

Impress—written evidence (FON0041)

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

Executive Summary

- Large technology platforms have fundamentally transformed the landscape of news production, distribution, and consumption in the UK. While these platforms have enabled greater access to information, the dependence of news publishers on technology platforms has created an unbalanced relationship, where platforms hold significant power over the dissemination of information.
- Technology platforms have contributed to a proliferation of media outlets, including independent publishers and community-driven initiatives, there is a risk of further consolidation and loss of plurality. The shift towards digital ecosystems has resulted in the erosion of journalistic standards, with news becoming indistinguishable from other forms of content.
- The emergence of generative AI technologies poses both opportunities and challenges for news media business models. While some view AI as a tool to streamline news delivery, others see it as a threat to the sustainability of the news industry. There is a growing concern that AI companies have utilised news content without proper compensation, potentially leading to an unsustainable commercial model for news production. If left unchecked, this could result in the creation of pay-walled content and exacerbate digital divides, limiting access to free online news for certain segments of the population.
- With the rise of unreliable AI-generated news sites and copycat content, there is a pressing need for regulatory oversight to address issues such as plagiarism, authentication, and mis- and disinformation. Additionally, the lack of industry-wide standards and kite-marking for authenticity and reliability further complicates efforts to preserve news quality. This necessitates collaborative efforts between industry stakeholders, regulators, and technology platforms to ensure the integrity and reliability of news content in the digital age.
- Trust in news media in the UK continues to be low. Factors such as medium type play a significant role in trust levels, with broadcast media enjoying higher trust compared to print and online sources. Independent press regulation is seen as crucial for improving trust in news, with 92% of respondents supporting the principle of independent regulation. Additionally, factors such as balanced reporting and press regulator membership contribute positively to trust levels, highlighting the importance of transparency and accountability in news production. Press regulators have a unique opportunity to address these challenges and enhance trust in news journalism, which not only impacts media

institutions but also has broader implications for public trust in other institutions and the functioning of democracy.

- UK news organisations face significant challenges in providing impartial and trusted news, with most legacy news publishers operating outside of regulatory oversight. While Impress-regulated titles offer assurance of trustworthy journalism, only a small fraction of news publishers are regulated, contributing to low public confidence in the quality of news consumed. Tabloids and middle-market newspapers are particularly mistrusted, with concerns raised about agenda-pushing and lack of factual reporting. Market size or reach should not be equated with trustworthiness, necessitating deeper content analysis and audience research.
- Despite strong public support for journalism there's a notable gap between the expectations the public have of the role and function of news and perceived effectiveness by news publishers fulfilling those expectations, underscoring the need for independent press regulation to rebuild trust in the UK press.
- The purpose of independent and effective self-regulation, as conceived under the Royal Charter for self-regulation of the press, was to remove that balancing burden from news publishers so that those competing interests and values would not compromise their provision of trusted news. Membership of an independent and effective regulatory body such as Impress is therefore one of the most practical steps a news organisation can take to balance those competing demands accordingly.
- The regulatory landscape governing technology platforms and content distribution in the UK is intricate, comprising a mix of statutory and self-regulatory bodies with varied responsibilities and levels of independence. Research indicates low public literacy on regulation, with significant gaps in understanding, particularly regarding the regulation of news content on social media and broadcast platforms. Addressing disinformation emerges as a top priority for the public, yet existing regulators have limited powers to combat its proliferation, highlighting the need for clearer strategies and interventions, especially given advancements in generative AI technology.
- The Government's proposed Media Bill encompasses crucial measures backed by all parties and the media industry, yet it also serves as a platform to abolish section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act, raising concerns over the lack of practical incentives for news publishers to adopt independent regulation, insufficient protection against vexatious litigants, and limited access to justice for citizens deterred by high litigation costs. Supporting a high-quality information ecosystem necessitates establishing trust through independent accountability mechanisms for news publishers, as advocated by the Press Recognition Panel and supported by Impress.
- A comprehensive policy vision is needed to address mis- and disinformation while safeguarding press freedom, promoting journalistic standards, ensuring public accountability, and transforming the relationship between citizens, communities, and news publishers. Despite

heavy government investment in legacy press outlets, estimated at over £600 million annually, many recipients lack effective regulation, potentially undermining the flow of reliable information. Government interventions should focus on creating market incentives for accountable journalism and enhancing public discernment of trustworthy news sources.

Trends over the next 12 months and 5 years

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?

Large technology platforms have completely altered the conditions for producing, distributing, and consuming news here in the UK and around the world. Much of our social and cultural reality is heavily influenced by technology. The platforms owning that technology have trended towards global monopoly in the absence of any public interest regulation at state or regional levels. The promotion of the news 'brand' rather than journalistic standards of truth and trust has rendered "news" increasingly indistinct from other forms of content and eroded its public interest function. This last variable is particularly important given that audience attention and monetisation are the basis of the digital services market where news principally resides.

We all know how we got here. The uptake and dominance of digital services levelled the news industry, collapsing the advertising monopoly that had made commercial print journalism very profitable in the past. As the news industry failed to innovate and keep pace of these changes, new entrants arrived who were able to create digital ecosystems that enjoyed huge public uptake, and therefore attracted advertisers. Technology platforms have made it increasingly difficult for news publishers to monetise their content products via advertising, requiring publishers to use and adapt to the platform's services and 'sandboxes,' to extract the little remaining advertising revenue made available to them. The news industry has become heavily dependent on technology platforms and the relationship is deeply unbalanced: while research shows that news adds value to digital services from a user perspective, many platforms (particularly search and social) are now ending their relationships with news providers and are withdrawing the structural investment previously made in news supply and diverting it towards AI. While some news providers may strike content provision deals with the technology platform providers, it is clear the providers hope to eventually eclipse the role of independent news publishers as sources of information and analysis, cutting them out of the information supply chain altogether. That way they can reduce external variables, entrench their market dominance and consumer reliance on their services: a one stop information shop.

The UK news industry has since faced a massive collapse in value: once worth £10billion in 2005 it is down to >£3billion now. This has forced even many of the best-intentioned news organisations to withdraw from areas of journalism that are most important to society, and which are more time consuming, expensive, and less profitable. Many local titles have closed: these audiences (villages or towns with audiences less than 250k) are deemed insignificant in terms of their

value to major ad buyers – ending these citizens’ access to accurate and relevant information from and for their local community. According to research by Press Gazette, this downward trend has seen the net loss of 245+ local news titles in the UK since 2005. Here, and in the US, closure and consolidation of titles have seen major job losses over the last few years, with the workforce dedicated to original reporting and investigations significantly diminishing.¹ The impact of the loss means that an estimated 11 million people in the UK now live in a news desert and many boroughs are no longer served by a news title run by a local editor or journalist.

At a content level, many platforms were designed and have encouraged users to produce and publish their own content online. This flooded the once highly gate-kept news market with new players, indifferent to national borders and to established journalistic norms and conventions; this contributed to news value being diluted, as now anyone can produce and disseminate news and opinion and amass a reliable audience to monetise. In the absence of any sort of regulation or professional accreditation demarking content as ‘news’ or publishers as ‘journalistic,’ all are free to publish in whatever way most efficiently engages and retains audiences. Many self-style as news organisations when they do not in fact engage in journalistic practices or produce original reporting. They are rewarded by the underlying digital advertising infrastructure even if (and sometimes because) content is low-quality, unethical, or even illegal. Technology platforms have enabled and incentivised poor-quality content, funnelling audiences towards sensationalism, clickbait, and dis/misinformation (whether it originates from legacy or new publishers) because the data tells them *that* is what tethers audiences to their ecosystems in the most profitable way.

The news industry did not push back effectively against this flood. It has failed to self-regulate in a way that would ring-fence and protect the integrity of news, and it can and still does produce content largely indistinguishable from the sensationalism, clickbait and dis/misinformation peddled across platforms. Industry leaders sometimes denied that these new entrants posed any sort of existential threat to news and how it is consumed, citing their large audience reach, ‘brand value’ and lobby success amongst the political class as signifiers of their continued relevance. Presently, as online reach stabilises for the largest news organisations, their focus appears to be on regaining ground for advertising revenue loss by putting lobbying for technology platforms to be forced to negotiating tables for content for cash deals. Their self-preservation in no way addresses the loss of democratic and social cohesion felt by the hollowing out of the public interest function of news. The industry’s failure to adequately resource news and to ensure news retains the primacy of its public interest function, has created a vacuum. The British public have a voracious appetite for news, information, and entertainment; we spend on average of 6 hours a day consuming media on screens. In the absence of news which directly addresses citizens and their communities, with the rise of local news deserts, and the industry’s failure to adequately resource news or protects its integrity, audiences have and will shift their attention towards alternative sources.

¹ https://pressgazette.co.uk/media_business/journalism-job-cuts-2023/

It is the new entrants, including independent publishers, which have instead sprung up to address the deficit. Recent mapping by PINF puts the number of media outlets (broadcast, print and online) near 1600, which includes community, non-profit and voluntary providers. There are many thousands more who publish information, and analysis on culture and entertainment as part of other business or hobbyist activities (these include podcasters, vloggers, influencers, and other online content creators). Many of these reach significant national and international audiences; to date however there has been no mapping of this adjacent sector through the lens of the public interest function they fulfil. Local editors and journalists are now more likely to own and run their own digital newspapers and to publish news directly to their communities through their own platforms; the constitution of Impress membership is a credit to this trend. Wanting to practice ethical journalism and recognising that trust and accountability are keys to their readers' loyalty, many of these publications have voluntarily committed to the only system of self-regulation approved in law, which ensures they publish with integrity.

This all implies a high level of market plurality; however, the new media economy is an incredibly fragile one that certainly will struggle to withstand further structural pressures such as supply consolidation wrought by technology platforms. Legacy news brands may have some early advantage over new entrants, but from the user and technology platforms' perspective, they are expected to produce original content that is unique and of equal or greater value to all other content publishers within the enclosures created for them by technology platforms.

The challenge for us is to find ways that preserve the public interest quality and function of news. This is an extremely challenging task, given how dependent much of the industry has become on technology platforms, and therefore subject to market forces over which they have little remaining influence and control. It starts with acknowledging that news is not just the expression of self-proclaimed news organisations, and that even if they may have been in the past, they may not be the best caretakers of the public interest function of news in the future. The democratic imperative is very real, and when we ask them, the public tell us repeatedly that they understand and believe in the function and value of news in their day to day lives. Those of us committed to the work must have the courage and creativity to rise to that challenge.

2. How is generative AI affecting news media business models and how might this evolve?

Generative AI technologies (GenAI) have been regarded by some as a new tool that will enable newsrooms to streamline delivery of their products and services, by others as an existential threat to the news media business. Most newsrooms are using AI in some way, whether it's administrative, systemic, or generative. Impress produced one of the world's first press codes on publisher responsibility for AI use and we have been closely monitoring developments on AI uptake for the purposes of ensuring our regulatory framework is fit for purpose and that our regulated publishers use the technology responsibly.

Meanwhile, there is now mounting evidence that the companies developing GenAI were hugely reliant on free-at-the-point-of-use news and used it to train

their systems to become what they are. News organisations were not paid for that use. However, no legal or regulatory interventions currently exist to ensure that news producers are properly compensated for the way their content is used by GenAI providers.

If this continues unfettered, there simply can be no sustainable commercial model to create news content and publish it online. GenAI companies would simply continue to scrape it, using it to train and produce output, without sharing value with creators. All original creators wanting to retain value in the content they produce (including news publishers) will likely be forced to create pay-walled gardens for content and/or enter into licence agreements with AI companies to fund news production, which would essentially mean the end of free-at-the-point-of-use content. This will accelerate digital divides for citizens who rely on free online news.

As above, if the goal of technology platform providers is to create single use enclosures for users with GenAI integration, they are not going to suddenly create systems which enable clickthrough to news websites and allow attendant revenue to be diverted away. As we have seen with technology platforms in recent history (search and social in particular), news organisations could eventually become wholly dependent on these platforms to maintain relevance and revenue.

Large technology platforms and independent GenAI companies have not shown competence in the purpose and function of news (particularly its democratic value) and have said little publicly about the impact their models have on news and the public interest/consumer welfare implications. So, it would be surprising to see them willing support news media business models short of negotiating the best value they can to access the data they need. Presently, GenAI technology, to be effective, requires large amounts of data, so the absence of data or 'news' on matters of public interest or where news deserts exist may see them invest in the short term to get better coverage. One can imagine a whole new market of publishers creating original content explicitly to feed the GenAI training models themselves. Conversely and for the reasons large news organisations allowed localities to become news deserts, the technology platforms may do the same, leaving communities unserved or with a lower quality service, unable to access relevant news and information that they need.

Some news organisations have begun litigation, others have begun to strike deals. Larger organisations will exercise influence and carve the pathway for how the wider sector is able to respond. News organisations with content and audiences deemed too small or irrelevant won't have the legal resources to protect their interests and may well not be given a seat at the bargaining table. Statutory or public interest self-regulation could alternatively enable a much more intentional set of parameters for how GenAI and news evolves.

At a content level, we are on the precipice of an unprecedented slew of new content from good and bad faith actors enabled by the easy user design of these GenAI products. NewGuard has already authenticated hundreds of unreliable AI-generated news sites, and there are probably thousands more. Copycat websites and social accounts are appearing and can easily be trained against behavioural metrics to mislead audiences. We have few means of interrogating users'

experience of this, given the lack of regulatory oversight. Existing regulation does not address risks regarding plagiarism, authentication, or mis- and disinformation. Technology platforms will not act unless compelled by financial, legal, or reputational risk.

It is not clear how those news organisations which have relied on their brand value and audience reach to preserve their incumbency, expect to retain that when thousands more news nodes appear. Given large parts of the industry have largely failed to self-regulate and create standards and kite-marking at a systemic level to signal authenticity and reliability to audiences, we need to find new ways to preserve news quality and integrity.

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

There is an abundance of research on trust in news in the UK, including annualised surveys by Ofcom, the Reuters Institute, and independent academic researchers. In 2022-23, Impress contributed to this body of work, by collaborating with the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds and the School of Humanities and Journalism at the University of Derby on a research project which surveyed 3044 representative respondents across the UK in addition to conducting in-depth focus group work, on news, trust, press standards, and regulation.

In this research, we found public trust in the news media is evenly split between those that trust it (49%) and those that distrust it (48%). The public hold even less trust in its practitioners: journalists are trusted by only 39% of the public. Trust in journalists increases slightly among those with higher educational achievements but remains below 50% across demographics. It is highest among age groups 18-24 and 75+ (both sitting at 47%), whereas 25-34-year-olds have the lowest levels of trust with 39% trusting the news media and 33% trusting journalists.

Trust is matter of medium: 80% of the public trust TV and 70% trust radio. Print and online journalists in the UK enjoy significantly lower levels of audience confidence. This is the result of inconsistent adherence to existing standards and low levels of effective enforcement of standards within the written and online press. It is print and online news therefore that drags down the trust rating of the news media overall. There is a predictable decrease in online news trust as age increases. 46% of 18-24-year-olds trust online-only news providers, compared to 26% of 75+ years.

One young focus group research participant explained to the researchers that standards and professionalism were factors they considered distinguished broadcast news, which is subject to compulsory regulation, from print news, which is not: "I trust the news on TV more than newspapers. [It's] live in front of so many people, they have standards and professionalism to uphold, whereas newspapers are written behind the scenes. They basically have a habit of forming their own opinion which makes it sometimes fictional as well as factual." Others attributed higher trust in broadcast news to balanced and open publishing processes: "You would tend to find that the broadcast journalists [are] balanced and pretty unbiased. Whereas the newsprint wouldn't be. And that's not a criticism, it's the nature of newsprint. It is about opinion as much as

it about news. That's not so true of broadcast journalism." Another focus group participant said, "I don't think anyone can ever be, in the end, totally impartial but I do see a real attempt in [broadcast] reporting to try and achieve that. I don't see it so much [elsewhere]; you can see a different slant at times with other news reporting and with newspapers, it is literally whatever they want to say."

Notably, even among those that mainly use news online, less than half trust online-only news to report on issues fairly: 1 in 5 respondents saying they don't know whether to trust online news or not. There are a few possible reasons for this: it is still a relatively new medium and audiences are not clear about the news processes behind it. Fewer professional and cultural norms bind online news providers together, whereas TV has established working norms formed over decades. As such, it may be difficult for the public to confidently place trust in online news or acknowledge it as a space for fair reporting when awareness and understanding of its production and regulatory processes is low.

Broadcast journalism is well regulated by Ofcom, written and online journalism is not. Therefore, when we looked at what might improve trust in news amongst the public, a comfortable majority of respondents told us that independent press regulation is important, while as many as 92% of respondents support the principle of independent press regulation. A strong majority feel that journalism should be held to account for untrue or harmful content, and a similar number feel that independent regulation improves the quality of journalism. Those that are disengaged or distrustful of the media and politics are also very likely to believe effective regulation enhances free speech. One focus group participant called for regulation that: "...Is totally independent, where you can go if you feel there is something wrong or misleading. People should be held up to account for giving false information." This highlights the crucial role that independent press regulation can and should play in improving trust in news, and the strong public demand for such a system.

We looked at specific factors that increase or decrease trust in the public's experiences of news. As might be expected, the likes of mis- and disinformation, misleading headlines, and undeclared sponsored content negatively impact trust levels. The three factors that produce a net positive increase in trust, however, are links to external support services when sensitive issues are discussed, balanced reporting of all sides, and press regulator membership. When publishers indicate that they are members of a press regulator, there is a notable increase in trust in 33% of respondents.

The research also demonstrated the public think greater transparency and literacy would improve the public's trust in news: 66% of the public believe that knowing more about news production would improve trust, while 70% believe that knowing more about press regulation would do the same. This is constant amongst almost all demographics. Of those that do not currently trust the media, 61% believe that better news literacy would lead to higher trust and 67% believe greater regulatory literacy would do the same. This view is held by 3 out of 4 people who already trust the media, and this improves as news use increases. Those with diverse media habits all agree that higher literacy would improve trust.

When we look at online news, the only factor with a net positive trust outcome is when a news story features a 'complain' or 'report' button, with over 40% believing it would increase their trust. The only other factor with parity to this is comment moderation (however 1 in 3 people believe comment moderation would decrease their trust). What is clear, both here and in previous findings, is that displaying a commitment to external accountability appears to be the most promising opportunity to increase public trust in news journalism.

This provides press regulators with a unique challenge and opportunity. If we continue par the course, we are likely to see further erosion of trust overall. While broadcast use is currently stable, as audiences age and younger audiences become the majority, their news habits which are dominated by online news will become the norm. Unless those online news sources command more trust, with the interventions described, we can expect to see public confidence in news continue to fall.

That in turn has consequences. We found that low trust in the media corresponds with lower trust in other institutions, such as the NHS, police, and political parties. Public institutions, and society at large, therefore, have a stake in the public engaging with news journalism, and trusting their news sources.

If we further consider the public interest function that news performs, informing, educating, and (in its watchdog role) holding power to account, less trust in news is likely to diminish those functions. Emerging research in the US demonstrates that corruption significantly increases, the cost of government increases, and there is less voter participation when news declines.²

Evaluation

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

The failure to implement the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry – despite their having had overwhelming public and political support when they were published – or to devise an alternative system of regulatory oversight across the whole journalism industry, has led to most of the legacy newsprint publishers sitting outside of any oversight which could provide assurance that their journalism is trustworthy.

The public can have considerable confidence that the news they receive from Impress-regulated titles is trustworthy, and that there are systems in place to protect them from any potential harm. This means that the 20million+ readers of UK news organisations regulated by Impress are given an independent assurance that our publishers can be held to account for breaches of accuracy and conduct in newsgathering. However, the present situation – where only 15% of news publishers are regulated by a recognised regulator; 16% are contracted

² Ted Matherly, No News is Bad News: Political Corruption, News Deserts, and the Decline of the Fourth Estate, (https://questromworld.bu.edu/platformstrategy/wpcontent/uploads/sites/49/2021/07/PlatStrat2021_paper_1.pdf); <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-30/when-local-newspapers-close-city-financing-costs-rise>; <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2022/06/newspapers-close-decline-in-local-journalism/>.

with an industry complaints-handling body; and 69% are entirely unregulated is not a situation that gives the public confidence in the quality of the news they consume. The effect is that UK news publishers (as opposed to UK broadcasters subject to statutory regulation) are some of the least trusted professionals in the UK. The UK press is one of the least trusted in Europe.

It is important to recognise at a macro level that the news organisations that perform poorly against audience expectations of trust are also the largest by market share, whether measured by revenue, circulation, or audience reach. Our research also showed overall UK tabloids are the least trusted newspapers: only 33% of the public trust them and only half of people that say they trust the media generally trust tabloids. Middle market newspapers such as The Daily Express and The Daily Mail are trusted by less than half of the public (43%), and only 2 out of 3 people trust broadsheets. One focus group participant highlighted why the public are less trusting of newspapers: "They don't report, they push an agenda." Those members of the public that use mainly print news are not particularly confident in their chosen news sources: 38% trust tabloids, 50% trust middle markets, and 63% trust broadsheets and traditional locals.

We would urge the Committee to avoid regarding the size of a news organisation, the sheer volume of news produced, or the extent of that news reach, as any real measure of trusted or trustworthy news provision. Several factors that have contributed to this perverse outcome where poor quality news provision is rewarded by the market. Deeper content analysis and audience research is required to tell the whole story.

Our research told us that the public are actively invested in and strongly support quality journalism. There is a strong, shared consensus around what values should guide news. The most supported values are openly admitting mistakes; separating facts, opinions, and adverts; and reporting different views. Values such as user engagement and empathy, responding to complaints, and explaining news processes are supported by over 70% of people. There is a strong sense that news should be transparent, open, accountable, empathetic, and independent. However, there was an average 30% drop in expectations when we asked the public how effectively they considered news is fulfilling those values which they think are important. The most significant failures were in relation to openly admitting mistakes and responding to audience complaints. This would seem to explain the public's strong support for independent press regulation, despite successive governments over ten years failing to implement some of Leveson's key proposals.

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?

The purpose of independent and effective self-regulation, as conceived under the Royal Charter for self-regulation of the press, was to remove that balancing burden from news publishers so that those competing interests and values would not compromise their provision of trusted news. Impress regulates accuracy, not opinion. It regulates press behaviour, not editorial freedom. Indeed, independent regulation and compliance with a recognised code of ethical standards helps free news publishers to pursue whatever agendas they choose, with their readers

secure in the knowledge that they can trust the factual accuracy of content even if they don't agree with it, and that there is an independent body they can appeal to if they believe that journalists have behaved unethically. Membership of an independent and effective regulatory body such as Impress is therefore one of the most practical steps a news organisation can take to balance those competing demands accordingly.

4. How well is regulatory oversight working?

The regulatory oversight of technology platforms, and distribution and publication of content, is characterised by a patchwork of statutory and self-regulatory bodies. Of the statutory bodies: Ofcom licences tv and radio, regulates video on demand, broadband, mobile phones, postal services, and recently obtained powers to regulate online safety; the Information Commissioner's Office regulates data controllers and processing; and the Competition and Markets Authority regulates competition in digital markets. Of the self-regulatory bodies: the Advertising Standards Authority manages complaints and conducts investigations into breaches of the advertising codes; Impress, the recognised self-regulatory body for the press manages complaints and provides regulatory services for UK news publishers; and IPSO, funded by the industry, decides on complaints for a broad swathe of national and regional newspaper groups. All of these bodies have different responsibilities, powers remits, and degrees of independence. This is clearly a complex system for the public to navigate, and research suggests the net effect of this framework is low public literacy on regulation.

When we asked how the press is regulated, 32% of the public did not know there were any codes of conduct that covered what journalists do or what they publish. 40% of people incorrectly assumed that social media companies are responsible for regulating the news stories that newspapers and broadcasters post on their sites; and 45% of people incorrectly assumed news on TV and radio is regulated by the same regulator as newspapers and online. There are clearly, therefore, huge gaps in public understanding of regulation in the digital space.

When we asked them what they wanted the regulators to address 51% of the public ranked addressing disinformation in their top three priorities. There are few laws in the UK to prevent publication of inaccurate information (outside of civil liability for reputational inaccuracy, i.e., defamation or malicious falsehood). The various regulators have limited powers to order corrections with due prominence or engage in other interventions to address mis- and disinformation. Despite the recent Online Safety Act there is no clear roadmap to address the proliferation of disinformation even though the capacity for GenAI to contribute to the proliferation of "fake facts" as well as to fake images, fake sound and fake video is daily more apparent.

5. Are there any actions the Government should take to address concerns around due impartiality, trust, and the influence of technology platforms?

a) Are changes needed to the Media Bill?

The Media Bill offers an important and wide-ranging series of proposed measures, rightly backed by all Parties and by the media industry itself. However, the Government are using the Bill as a vehicle to abolish section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act, to give effect to their repeated manifesto pledge. The failure to implement section 40 has three consequences. There is no practical incentive to news publishers to adopt independent regulation. There is inadequate protection for publishers against vexatious litigants with deep pockets. And there is no access to justice for ordinary citizens deterred from taking publishers to court for fear of the punitive costs involved.

The Committee is urged to take note of the Press Recognition Panel's annual report to Parliament on the recognition system. The following extract is taken from their most recent report:³

"... while there is an effective Approved Regulator (Impress), with the threatened repeal of Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, and without any meaningful alternative in place to incentivise participation, there is little prospect that the Recognition System can succeed as Parliament originally intended.

...Nevertheless, as of 31 March 2023, 120 news publishers had joined the only Approved Regulator to date (Impress), underscoring that the concept of press self-regulation under the Recognition System works in practice. Many more, including the traditional national print news titles, have chosen not to do so. Without Section 40, there is not a sufficiently robust incentive to create a commercial advantage for news publishers to participate in any voluntary system of press self-regulation (and it is important to note that even with Section 40, news publishers could still choose to remain outside of the Recognition System). Consequently, the Recognition System has not gained the traction with the industry necessary to operate effectively and provide assurance that the system of press self-regulation is working in the public interest and not in the interests of politicians, the industry itself or any other third party."

One of their key recommendations is that the UK Parliament should not repeal Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. Instead, it should either commence its provision with immediate effect or put in place equivalent and alternative mechanisms to protect freedom of speech and the public by holding the whole of the press to account under an independent system of self-regulation. We agree with the Press Recognition Panel on these points.

Despite successive governments having failed to carry through the Leveson reforms, Impress continues to make significant strides, bringing as many news publishers into independent regulation as we can. More than two hundred news titles have chosen voluntary regulation, together reaching 20 million readers. We

³ <https://pressrecognitionpanel.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Press-Recognition-Panel-Annual-Report-on-the-Recognition-System-Laid-in-Parliament-on-8th-February-2024.pdf>

consider that supporting and enabling a high-quality information ecosystem starts with news publishers distinguishing themselves as sources of trusted information and that that can only be achieved through giving the public assurance that news publishers can be held to account through a genuinely independent and non-political process.

b) Are changes needed to the way the Government addresses mis- and dis-information?

What we need is a comprehensive policy vision that protects the free press, promotes journalistic standards, demonstrates public accountability, and delivers meaningful transformation of the relationship between citizens, communities, and news publishers. Public policy and state interventions need to address the interlocking issues of creating a market incentive for accountable and well-regulated journalism and increasing the public's ability to recognise trustworthy sources of news and information. In recent years, the Government has invested heavily in the corporate national and regional press through a system of tax relief, advertising, and grants, which are estimated to be worth more than £600 million a year.⁴ Those publishers in receipt of financial support do not need to be well-regulated or to be regulated at all. State funding has come at the expense of new entrants to the market who have chosen to be regulated and accountable. It is also unclear whether public investment has increased the flow of trustworthy information or merely added to a plethora of opinion, speculation, or inaccuracy.

Impress has three key objectives when it comes to addressing the information challenges ahead, and consider these objectives should be prioritised when developing constructive solutions:

1. Encourage a robust, healthy relationship between the public and the media by increasing community participation, strengthening democratic engagement of these communities as key stakeholders, and promoting effective resolution processes.
2. Foster and grow a resilient, literate public that engages productively and constructively with the news, local communities, society, and democracy.
3. To incentivise, champion, and protect news providers that sign up to be independently held accountable to recognised standards of journalism. We have set out a blueprint for how government might do this in our policy framework attached to this submission.

⁴ For example, the beneficiary publishers receive VAT relief of 20% on print sales and digital subscription sales which were estimated to be worth £594 million in 2008 (Nielsen and Linnebank, 2011). The statutory duty on local councils to place notices in local newspapers on planning, licensing and traffic orders is estimated to be worth around £40-50 million a year – again the vast majority is assigned to the corporate regional press. The BBC licence fee funded Local Democracy Reporter Scheme previously provided grants of around £8 million a year to newspaper groups, and less than 5% went to the independent local journalism sector. During the COVID-19 crisis the Government funded a public health campaign through corporate local media worth an estimated to be at least £45 million but could be more in the region of £100million+, again 95% of which was funnelled to the national and corporate regional press.

About Impress

Impress is a champion for news that can be trusted. We work to ensure that our members can publish with integrity; so that the public can engage with confidence in an ever-changing media landscape. We operate a recognised scheme of independent press self-regulation that works in the public interest to protect freedom of expression, individual rights, and public safety.

Independent self-regulation ensures that the news sector can meet legal and ethical news publishing standards. The press has a powerful and influential role in UK society. Therefore, it is important that there is independent oversight of the impact the news publishing sector has on individuals and society, whilst maintaining robust mechanisms to prevent state and commercial interests from having any involvement in that oversight. Improving press standards is hugely popular among the UK public and has been ever since the Leveson Inquiry into culture and practice of the press.

Who we regulate

Impress provides self-regulatory services to over 200 news brands, which reach 20% of the UK population each month; these publishers have voluntarily subscribed to the model of Royal Charter approved self-regulation since Impress first became recognised in October 2016. This includes a significant number of online news publications that specialise in investigative journalism. These publishers play a vital role in the news ecosystem by uncovering stories that often go on to appear in the national and international media.

Impress is recognised as the UK's only body to regulate the press independently and effectively. Alongside the regulatory and dispute resolution services it offers, it also addresses news literacy for the public through research and awareness raising activities. It has submitted a response to this inquiry as a significant infrastructure stakeholder in public and policy debates on the provision of trusted news and information.

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