

NCTJ—written evidence (FON0045)

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

Introduction

1. The NCTJ (National Council for the Training of Journalists) is a charity which works with the news media industry to develop professional qualifications and training programmes for UK journalists.¹
2. Established in 1951, the NCTJ has maintained its position at the forefront of journalism training and qualifications, working closely with news publishers and broadcasters to ensure its courses continue to prepare prospective journalists for the rigours of the modern news environment. It also oversees professional development programmes to enable working journalists to update their skills and knowledge throughout their careers.
3. Just over 80 per cent of qualified UK journalists hold an NCTJ qualification.² The charity's watchwords are quality, trust and diversity.

This Inquiry

4. The NCTJ welcomes the Committee's continued attention to key issues facing the news media sector. It is paramount to the safeguarding of an effective fourth estate that journalists should report responsibly, and in a way that engenders trust. However, it should not be regarded as axiomatic that an apparent decline in levels of trust in the media itself demonstrates falling standards of journalism. Rather, there are a range of factors at play affecting perceptions of UK journalism.
5. Some areas of the Committee's inquiry are not matters that fall within the NCTJ's purview. In this response, we confine ourselves to points that directly affect the NCTJ's work and the future of journalism training, within the context of the issues being considered by the committee. We would be glad to provide oral evidence in due course should the committee find it helpful

Technology platforms

6. It goes without saying that the impact of 'big tech' on traditional news providers has been monumental over the last fifteen years or so.
7. For its part, the NCTJ has always sought to adapt its training programmes to meet the evolving skills required by journalists and their employers. In

¹ www.nctj.com

² *Journalists at Work*, NCTJ, 2018 - <https://www.nctj.com/publications/journalists-at-work-2018/>

recent years, that has included equipping journalists so they can operate effectively in an environment in which attracting audiences through social media and search engine optimisation has been critical. Invariably, journalists today need all the core skills they ever did, and many others besides: their training and their ongoing development needs are more complex than in previous eras, squarely because of the way journalism and big tech have come to intersect.

8. While plainly it is a matter of some debate, the relationship between news providers and technology platforms has at times seemed symbiotic. This notion was encouraged by the support provided by tech firms to the broader journalism ecosystem, through news partnerships and other initiatives.
9. The NCTJ has benefitted from this approach. It has worked – and continues to work – closely with the Google News Initiative (GNI), which has become one of the major supporters of the Journalism Diversity Fund, an industry-backed scheme set up by the NCTJ in 2005 to support people from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds gain access to professional qualifications.³ GNI has also supported the development of the NCTJ’s Journalism Skills Academy (JSA), through which the NCTJ has been able to offer professional development courses for journalists at all stages of their career, across a wide range of topics. At present, the JSA has close to 40,000 registered users.⁴
10. The NCTJ has also worked closely with Meta, notably on the Community News Project.⁵ Starting in 2019, and expanded in 2022, this project ultimately created 100 new community reporter roles in newsrooms across England, Wales and Scotland. In total, over 280 individuals have taken up an opportunity through the project to gain a foothold in the news industry, and to undertake formal NCTJ qualifications. More than 70 per cent of reporters met one or more diversity criteria established at the outset of the project, and many have subsequently moved into permanent journalism roles, creating an enduring legacy for the scheme.
11. However, in step with its withdrawal from the news arena more broadly, Meta announced in the autumn of 2023 that it would not fund the Community News Project beyond its current phase.⁶ As such, the 100

³ The Journalism Diversity Fund (JDF) awards bursaries, as well as insight and mentoring opportunities, to people from diverse backgrounds, who would otherwise not be able to finance the completion of the Diploma in Journalism, the industry’s primary pre-entry qualification. Since 2005, over 550 individuals have been supported by the scheme, with the large majority going on to have successful careers in journalism. It is supported financially by 25 media organisations and other partners: NLA Media Access, Google News Initiative, Aziz Foundation, BBC, Bloomberg, BMJ, Business Insider, Channel 4 News, CNN, DMG Media, Dow Jones, FT, 5 News, Football Writers’ Association, ITN, ITV News, Journalists’ Charity, Newsquest, News UK, PA Media, Printing Charity, Reach, Reuters, Sky, Yahoo News.

⁴ The Journalism Skills Academy offers a way for learners to obtain NCTJ qualifications via self-study courses, as well as offering a wide range of skills development programmes – through in person training, live webinars and interactive e-learning. Topics covered include: ethics and regulation; media law; newsgathering; fact-checking; reporting climate change; reporting polls; podcasting; AI; leadership; diversifying newsrooms; and many others.

⁵ The Community News Project (CNP) is a partnership between the NCTJ, Meta and 23 regional news publishers, which created new reporter roles focussed on previously under-represented communities.

⁶ <https://www.nctj.com/news/current-community-news-project-contracts-unaffected-as-meta-funding-draws-to-end/>

reporter roles the scheme created will (absent alternative sources of funding) in due course be lost, with the project winding down over the next 12 months.

12. This has presented a double whammy for the publishers involved in the project, as they not only deal with a downturn in audience referrals from Facebook, but also see externally-funded reporter roles come to an end.
13. From the NCTJ's perspective, the ending of the partnership is naturally disappointing, not least because the project offered an opportunity for those who took part to obtain professional qualifications, while working, at no cost to themselves. Given the NCTJ's longstanding focus on opening access to training to people from diverse backgrounds, the loss of this route to gaining qualifications is very unfortunate.
14. A similar picture emerges in relation to X (formerly Twitter). Changes to the platform have patently reduced its role as a driver of audience to news providers – albeit that it was never as important as other platforms. Similarly, where once it was – via its news partnerships network – strongly engaged with the work of the NCTJ, that engagement has now ceased. Funding previously provided to the NCTJ's Journalism Diversity Fund is no longer forthcoming.
15. In short, just as the shifting priorities of the tech platforms continue to create challenges for publishers (in terms of driving audience, gaining a fair share of the advertising market and so on), so they impact the NCTJ, both in terms of financial support and engagement with training.

AI and journalism

16. The impact of generative AI technology on journalism raises important questions for the news media industry as a whole and for those involved in the training of journalists: structurally, ethically and practically.
17. For existing news businesses, plainly there are concerns about audiences turning to large language models for news updates, instead of journalism providers. For the NCTJ, that existential question naturally has a trickle-down effect. However, our primary focus is on the potential opportunities afforded to journalism by AI, and ensuring individual journalists and news providers are best placed to make the most of them.
18. While news organisations have used AI in many forms for a considerable time – to analyse datasets or to help determine the credibility of source material, for instance – the exponential advances seen in the last 12-18 months mean new skills must be mastered quickly and effectively. That itself creates a challenge for an industry that has experienced economic decline in recent years, but it is a challenge in response to which the NCTJ is playing a central role.
19. At the start of 2023, as the pace of developments in generative AI became widely-debated, the NCTJ began a scoping exercise to consider

the potential impacts on its work. This included: an examination of existing programmes of study for the Diploma in Journalism (the typical entry-level qualification for UK journalists); the potential need to develop new professional development resources; and a consideration of how AI might affect online assessments and the NCTJ's role as a regulated awarding organisation.

20. In the subsequent months, the NCTJ held discussions with academic and industry partners, carried out a survey of industry leaders, and conducted detailed research into newsroom practice.
21. In October, the NCTJ participated in a roundtable discussion convened by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to consider the impact of AI on journalism, and potential industry responses to the resulting challenges and opportunities.
22. A month later, an e-learning course, 'A Journalist's guide to artificial intelligence', was launched on the NCTJ's Journalism Skills Academy, aimed at working journalists and those about to enter the industry.
23. In December, the NCTJ brought together industry and academic partners for an afternoon conference, hosted by Reuters, to further engage its stakeholders in this vital area.⁷ From February 2024, the NCTJ will begin running webinars on AI and journalism at both an introductory and a more advanced level.
24. At the heart of all this work is a recognition that AI advances are a reality for the journalism sector, and that they must be harnessed in a way that maintains the NCTJ's core values of quality, trust and diversity.
25. However, funding this work remains a significant challenge, especially with some tech platforms no longer engaged in news-related partnerships. The NCTJ has not previously received government funding for its work, but we believe there is a strong case for that to change, not least given the importance to the wider economy of AI being harnessed effectively, positively and responsibly – including when it comes to the news sector.

Trust and impartiality

26. It has long been an apparently reasonable assumption that trust in journalism is correlated to the quality of journalistic output.
27. The experience of recent years calls that hypothesis into question, for while trust in the news media appears (at least by some measures) to have declined, there is little evidence that the output of mainstream news providers is intrinsically of lower quality than in previous decades. Indeed, the greater scrutiny afforded to journalism by its availability across multiple platforms, and the increased focus on ethical best practice

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<https://www.nctj.com/news/nctj-hosts-successful-artificial-intelligence-in-journalism-event/>

following the phone-hacking scandal, have created an imperative to improve standards.

28. However, much of the online scrutiny of journalism is undertaken by partisan audiences, typically 'calling out' content they regard as negative or undesirable because it does not accord to their views. The British press may not always be impartial (and is not required to be), but nor, increasingly, are those who critique it (sometimes tendentiously). News broadcasters, unlike publishers, are bound by rules on impartiality, and largely follow those rules – yet they are just as likely to be accused of partisanship by critics.
29. In this situation, where claims of media partiality (justified and unjustified) have become an end in themselves, rather than a starting point for debate, objective markers of trustworthiness arguably become more important.
30. Alongside adherence to regulatory codes, professional training and development can – indeed should – be one of those trust markers. And while journalism is not, and should not become, a licensed trade, open only to people who have passed particular qualifications, there is more that industry and government could do to highlight the role that professional training plays in the news media sector.
31. The overwhelming majority (81 per cent) of UK journalists hold a journalism qualification; and a similar proportion of those hold an industry-standard qualification overseen by the NCTJ.⁸ The UK journalism work force is therefore highly trained in core skills, including newsgathering, news production, knowledge of media law and regulation and the working of public institutions. Some employers regard completion of the NCTJ Diploma in Journalism as a prerequisite when hiring reporters; for most it is an advantage. An NCTJ-trained journalist is one who is likely to be able to hit the ground running when they enter a newsroom for the first time, and one who is unlikely to cross legal or ethical boundaries due to a lack of knowledge.
32. Yet despite the value placed on those credentials, there is little evidence of widespread public knowledge about the training undertaken by most journalists, or the professional qualifications most obtain before or during their careers. Greater work by industry and by government – in partnership with the NCTJ – to raise awareness of the role training plays in journalists' lives (before and after they enter the workplace) could prove effective in tackling the scepticism that exists in some quarters.
33. Likewise, greater support for and promotion of NCTJ qualifications would assist those universities and FE colleges which deliver the Diploma in Journalism and which are therefore providing a pipeline of talent into industry.⁹ The diploma is a challenging qualification, and centres which

⁸ *Journalists at Work*, NCTJ, 2018

⁹ The NCTJ's Diploma in Journalism is the primary pre-entry qualification for UK journalists, undertaken by around 1,500 people per year. It can be delivered within a variety of contexts: within a BA or MA degree programme; as

deliver it must take on significant additional work to gain accreditation, deliver additional exams and meet industry standards. At a time when the further and higher education sectors are experiencing major economic tests, it is essential that universities and colleges are incentivised to continue delivering the professional qualification that is central to the ongoing health of the UK journalism sector.

Diversity

34. Just as significantly, more work is needed to remove barriers to professional training, not least to demonstrate that the journalism sector is indeed open to people from all backgrounds.
35. The NCTJ has been at the forefront of efforts to diversify the news media industry. It set up the Journalism Diversity Fund in 2005, which has supported over 550 prospective students from diverse and financially disadvantaged backgrounds, enabling them to complete professional qualifications.
36. The Community News Project has also played a key role in the last five years in terms of providing a route into work alongside training, with recruitment targeted in local communities around the UK. This has been particularly valuable in reinforcing the historic link between the NCTJ and the regional news sector, which was once the starting point for almost all journalists on their career journey. While the NCTJ now works with publishers and broadcasters across the news media industry (and indeed beyond), regional newspapers and websites remain crucial to supporting many early career journalists.
37. Similarly, the resurgence of journalism apprenticeships has offered a way to take up entry-level roles without having to undertake prior professional (or indeed any other post-16) qualifications previously. Again, this has been particularly important for regional news publishers, which have long prided their role as a training ground for the wider journalism industry. By using the apprentice levy both to train new entrants, and – since the introduction of a Level 7, senior journalism apprenticeship in 2020 – to upskill trainees, the industry has been able to maintain the embedding of professional training within their organisational structures. However, funding apprentice salaries is an increasing challenge, which is why the NCTJ has previously called on government to support journalism apprenticeships more fully.
38. Despite the creation of these 'new' routes into industry, the NCTJ's annual Diversity in Journalism report shows that much remains to be done to make journalism more representative of the audiences it serves. In our 2023 report,¹⁰ 72 per cent of journalists had a parent in one of the three highest occupational groups, compared to 44 per cent of all UK workers.¹¹

a standalone qualification; as the gateway qualification in a journalism apprenticeship. At present, 32 universities, FE colleges and independent training providers deliver NCTJ-accredited diploma courses.

¹⁰ <https://www.nctj.com/publications/diversity-in-journalism-2023/>

¹¹ The Diversity in Journalism survey forms part of a longstanding and multi-faceted research programme which the NCTJ oversees in order to inform industry actions around workforce development, skills needs and journalists'

39. The unrepresentative nature of the industry itself has an impact on the question of trust, with media critics regularly contending that its failings are a result of it being 'out of touch' with the public. That characterisation may be simplistic, but the statistics around journalists' backgrounds might be used to undermine the notion that journalism exists to serve the wider public interest.
40. Further efforts to widen access to journalism training and journalism jobs have the potential both to increase understanding of journalistic processes, and to ensure that fewer members of the public feel that the media is operated by 'elites'.
41. The NCTJ has previously urged the government to support the training of journalists financially – especially in the regional publishing sector, where the economic challenges associated with the production of journalism at scale are particularly acute. With the likely ending of the Community News Project, government – or indeed non-governmental – support is needed even more now than ever.
42. We recognise that direct funding of journalism by government itself raises some difficult questions, but arms-length support via the NCTJ has proved effective in the Community News Project – both in respect of training costs, and indeed contributions to salaries. A proposal to this end was set out as an appendix to the NCTJ's submission to the Committee's 'Our Creative Future' inquiry in 2022.¹²

Safety

43. One further area that the Committee might usefully consider in the context of the trust debate, is the way that claims of the media being untrustworthy and/or partial and/or otherwise inadequate impact on individual journalists.
44. This is particularly true in an environment where journalists are part of the same online world as their critics. Abuse of individual reporters can be vicious and unrelenting, to an extent that can be damaging to their mental and physical health.
45. In December 2022, the NCTJ set up a Safety and Resilience Advisory Panel¹³ to take forward its work in this area, having previously created an e-learning resource as part of the government's National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists.¹⁴
46. Without suitable interventions to secure journalists' safety and well-being, there is a danger that a cycle develops in which journalists are more likely

experience.

¹² The proposal envisaged a government fund, managed by the NCTJ, which would provide match-funding to support the salaries of 70 journalism apprentices in the 27 counties and metropolitan districts of England. The NCTJ believes this proposal would be widely supported by regional news publishing companies.

¹³ <https://www.nctj.com/news/nctj-launches-safety-and-resilience-industry-forum/>

¹⁴ <https://www.nctj.com/news/nctj-to-launch-e-learning-course-on-safety-and-resilience-for-journalists/>

to leave the sector at an early stage in their career, and are replaced by others who subsequently find themselves facing similar levels of abuse – including claims that their lack of experience is somehow evidence that they cannot be trusted.

47. The NCTJ remains focussed on developing tools which journalists – as well as employers and educators – can deploy to combat the challenges inherent in doing a public-facing job.

Dis- and mis-information

48. Tackling the inadvertent and deliberate spread of dis- and mis-information has become a key journalistic endeavour, and the NCTJ's programmes of study reflect that.
49. Much effort has been expended in the last decade on media literacy efforts. While the NCTJ is not in the business of media literacy provision *per se*, many of the resources available via the NCTJ's Journalism Skills Academy offer a window into the realities of journalism in a way that can combat the apparent lack of understanding over why some sources of information can be trusted and why others may be more questionable.
50. The NCTJ remains of the view that media literacy is best addressed by underscoring the skills that go into producing good journalism – rather than primarily by seeking to challenge material that may indeed be false, but is nevertheless attractive to some (particularly younger) audiences. To that end, we believe there are strong grounds for embedding an understanding of practical journalism skills in the school curriculum. The Certificate in Foundation Journalism, a level 3 qualification, offers a basis for teaching delivery and assessment – it is currently offered in a small number of schools to children aged 16-18.
51. In 2023, the NCTJ ran a pilot outreach project with three partner FE colleges (in Darlington, Liverpool and Derry City), which aimed to introduce an understanding of journalism to cohorts of young people (target age range, 15-19) from predominantly disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Each college designed their own programme, but all included delivery of at least one module of the CFJ, thereby providing a template for future schemes.

Summary

52. Journalism standards in the UK are, in the NCTJ's view, generally high. The industry does, however, face significant challenges which continue to adversely impact resource levels, retention, audience engagement and staff well-being. Some of these challenges are worsened by claims that particular news providers, individual journalists or the 'mainstream media' as a whole are untrustworthy or inadequate – even though the individuals making those claims often start from a partial position themselves, or are making a criticism for their own ends.
53. The journalism industry is highly-trained, but many news providers do little to explain what training is involved in becoming a journalist, or what skills development programmes are undertaken by journalists once they enter the workplace. Increased public understanding of the role of the NCTJ in overseeing industry standard qualifications and an ongoing professional development service for journalists, could help to tackle the trust issue.
54. While much has been done to make journalism in the UK more diverse, the sector remains unrepresentative of the wider population, especially in terms of socio-economic background. The statistics bolster a narrative (overly simplistic though it may be) that the media is 'out of touch'. Government should consider what more can be done to bolster an interest in, and access to, journalism careers among people from under-represented backgrounds, either by promoting the development of journalism skills (many of which are transferable) in schools, and/or by supporting schemes akin to the Community News Project, which enable employers to recruit reporters without prior training and experience.
55. The relationship between news media and technology platforms remains unstable, and Meta's broad withdrawal from news partnerships is indicative of the way it can change quickly. That creates difficulties for the journalism sector in myriad ways, but it also impacts on news-adjacent sectors such as journalism training.
56. Developments in AI have the potential to create even greater disruption, both to news providers' business models, and to the way journalism is produced and consumed. There are, however, potential opportunities to harness AI technologies to journalism's benefit, and the NCTJ is working to ensure that journalists have the resources and training available to develop their skills to this end.

Recommended action

57. In the context of journalism training, the NCTJ believes the government could take a range of effective actions to bolster trust in journalism, and to enhance the ability of the news media industry to take advantage of advances in AI and other technology.

- a. Support the development of skills and knowledge around AI, by backing the NCTJ to deliver a training programme focussed initially on regional publishers.
- b. Incentivise higher and further education centres to deliver journalism courses which incorporate the Diploma in Journalism, and promote that industry standard as a key marker of trust in the journalism sector.
- c. To undercut the narrative of the news media sector being dominated by 'elites', support the recruitment of new journalists from under-represented communities by: offering financial support to the regional news sector in respect of apprentice salaries; promoting industry outreach schemes; and encouraging the teaching of foundation journalism skills in schools.
- d. Promote the uptake of professional development courses and qualifications across the news media industry, to enhance a culture of CPD that will further demonstrate to audiences the commitment of professional journalists to their trade.

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