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

Introduction

1. I study the impact of technology on journalism and would like to share a few perspectives on the future of news. I have published widely on this topic, including recent publications:
 - Tong, J. (2022) *Data for Journalism: Transparency and Accountability*, London: Routledge.
 - Tong, J. (2022) *Understanding Journalism in the Data Age*, London: SAGE.
 - Tong, J. (2022) *Journalism, Economic Uncertainty and Political Irregularity in the Digital and Data Era*. London: Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley.
 - Tong, J. (2022) "Policing content on social media platforms: three dilemmas and their ethical and legal implications", in *AI and the Media*, edited by Pihlajarinne, T. and Alen-Savikko, A., Edward Elgar Publishing.
2. Drawn from these recent publications, my response is focused on answering question one: "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?"
3. My research demonstrates:
 - The detrimental impacts of technology platforms and online news aggregators on the UK's news ecology and journalism outweigh the benefits significantly.
 - The prevalence of audience-driven news values hampers journalism's capacity to effectively serve the public interest.

Impacts of tech giants and online news aggregators

4. **Positive impacts.** The platforms of tech giants and online news aggregators have multifaceted impacts on the UK's news environment and journalism. These platforms and online news aggregators contribute to increasing the visibility of news content and expanding the audience reach of news media and journalism. UK news media have increasingly relied on

tech giant companies for audience reach and content delivery. Take cloud computing. My research reveals that UK news media such as the *Financial Times*, Reach plc, and the BBC have accelerated the adoption of cloud computing. The BBC online was moved entirely onto the cloud in 2020. Transitioning to the cloud enables UK news media to reach global audiences and address the challenges posed by big data, although potential issues such as data security and privacy may arise. Additionally, certain technology companies have taken initiatives to support journalism by offering free-to-use tools such as Google Flourish, Google Sheets, and Google Dataset Search, and providing funds for its sustenance, such as Facebook's UK Community News Projects. However, the long-term sustainability of these initiatives remains uncertain.

5. **Negative impacts.** Despite this, the predominance of technology platforms such as X and TikTok and online news aggregators such as Google News undermines British news media's revenue streams and audience bases, leads to audience fragmentation, and facilitates the circulation of mis/disinformation.
 - a. **Revenue streams and audience bases.** Traditional funding models of news media, namely advertising and subscription, have collapsed. UK news media have lost audiences and experienced a decline in revenues, with advertising revenues shifting to the platforms provided by technological companies. Having little or no investment in journalism, news aggregators, such as Google News and Yahoo News, offer users a wide variety of free news products. In 2020, UK newspapers' circulation dropped drastically, with their revenue generated from selling newspaper copies shrinking by two-thirds since 2000. In addition to significant revenue losses, job cuts and news outlets' closure spread rapidly. Reach plc, for example, constantly cut jobs. News aggregators 'snatch' journalistic content, audiences and advertising, with no or little costs. While there have been some improvements in this field, they may not be sustainable and the overall situation has not fundamentally changed.
 - b. **Audience fragmentation.** Audience fragmentation arises from the formation of segmented audience clusters comprising like-minded people who like to be connected and share information. The technological capabilities of these platforms have sped up audience fragmentation. Furthermore, technology companies and online news aggregators possess vast volumes of audience data and deliver tailored content to their audiences through recommendations, exacerbating audience fragmentation.
 - c. **Worsening the issues about mis/disinformation.** My research reveals that alongside fake news, misinformation and disinformation, the spread of hate speech proliferates widely and rapidly on social media platforms. Social media companies have their internal policies for controlling content on their sites and are making efforts to cleanse it. However, there are challenges in moderating social media content. The challenges partly come from the sheer volume of the content and technological limitations, but

are also influenced by the divergent interests of social groups and controversies surrounding certain topics. Additionally, these companies' policies are often vague, opaque and challenging to enforce. Consequently, with the widespread use of social platforms, the issue of mis/disinformation is getting worse rather than improving.

The prevalence of audience-driven news values

6. Audience measurement metrics are commonly used by newsrooms to measure the popularity and success of news articles. These metrics help news organisations understand their audiences. However, the focus on, or even obsession with, audience measurement analytics, may lead them to prioritise audience interests over public interests and influence what and how they report. The need to compete for audiences' attention may encourage journalists to prioritise sensationalism over reporting information that citizens should know due to its importance for the public good, in order to capture the attention of Internet users. The use of web analytics exposes journalism to market influence more than ever, as news articles' success is judged by on the number of clicks and shares they receive on the internet, especially on social media platforms. Two consequences of relying on audience metrics are the rise of a strong interest in soft tabloidised news and the pursuit of human interest stories, which are believed to be more likely to attract clicks and shares on social media. My research identifies the tabloidisation trends presented and identified in the tweets published by seven British news media Twitter accounts @BBCNews, @guardian, @thetimes, @Telegraph, @TheSun, @DailyMirror and @MailOnline between 10th and 15th January 2022.

Recommendations

7. Sustainable financial incomes for news media would be a solution to these problems. When UK news media no longer need to worry about their funding, they are in a better position to invest in supporting public interest journalism. **Therefore, there is a pressing need for tech giant companies and online news aggregators to compensate/pay news publishers for the content appearing on their platforms.**
8. Meanwhile, **strict regulations need to be imposed to govern technology companies' advertising and content.**
9. I also recommend that Government and Parliament **provide financial support to UK journalism and work with UK news media to explore solutions** to mitigate the impacts from tech giants and online news aggregators.

Finally

10. I hope you find the above research findings useful. I would be happy to assist your inquiry in any other way I can if it would be beneficial at any point.

