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

I write to submit as an expert on both the political attitudinal effects of news media and journalism ethics.

The evidence I present comes from 1) primary research that I've conducted via randomised-controlled survey-experiments; and 2), the latest relevant large-scale studies that employed British samples -the findings of which I've reviewed and collated for your consideration. Accordingly, my submission will only address the set of the inquiry's questions that are emboldened below. I end my submission with a list of all the studies cited hereafter. Parenthetically, please note that I would be happy to present oral evidence to the committee and expand on my written responses if requested.

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

Both UK-based and quantitative studies conducted in comparable Western democracies consistently show that partisanship -conceived broadly as either one's party preference or political ideology, is one of the strongest predictors of trust in news (Leyva, 2023; Osmundsen et al., 2021; Toff et al., 2020). For example, in 2018 I ran an online survey-experiment on a cross-sectional sample of 180 British participants that were randomised evenly into either a treatment or control condition. The treatment condition exposed participants to articles about immigration from the *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, and *Daily Express*, whilst participants in the control condition were exposed to apolitical articles not related to immigration and cribbed from popular magazines. Relative to the control group, participants in the treatment group were more likely to trust the news content if they self-identified as politically conservative. In other words, conservative ideology increased trust in the news sources and messages. Moreover, the interaction effect between conservative ideology and news trust, led to a significant increase in anti-immigrant attitudes and intentions to vote for a party or politician that would impose stricter or punitive immigration controls (Leyva, 2020). Of course, there are other important factors that affect news trust such as political knowledge and the framing and valence of any particular news product, but their effects are also often modulated and partly conditional on a news consumer's partisan orientation (Carpentier et al., 2008; Vegetti and Mancosu, 2020).

Furthermore, there is currently no empirical evidence which suggests that the aforementioned partisanship-news trust dynamic is going to substantially change or evolve anytime soon. To wit, partisan views and identities are steadily internalised and cultivated in long-term memory structures known as schemas. This process begins in infancy, and generally crystallises by around age 25. By this period, partisan schemas typically become relatively fixed because they are usually from then on regularly and unconsciously reinforced and consciously defended throughout the rest of a person's life. Indeed, this can occur even

when faced with credible evidence that goes against our respective political beliefs and practices, because we are predisposed towards rationalising conflicting information rather than changing our pre-existing views and behaviours. This is a hardwired cognitive and psychological mechanism that's termed 'motivated reasoning'. Correspondingly, my findings align with the leading scientific explanation which posits that the credibility that audiences attribute to a message/source will largely depend on their ideological dispositions. In brief, this means that news consumers are much likelier to accept the credibility of a biased message and source that coincide with their partisan orientations. Otherwise, irrespective of their veracity or reputability, news messages and sources will normally be rejected if their content runs counter to a receiver's core political beliefs and identities. Again, the reason being that when presented with attitude-discrepant information, people, and especially those with highly developed and crystalised partisan schemas, are predisposed towards employing motivated reasoning to defend and maintain their longstanding views and positions.

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

Given what I've outlined above, perceptions of impartiality are important, but they don't seem to play a major role in whether or not audiences trust a particular news source (Mont'Alverne et al., 2023), or that is, at least not one that supersedes partisanship. However, on a more positive note, most people distrust or don't engage with unestablished Internet-only news sources (e.g., *Breitbart*, *InfoWars*). To clarify, people do read online news, but do so predominantly from popular and mainstream news organisations who also run old media operations. Relatedly, most people's political attitudes and vote selections aren't changed or even meaningfully affected by the online political "fake news" that's being spread by fraudulent news websites, social networking platforms, and social media bots (Cantarella et al., 2023; Guess et al., 2020; Leyva & Beckett, 2020). There are a few inter-related reasons for all this.

Firstly, just like and in congruence with their partisan schemas, people's media preferences start to develop in early childhood. Their consumption of news and other preferred sources of politics-related information then becomes more habitual and static with age. So, after around 25 years of life, which is roughly when people finish their neuro-biological development, people will stick to, trust, and prefer to attend to a few news sources. And these tend to be primarily mainstream outlets which they have been probably engaging with since at least adolescence.

Secondly, online fake news websites and bot accounts are still a fairly recent phenomenon. Further, most of them are not well-funded, and thus generate content that's lacking in production value or is not as polished and professional looking as the news content produced by mainstream press. Hence, their credibility and viewership aren't as established or large as that of mainstream news outlets. The latter have also been around for decades, which has allowed them to build trust in their audiences or at least enough brand recognition to be considered relatively reputable news sources by lay and less politically knowledgeable people. Also, the majority of news audiences, including regular visitors to fake news websites, continue to receive their news from multiple

mainstream sources (Leyva, 2023; Nelson & Taneja, 2018). In theory, this allows most news consumers the opportunity to better question, if not verify, the veracity of the often glaringly false claims presented in online fake news products. Moreover, traffic to fraudulent news websites is heavily dependent on their articles being seen and accessed through social media. This means that the reach and actual uptake of online fake news content is quite limited, especially compared to the circulation potential of legacy news media which utilise both online and conventional analogue broadcasting and print avenues.

Thirdly, UK news publications are inexpensive (usually less than £2), and some are completely free. This makes for cheap reading on, for instance, the long train commutes that many Britons take every week. These train lines, including the London subway system, have very patchy to non-existing Internet connections, which makes accessing content from online fake news sites rather difficult. So, it could also partly be the case that most Britons prefer or are used to getting, or it's just easier for them to get, their news from well-known British newspapers than from obscure Internet-only news sources with no established credibility or name recognition in the UK. Please keep this point in mind, because it's closely relatedly to the rest of my responses.

### **How adequately are UK news organisations providing impartial and trusted news?**

To answer this question, it must first be noted that in the UK, conservative press dominate a centralized media landscape. The *Sun* and *Daily Mail*, for example, have for over a decade now traded places as the first and second most read newspapers in the nation. Their respective monthly circulation is over 1 million, and they each have around 20-30 million unique monthly visitors to their websites. Keep in mind that: 1) those readership numbers are just for two commercial publications; 2) on any given week, 7 of the top 10 newspapers with the highest circulations are from a conservative outlet, which dwarf those of centrist and liberal publications; and 3), the total British population is only about 67.3 million. Additionally, the conservative press also has a considerable influence on the reportage of television newscasts. For example, a content analysis study of the 2015 General Election shows that British broadcasts (*viz.*, the *BBC*, *ITV*, *Sky News*, *Channel 4*, and *Channel 5*). frequently relied on and re-reported stories from conservative newspapers, which in turn, largely favoured and presented a right-wing case for leaving the European Union. According to the researchers, this reliance compromised those television journalists' and editors' ability to make impartial news selections (Cushion et al., 2018).

It is, therefore, somewhat of an understatement to say that the conservative press plays a uniquely important and large role in shaping UK politics and public opinion. However, whilst said newspapers generally claim to conduct objective professional journalism, their coverage on sociopolitical issues, is routinely misrepresentative, misleading, and ideologically biased (Hanif, 2018; Fenton, 2018; Innes, 2010; Leyva, 2020a). This is best exemplified in their coverage of immigration which according to several content analysis studies, has been consistently defamatory, dehumanising, and inflammatory for over the last 30 years (Binder & Allen, 2016; Bleich et al., 2015; Innes, 2010; Moore & Ramsay, 2017; Rasinger 2010). Importantly, my experimental research indicates that

such coverage likely played a significant role in the Brexit outcome (Leyva, 2023).

Now, to be fair and balanced, centrist and liberal news outlets also employ manipulative and unethical reporting practices. These malpractices include but are not limited to the use of loaded negative wording, ad hominem attacks, salacious imagery, emotionalised lurid details, misleading framings, dubious sources, and questionable and alarming numeric figures. Nevertheless, the preponderance of relevant empirical evidence strongly indicates that conservative newspapers employ such journalistic malpractices much more frequently and egregiously than centrist and liberal news media. This is especially concerning given:

- a) the aforementioned reach of the conservative press in the UK.
- b) the growing support for authoritarian populist leaders and parties that is taking place across the globe.
- c) the well-documented pronounced propensity for right-leaning individuals to believe politically congenial misinformation irrespective of whether it comes from mainstream news outlets or online fake news sites and sources (Garrett & Bond, 2021; Leyva, 2023; Roozenbeek et al., 2022).
- d) the likely considerable upsurge in immigration to the UK that will occur due to climate change induced displacement.

### **How well is regulatory oversight working?**

The answer to this question is unfortunately no. Though, for the reasons outlined, my response here specifically pertains to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) and their Editors' Code of Practice. In short, I understand and sympathise with the argument that the British print news media must be self-regulated in order to ensure free speech and the integrity of the coverage of their events. Nevertheless, their fiduciary obligation to maximise profits has forced newspapers to disseminate increasingly sensationalistic reporting. This has led many conservative newspapers, in particular, to numerous instances of unethical and illegal conduct (e.g., recall the *News of The World* phone hacking scandal).

Moreover, this failure of self-regulation is perhaps best exemplified in how conservative newspapers have and continue to report on the issue of immigration. Certainly, an argument can be made that this reporting chronically and evidently fails to comply with the intended spirit of clauses 1 Accuracy: i) and 12. Discrimination: i) of the Editors' Code. However, the selected wording in these clauses grants editors plausible deniability and requires a virtually impossible burden of proof for breaches. This has allowed IPSO to dismiss complaints of what are arguably objectively clear violations, on semantics alone (see e.g., Fenton, 2018).

Furthermore, as the lines between opinion and news become blurrier and advertising and reader revenues increasingly migrate to digital media, then this

lack of effective regulation is going to allow for ethical breaches to continue, if not likely worsen.

**Are there any actions the Government should take to address concerns around due impartiality, trust, and the influence of technology platforms? b) Are changes needed to the way the Government addresses mis- and dis-information?**

While I don't have the space here to provide a detailed policy prescription, I will recommend proposal long argued for by media scholars and former regulators. To start, this proposal calls for media regulators to enshrine a more comprehensive, unambiguously worded, and standard code of journalism ethics akin to Hulteng's (1976, p. 23) classic formulation outlined below.

- Journalists must observe a responsibility to the public welfare; their impressive power should be employed for the general good, not for private advantage.
- Journalists should provide a news report that is sincere, true, and accurate; accounts should be thorough, balanced, and complete.
- Journalists should be impartial; they should function as the public's representatives, not as mouthpieces of partisan groups or special interests.
- Journalists must be fair; they must give space or air time to the several sides of a dispute; private rights should not be invaded; corrections of errors should be prompt and wholehearted.
- Journalists should respect the canons of decency, insofar as those canons can be identified in a society with changing values.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This code is similar to the Ofcom Broadcasting Code but more direct and extensive than IPSO's Editors' Code. In any case, a quick review of how journalists are meant to follow the Hulteng code above can help inform future policy formulations. Firstly, journalists must systematically gather and verify information pertaining to events, political positions, or policy effects that the public needs to know about by examining or interviewing multiple and relevant sources expressing varying viewpoints. Secondly, journalists must be aware of and suppress their personal biases to fairly collect and interpret their data. Thirdly, all claims and collected data pertaining to a report must be evaluated consistently using the same criteria. Finally, the news reports presented to audiences must be dispassionate in tone and neutral in wording. These reports should also give the same or proportionally balanced amount of space (whichever is more applicable) to the various sides of an issue and fully disclose any and all possible conflicts of interest, necessary details about the sources used, or other pertinent information. A key example of the latter would be financial interests. Indeed, I strongly recommend that a section on the disclosure of guests' and interviewees' financial interests be added to the 'Due Accuracy' segments of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code.

Now, when enacted together, these journalistic practices can help ensure that audiences are as best informed as possible to make their own judgments about the news content they consume. Conversely, failure to enact any single one of these practices will likely result in the reporting of distorted and biased news content that can mislead and negatively sway audiences' beliefs, attitudes, and corresponding political behaviours. To be certain, it is sufficient adherence to all these practices that distinguishes professional journalism from manipulative and emotive modes of communication like propaganda.

Further, this code should then serve as the ethical and behavioural framework for the entire press (including Internet-only outlets). And be enforced, by independent state regulatory and civil judiciary bodies whose members have no connections to the industry or partisan groups. I need to be clear, however, that as I see it, this framework should only apply to news organisations purporting to carry out a journalistic function that serves the public interest. It should, therefore, not apply to other types of mass media (including social networking platforms); private conduct; nor to individuals who express their personal views on a public forum -which includes journalists provided they do so in their capacity as private citizens and not acting journalists.

Moreover, regarding the latter enforcement body, some tort scholars have, in the US context, opined that lay judges and jurors can be influenced by personal ideological biases. They may also not be equipped to comprehend and interpret journalistic codes of ethics. There is thus a concern that if journalists or news companies were to be tried for breaching their code, then the potential rulings and precedents resulting from these deliberations could be overly punitive or operationally burdensome. This is certainly a legitimate concern. However, again I argue that only organisations should be held liable for any violations of the new code, not individual journalists. It's also the case that in civil litigations for just about all other professions (e.g., medicine, education, automobile manufacturing), we have laws concerning negligence that allow judges to use codified professional guidelines to determine whether a defendant failed to uphold their legal duty of care. In other words, the civil court judges who would have primary jurisdiction over such tort cases are well-versed on how to interpret ethics protocols and accordant violations thereof. Moreover, as the legal scholar Blake Morant (2014) argues, with the aid of expert testimony, journalistic codes of ethics could be used as probative indicators of industry practices and thus "contribute to the establishment of the standard of care necessary to establish negligence". Additionally, a maximum penalty can be set for every breach to sufficiently deter future violations without bankrupting a news organisation for initial or even sporadic offenses. In this way, only repeat and gratuitous offenders would be significantly impacted.

That said, these are just rough policy notions that need to be fleshed out, but I hope they can give you some ideas for what to include in or further probe for your final inquiry report. I'll end by noting that another major reason why online fake news is not currently a significant concern is simply that most of the misinformation and disinformation that Britons are exposed to is coming from the 'real news' of the mainstream conservative press. This is highly unlikely to stop unless stricter regulatory oversight is imposed. Again, I'd be happy to provide oral evidence and expand on anything discussed in this document. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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