

**Professor Fabienne Peter, University of Warwick, Professor Rowan Cruft, University of Stirling, and Dr Jonathan Heawood, Public Interest News Foundation—written evidence (FON0026)**

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

**Who we are**

We are collaborating on **The Co-Creational Model for the News Media** project. Professor Fabienne Peter is the Principal Investigator, and Dr Jonathan Heawood and Professor Rowan Cruft are project co-leads.

In our project, we are partnering with news media industry leaders who are experimenting with elements of co-creation, with the aim of identifying best practices and supporting professional standard innovation.

A pilot project has previously received funding in the form of an Impact Acceleration Award from the Economic and Social Research Council ([project report](#)). The project is now receiving funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (official announcement imminent).

We have a longstanding research collaboration on topics concerning the digital public sphere. A previous project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, focussed on [Norms for the New Public Sphere](#). It informs Professor Rowan Cruft's submission to this call for evidence.

**Summary of our response**

- The rise of social media has disrupted the news media industry, and this calls for a **new model for the news media**.
- **Impartiality** is an important norm for the news media, but **other norms are also important** – including epistemic norms such as accuracy and fact-checking and participatory norms such as social inclusivity.
- The **co-creational model** for the news media reconciles a commitment to high epistemic standards with a commitment to audience participation in journalism, thus promising to deliver **high-quality news that reflects the concerns and perspectives of different social groups**.

**Background**

Our response to this call for evidence is focused on demonstrating how the co-creational model for the news media provides an important set of tools for shaping the news industry of the future.

In our research, we distinguish the **co-creational model** from three other models of news media (see chapter by Peter and Heawood in the [Routledge](#)

[Handbook of Philosophy and Media Ethics](#), 2023). The other models are: the **professional model**, exemplified by some broadsheet newspapers and public service broadcasters; the **libertarian model**, exemplified by some tabloid newspapers, cable TV channels and fake news websites; and **the social model**, found on platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Twitter and YouTube.

The co-creational model aims to combine the best features of the professional and the social models to support the vital role that the news media plays in a democracy. The professional model has high epistemic standards but struggles with social inclusivity. The social model has the opposite problem, whilst the libertarian model is committed neither to social inclusivity nor to high epistemic standards. The co-creational model is designed to enable audience involvement in the production and dissemination of news while securing high-quality news.

## Key questions

*Trends over the next 12 months and 5 years*

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

Impartiality in reporting is a core feature of what we call the professional model of the news media. This model is organised around the epistemic (knowledge-related) authority of its agenda-setting and fact-checking processes. In an attempt to contain political bias and other influences that might distort objective, truth-driven reporting, this model is committed to the impartiality ideal.

The professional model of the news media has been disrupted by the rise of social media, which offers new opportunities for participation in political debate and for a more socially inclusive public sphere. This is putting economic pressure on the ability of news media organisations to produce high-quality news (by attracting audiences and advertisers away from news outlets). It also challenges the normative commitments of professional journalism because the dynamics of social media often reward false information more than carefully researched contributions (see O'Connor and Weatherall on "[How Misinformation Spreads – and Why we Trust it](#)").

The disruption in the news media industry presents a formidable challenge for democracy. A well-functioning democracy is only possible if it is supported by informed political debate and, in the second half of the twentieth century, this was largely facilitated by professional news outlets.

In response to the rise of social media, researchers in media studies and related fields have explored the potential for participatory models for the news media. Some have also argued against an ideal of journalistic objectivity and in favour of a model that blurs the distinction between [journalism and political activism](#).

Our research, which draws on Peter's work on political legitimacy (Peter [2008](#); [2023](#)) and Heawood's knowledge of the news media industry, rejects the binary nature of this debate: greater social inclusivity need not threaten truthful reporting, and the epistemic authority of the news media may be enhanced by greater audience participation.

The co-creational model for the news media shows how it's possible to reconcile a commitment to high epistemic standards with a commitment to audience participation in journalism. Impartiality plays less of a role in this model than epistemic norms such as accuracy and fact-checking, on the one hand, and opportunities for engagement, on the other.

To elaborate on this last point, we question whether impartiality is always the most appropriate norm for the news media. There are longstanding debates in philosophy on impartiality, but they tend to focus on ethics – on whether just treatment requires impartiality (see this [overview](#) by Troy Jollimore). In the context of the news media, impartiality is often invoked as an epistemic norm, however. It is supposed to help make reporting better approximate truth, knowledge, or understanding. As an epistemic norm, impartiality may be misleading, however. Whilst it has certain strengths in mitigating the risk of political bias, it also has weaknesses in creating false equivalence between rival truth claims or suggesting that complex issues can always be reduced to two 'sides' of a single 'argument'. Most serious forms of inquiry (scientific research or criminal investigation, for example) are not characterised by impartiality, as such, but by other epistemic norms such as rigour, open-mindedness, self-scrutiny, curiosity and so on. The co-creational model is in line with such an understanding of the goals of inquiry and takes seriously the epistemic quality of news. At the same time, it also facilitates far greater public involvement in the work of journalism than the impartial professional model. We believe that those mechanisms are more robustly socially inclusive than traditional standards of impartiality.

In sum, by reconciling a commitment to high epistemic standards with a commitment to audience participation in journalism the co-creational model offers an important and timely tool to contain the pernicious political effects of lies, mistrust, misinformation, elitism, and polarisation. As such, it has the potential to strengthen the positive democratic role of the news media.

### *Evaluation*

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

News media organisations that are experimenting with the co-creational model are developing business models that differ from those common in the traditional news media and for social media platforms. They are keen to minimise relying on advertising income, as this reliance can be in tension both with the commitment to epistemic goals and with social inclusivity.

One possible alternative business model is a cooperative, and some organisations have adopted that. Other organisations are using a combination of membership fees, subscription fees, and advertising. Yet others also receive grants from various public bodies and philanthropic donors. However, viable alternatives are not readily available, and more work is needed on this issue.

2. How adequately are UK news organisations providing impartial and trusted news? What actions are needed to address any shortcomings?

As mentioned in our answer to question 3 above, impartiality might be a misleading ideal. What matters for trustworthy news is that it's high-quality – satisfying epistemic norms related to accuracy and fact-checking – and that the process of news production and dissemination is socially inclusive.

The co-creational model for the news media is designed to support the provision of trustworthy news. Many news organisations in the UK today are experimenting with elements of what we call the co-creational model, and we see opportunities also for more traditional outlets such as the BBC and broadsheet newspapers to become more co-creational. In our pilot project, funded by an ESRC Impact Acceleration Award, we were working with representatives from Bellingcat, Black Ballad, the Bristol Cable, the Ferret, gal-dem, and Open Democracy. In our current and future work, we'll be looking to expand the range of news media organisations that we're working with and explore the potential for co-creation in those settings. The advisory board of our current project includes representatives from the BBC and the FT.

We see the co-creational model as providing a corrective to the weaknesses of other models of news media – the professional model, the libertarian model, and the social model (see Background section). Correcting for those weaknesses was an important concern in the origin stories of the news media organisations we've worked with so far. Further developing the co-creational model, which is the goal of our current project, should generate a set of steps that other news organisations can adopt as well to improve the provision of trustworthy news.

- 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?

As also mentioned in our answer to question 3 above, we reject the assumption that enabling social inclusivity is in tension with the goal of providing high-quality news. The co-creational model gives weight to both. Our industry partners demonstrate how the two goals are not in tension: many of them place a high value on the synergy between the aim of providing accurate information and audience engagement.

The co-creational model can serve different audiences. Some of our industry partners are committed to serving particular audiences – for example local communities or communities that share certain socio-demographic features (e.g. black women). Other co-creational news media organisations aim for broad reach (e.g. Bellingcat, Bylines Network, Open Democracy).

Partiality to certain audiences doesn't translate to indifference towards truth, however. In all cases, the organisations we've worked with so far are strongly committed to traditional epistemic norms of journalism, such as fact-checking, or editorial independence. We might say that they aim to increase the trustworthiness of the news that they provide by amplifying otherwise neglected information and correcting for 'testimonial' or 'hermeneutical' injustices (Fricker 2007).

By contrast, we categorise some forms of news media – both old and new – as 'libertarian', where they exist only to promote the interests of their owners or to

satisfy a market demand for news of a certain perspective. Highly partisan news which rejects any commitment to epistemic value would come under this heading, whereas news which reflects the values of a certain group (e.g., Brexiteers or pro-Europeans) but also shows a commitment to epistemic value would come under the co-creational heading.

In our view, a healthy public sphere will include examples of professional media, co-creational media and social media. In this regard, one avenue worth exploring is a platform interchange, which would allow users of different internet platforms to communicate and interact. Such a platform interchange could be an important tool for sharing of knowledge, containing so-called echo-chamber effects, and mitigating political polarisation.

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