite fierce opposition, Ofcom also allowed the BBC to proceed with plans to close the BBC News Channel and BBC World, replacing it with a single channel covering domestic and international output. Plans led to considerable job cuts alongside change in the content audiences of both channels had previously valued. It also leaves a major question over the breadth and quality of content being produced for licence fee payers and international audiences in a year that will herald major domestic and world news events.

Changes to the Media Bill

11. The NUJ welcomes the long-awaited Media Bill supporting many of its aims, including on ensuring prominence of public service broadcasters across on-demand services, and changes to requirements to video on-demand (VoD) services to improve accessibility for audiences. There is scope to improve the bill however, and as part of recommendations the union is seeking a strengthened position on the prominence of television selection services. We propose “significant” rather than “appropriate” prominence is afforded to PSBs.
12. Local radio is valued by communities for its news provision and entertainment, but many stations continue to struggle faced with inadequate funding.

The NUJ has expressed its concern on the impact of greater deregulation of radio and the impact on listeners reliant on content. We argue there should be ongoing regulatory support for audiences who listen to content on FM and AM platforms.

13. Whilst the bill’s proposals on regulating video will positively impact the media landscape, the NUJ notes the rise in podcasting and range in content produced across shows. Misinformation and disinformation can be relayed to audiences across issues including politics, accepted by audiences as factual. The Media Bill should include the regulation of podcasts with a code of conduct, and Ofcom should be provided with adequate resources to regulate the industry.

Conclusion

14. The future of news is reliant on passionate, skilled journalists keen to remain in the profession and the NUJ's News Recovery Plan¹ includes calls for investment in the workforce to ensure their retention. As media organisations consider their strategic aims and how best to adapt to emerging threats, they must consider the impact on workforces and journalism more widely.
15. The value of journalism is evident when we consider reporting during the covid-19 pandemic as journalists kept the public informed amidst widespread conspiracy theorists gaining traction online. Numerous other examples include investigations on the Grenfell Tower fire or on corruption within councils. On the latter, local news reporters play a crucial role but have been impacted by declining funding and the subsequent closure of posts and local newspaper titles. According to recent Guardian analysis², several UK councils have been subject to corruption investigations, but the NUJ is concerned that without ongoing scrutiny from journalists, engaged and active in producing original news in their local communities, wrongdoing will remain undiscovered.
16. Reach plc, the UK and Ireland's largest commercial news publisher, has cut 800 posts over the past year including several editorial roles in restructures at the company. Its Digital First strategy spearheaded by chief executive Jim Mullen has led to considerable financial losses at the publisher, with digital revenue down £21m. Reach has so far avoided the introduction of subscription models to bolster its revenue, seeking instead cost savings by cutting journalists' jobs. Last month, Mullen stated print titles at Reach would remain profitable for only five more years but offered no strategy focused on improving this, leaving staff with worsened morale already damaged from relentless cuts.
17. At an NUJ briefing in December 2023, parliamentarians shared constituent concerns over the hollowing-out of titles and loss of skilled journalists at the publisher. Without a strategic vision that considers the diversification of the business, the future of news at Reach titles is under threat. With over 100 titles, its weakened impact is already felt acutely by both journalists and audiences.
18. Journalists at Reach are not the only casualties of recent job cuts with others occurring at the BBC, National World, Vice News and Business Insider. Proposals to axe half of the BBC's Newsnight team, altering its current affairs format to a chat show have been condemned by the NUJ for its ramifications on news and the ability of journalists to hold politicians to account. Plans appear especially short-sighted as we head closer to the general election.
19. Journalists in the BBC's World Service are also facing cuts and job losses – including at the Arabic Service, at a time when events across the Middle

¹ <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/news-recovery-plan.html>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/feb/02/lawyers-raise-alarm-at-struggle-to-tackle-uk-local-government-corruption>

East require more incisive news and attention than ever. The NUJ continues to push for the vital services provided across the World Service – a source of significant soft power for the UK – to be funded in full by the government rather than by licence fee payers.

20. Government must ensure sustainable funding of PSBs to ensure the sustainability of news. As threats from artificial intelligence threaten to erode public trust in journalism, it is crucial government takes action to support journalists' rights and publishers recognise the need for ethical journalism at the core of changes to business models.

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