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

Author:

1. Personal background and expertise

- 1.1. [Felix M. Simon](#) is a communication researcher and doctoral student at the Oxford Internet Institute (OII), a [Knight News Innovation Fellow](#) at Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism, and an [affiliate at the Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life](#) (CITAP) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also works as a research assistant at the [Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism \(RISJ\)](#) and regularly writes and comments on technology, media, and politics for various international outlets. As a former journalist, he has been researching the implications of AI in journalism and the news industry since 2019. More specifically, his research seeks to understand the structural implications of artificial intelligence, including forms of generative AI, for news organisations' gatekeeping processes – the production and distribution of news – and the public arena.
- 1.2. I make this submission as part of the inquiry "The future of news: impartiality, trust and technology" lodged by the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital. This submission focuses on two questions from the call for written evidence:
1. How is generative AI affecting news media business models and how might this evolve?
 2. What impact do concerns around disinformation have on trust in the information environment?

2. Generative AI and news media business models: No silver bullet

- 2.1. It is presently unclear how exactly generative AI¹ will affect news media's business models, as its implementation is in many cases still experimental and in early stages (as opposed to more "traditional" forms of AI, i.e.

¹ Defined here as AI systems that can "generate new forms of data, often by applying machine learning to large quantities of training data. This output can be multimodal and include text, visuals, and audio. Large Language Models are the most prominent form of generative AIs. The output that can be produced with these is, depending on the instructions, sufficiently sophisticated that humans can perceive it as indistinguishable from human-generated content." See: Arguedas, A. R., & Simon, F. M. (2023). *Automating Democracy: Generative AI, Journalism, and the Future of Democracy* (p. 21). Balliol Interdisciplinary Institute, University of Oxford. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5287/ora-e262xv7no>, p. 7.

systems based on machine-learning approaches which have been used in the news for quite some time).² Therefore, any predictions about the impact of generative AI should be approached with caution in the light of ongoing experimentation at both publishers and technology companies and platforms, as well as a shifting regulatory environment and uncertain audience acceptance and use. However, the recent academic literature from fields such as communication, journalism studies, and media economics offers some indication as to what the impact might be. It is in this light that the following should be read.

- 2.2. Generally speaking, we need to distinguish between how publishers appropriate (generative) AI and how they adapt to a wider information landscape in which generative AI will come to be used. We can say from existing evidence around the use of AI that the same (and by extension generative AI) is and will be reshaping news media business models primarily by altering how news content is produced and distributed at publishers and by reshaping how information is discovered and consumed on digital infrastructures.
- 2.3. Publishers are adopting (generative) AI because of recent technological advancements, market pressures stemming partially from the industry's financial challenges, competitive dynamics with a focus on innovation, and the pervasive sense of uncertainty, hype, and hope surrounding AI.³ AI is now applied across a great range of tasks in the production and distribution of news (see figure 1). Many of the most beneficial applications of AI in news are relatively mundane and AI has often not proved to be a silver bullet in many cases. Still, various examples demonstrate that efficiency and productivity gains have been achieved, including around dynamic paywalls, automated transcription, and data analysis tools in news production. However, such efficiency or optimisation gains are task- and context-dependent and can be curtailed by factors such as the unreliability of AI outputs, concerns about reputational damage resulting from inaccurate AI outputs, and the inherent difficulty of automating certain tasks.

² See, e.g., Simon, F. M. (2024). *Artificial Intelligence in the News. How AI Retools, Rationalizes, and Reshapes Journalism and the Public Arena* (p. 46). Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia University. https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/artificial-intelligence-in-the-news.php

³ Simon (2024, p. 3)

2.4. Figure 1: Some uses of AI systems in news organisations (Simon, 2024, p. 13).

Production and distribution process	Use of AI systems
Access and observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information discovery • Audience and trends analytics; story detection • Prompting for new ideas following from a news story
Selection and filtering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verification, claim matching, and similarity analysis (e.g., for fact-checking) • Content and/or document categorization; analysis of datasets • Automated collection and analysis of structured data (e.g., financial, banking, and sports data) • Coding assistance for various tasks • Transcription and translation of audio and video • Search in archives and/or metadata
Processing and editing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brainstorming and ideation • Content production (writing of draft text or articles; editing of news content) • (Re-)formatting of content for online, social media, print, broadcast (e.g., summarization, simplification, stylistic changes; text-to-video, speech-to-text, text-to-speech translation) • Copy editing, adaptation to house style • Tagging of content, headline, and SEO suggestions
Publishing and distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalization and recommendation • Dynamic paywalls, audience analytics • Content moderation

2.5. Existing research suggests that any productivity gains from generative AI which would benefit publishers' business position will not be straightforward. The same is true for the use of AI in creating more effective distribution and subscription models. In both cases, the implementation of AI will incur costs in the early stages and necessitate changes at the organisational and strategic level.

2.6. Despite the potential impact of (generative) AI in helping to create optimised business models (e.g., improved paywalls which persuade more people to subscribe and retain them long-term), it is unlikely that AI will

significantly change one of the principal challenges faced by news organisations as regards their increasingly subscriber-oriented business models: the pervasive reluctance of the public to pay for news. A substantial portion of the audience in many countries, including the UK,⁴ does not subscribe to any news outlets, and even among those who do (9% in the UK according to the 2023 edition of the Reuters Institute Digital News Report), the majority are selective, often paying for only a handful of sources while consuming content from many others without financial contribution. News also faces competition for attention and money from other forms of content, especially entertainment content. Furthermore, a significant segment of the public exhibits a general apathy towards news, deeming it not worth their attention or financial support, and generative AI is unlikely to substantially address this issue.⁵

- 2.7. Shifting the perspective from publishers' use of AI to the information environment (public arena) within which news organisations find themselves in, (generative) AI could have negative implications for news media's business models, under some circumstances.
- 2.8. One key concern in recent years has been the reduction in direct audience access for news outlets, exacerbated by the increased use of third-party platforms and aggregators for news consumption. This trend is stronger among younger audiences who find social media platforms more accessible and engaging, often gravitating towards formats that prioritise personalities over traditional news sources.⁶ Recent research highlights a notable decline in news outlets' direct access to audiences, a shift that is particularly challenging for smaller publishers as they face diminishing traffic from platforms like Facebook and search engines, a result (among other things) of strategic pivots away from news content by companies like Meta.
- 2.9. This situation is poised to worsen as generative AI technologies become integrated into search engines and other digital product although it is difficult to make exact predictions. One risk is that AI-enhanced search functionalities, which prioritise AI-generated answers over directing users to external content, could significantly diminish already declining traffic to news sites. In addition, changing audience behaviour could exacerbate this situation. This potential shift represents a substantial risk, particularly for publishers reliant on search-driven audience traffic, as it threatens to reduce the visibility of news content even further, with some organisations

⁴ See: United Kingdom (2023). Digital News Report: United Kingdom. Oxford, UK: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved from

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/united-kingdom>

⁵ See, e.g. Majid, A. (2023, September 28). Who pays for news? Discounts lure in new subscribers but many cancel rather than pay more. Press Gazette. Retrieved from

<https://pressgazette.co.uk/paywalls/news-subscriptions-analysis-reuters-institute/>;

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Eddy, K., Robertson, C. T., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023* (Digital News Report). Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf

⁶ See: Ofcom. (2023). News consumption in the UK: 2023. Retrieved from

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0024/264651/news-consumption-2023.pdf.

fearing a loss of up to half of the audience reach they currently obtain from search engines.

- 2.10. Moreover, news organisations find themselves in a paradoxical situation where their content inadvertently contributes to the refinement and improvement of the very AI systems that pose potential threats to their business models and their role as information gatekeepers. High-quality language data, essential for training large language models (LLMs), often comes from the content produced by these news organisations, either through direct provision, scraping by platform companies, or use in AI-driven tools provided by these companies.⁷ This dynamic risks reinforcing the dominance of platform companies in the AI space, potentially enabling them to usurp roles traditionally held by news organisations, such as providing audiences with critical information on public affairs and political positions.
- 2.11. In summary, the evolution of generative AI in the news media landscape presents both opportunities and challenges. While it offers the potential for increased efficiency and novel content creation methods as well as content distribution and subscriber acquisition for publishers, it also poses risks to traditional news media business models, especially regarding audience reach and the autonomy of news organisations in the face of growing platform dominance. (Generative) AI will not be a panacea for the many deep-seated problems and challenges facing journalism and the public arena. Technology alone cannot fix intractable political, social, and economic ills which all contribute to the difficult business situation many news organisations face. Regardless of any technology, news organisations will continue to be forced to make a case for why they still matter in the modern news environment — and why they deserve audiences' attention and money.

3. **Exaggerated concerns around disinformation can negatively affect trust in the overall information environment.**

- 3.1. Concerns about mis- and disinformation should not generally be dismissed out of hand. Mis- and disinformation exists and can have harmful effects. As Petersen (2024) writes it can, for example, change people's views and "distract people's time and attention from more relevant information sources; it can deplete politician's and mainstream media's resources because of a constant felt need to counter it; and, even if it does not change views, it can still sow confusion and uncertainty."⁸

⁷ Simon, F. M. (2022). Uneasy Bedfellows: AI in the News, Platform Companies and the Issue of Journalistic Autonomy. *Digital Journalism*, 10(10), 1823–1854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2063150>; Simon, F. M. (2023). Escape Me If You Can: How AI Reshapes News Organisations' Dependency on Platform Companies. *Digital Journalism*, 0(0), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2287464>

⁸ Petersen, M. B. (2023, June 1). Empowering Audiences - Against Misinformation Through 'Prebunking': Research-Based Insights on the Problem of Misinformation and Steps Towards Its Solution. Background report commissioned by The Future of Free Speech. Retrieved from <https://futurefreespeech.org/background-report-empowering-audiences-against-misinformation-through-prebunking/>

- 3.2. However, the extent of the negative effects of mis- and disinformation is contested and scientific evidence suggests the reach of (online) misinformation is likely limited, only constitutes a small amount of people's overall information consumption,⁹ and that people are generally hard to persuade,¹⁰ "because specific attitudes are often rooted in larger worldviews that are difficult to change"¹¹ which limits the impact of mis- and disinformation.
- 3.3. Despite evidence to the contrary, recent public discourse on the phenomenon termed "fake news" and mis- and disinformation has often been alarmist and not in line with academic research.¹² This has recently extended to generative AI, with many worrying "about its impact on our information environment, with concerns being raised about the increased quantity, quality, and personalization of misinformation", as Simon et al. (2023) write, before concluding after a review of recent scientific evidence that these concerns, too, are likely exaggerated.¹³
- 3.4. Although it has hard to attribute causality, we have seen a global response to this "moral crisis of disinformation", with a proliferation of legislative measures in recent years aimed at curbing its spread. This can have problematic effects. A report by the Center for New Technology and Internet (CNTI) highlights a trend wherein a majority of laws enacted between 2020 and 2023, ostensibly to combat "fake news" and/or "mis- and disinformation" can undermine, e.g. the protection of an independent press, jeopardise public access to a diverse range of factual news sources,¹⁴ and limit human rights such as freedom of expression.
- 3.5. Empirical evidence underscores the unintended consequences alarmist narratives surrounding disinformation can have.¹⁵ Research by Van Duyn

⁹ See: Guess, A., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. A. (2019). Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook. *Science Advances*, 5(1), eaau4586. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aau4586> and Allen, J., Howland, B., Mobius, M., Rothschild, D., & Watts, D. J. (2020). Evaluating the fake news problem at the scale of the information ecosystem. *Science Advances*, 6(14), eaay3539. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aay3539>

¹⁰ See: Mercier, H. (2020). *Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who We Trust and What We Believe*. Princeton University Press.

¹¹ See Petersen (2023).

¹² See, e.g., Camargo, C. Q., & Simon, F. M. (2022). Mis- and disinformation studies are too big to fail: Six suggestions for the field's future. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 3(5). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-106> and Jungherr, A., & Schroeder, R. (2021). Disinformation and the Structural Transformations of the Public Arena: Addressing the Actual Challenges to Democracy. *Social Media + Society*, 7(1), 205630512198892. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121988928>

¹³ Simon, F. M., Altay, S., & Mercier, H. (2023). Misinformation reloaded? Fears about the impact of generative AI on misinformation are overblown. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 4(5). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-127>

¹⁴ Most Fake News Legislation Risks Doing More Harm Than Good Amid a Record Number of Elections in 2024. (2024). *Innovating News*. Retrieved from <https://innovating.news/article/most-fake-news-legislation-risks-doing-more-harm-than-good-amid-a-record-number-of-elections-in-2024/>. See also Radu, R. (2020). Fighting the 'Infodemic': Legal Responses to COVID-19 Disinformation. *Social Media + Society*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948190>

¹⁵ Hamelers, M. (2023). The (un)intended consequences of emphasizing the threats of mis- and disinformation. *Media and Communication*, 11(2), 5–14. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i2.6301>

and Collier (2018), for example, demonstrated in a US context how elite warnings against fake news and disinformation can lead to an overall decline of confidence in news and information as well as trust in media, and less accurate identification of real news.¹⁶ Recent research conducted by Jungherr and Ouzhou (2024) demonstrates, too, that exaggerated threat narratives about the impact of disinformation can backfire, diminishing democratic satisfaction and fostering support for more restrictive regulatory measures within digital communication environments. Their findings suggest that the framing of disinformation as a dire threat may have counterproductive effects, potentially eroding public trust in democratic institutions and encouraging the adoption of more authoritarian governance models. Conversely, more balanced accounts about the presence and dangers of digital disinformation but also information about its limited reach and persuasive appeal lowered threat perceptions.¹⁷

- 3.6. While the intention behind warning about disinformation phenomena and implementing both technological, societal and regulatory countermeasures is often well-meaning and aimed at improving the public arena (our information environment), ensuring the availability of quality information, and thereby strengthening democracy, the outcomes may not always align with these objectives. The available evidence should serve as a cautionary reminder that even well-intentioned actions can lead to adverse effects, potentially negating the very goals they seek to achieve,¹⁸ by negatively affecting peoples' trust in qualitative information as well as the institutions and experts providing the same.

4. **Declaration**

- 4.1. The author has no conflict of interest to declare. His research has been supported by the Leverhulme Trust, the OII-Dieter Schwarz Scholarship, the Oxford-Minderoo Challenge Fund in AI Governance, Balliol College, and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism. These comments represent my personal views, and I am not here commenting in any official or representative capacity for the OII.

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¹⁶ Van Duyn, E., & Collier, J. (2019). Priming and Fake News: The Effects of Elite Discourse on Evaluations of News Media. *Mass Communication and Society*, 22(1), 29-48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2018.1511807>

¹⁷ Jungherr, A., & Rauchfleisch, A. (2024). Negative Downstream Effects of Alarmist Disinformation Discourse: Evidence from the United States. *Political Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-024-09911-3>

¹⁸ See also: Simon, F. M., & Camargo, C. Q. (2023). Autopsy of a metaphor: The origins, use and blind spots of the 'infodemic'. *New Media & Society*, 25(8), 2219-2240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211031908>