

## **NewsNow Publishing—written evidence (FON0051)**

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

#### **Executive Summary**

1. NewsNow is a news organisation which has been supporting and promoting public interest news for 25 years. Our mission is to champion a healthy news diet through advocacy and services promoting access to credible, independent and public interest journalism from a plurality of sources. Our primary services are the publicly-accessible news aggregation websites at <https://www.NewsNow.co.uk/> and <https://www.NewsNow.com/>.
2. Social media, search engine and news aggregation platforms have taken on a significant intermediary role in the curation and discovery of news information over the last two decades or so. Digital intermediaries can add significant value to news consumers, by presenting a range of sources, topics and articles in a comparative context that individual outlets alone cannot achieve. Doing this properly does not happen by accident, but needs to be actively worked on by intermediaries.
3. Unlike social media and search platforms, responsible news aggregation platforms - like ours - are crucial to facilitating public access to a genuinely diverse range of credible news sources, presented in a context that allows users to build an accurate picture of the world. NewsNow excludes misinformation and disinformation and matches independent niche and local outlets with audiences. Without responsible news aggregation platforms, it is very difficult for the public to read widely from a true plurality of credible sources.
4. Social media, in its current forms, generally does a very poor job of providing true media plurality in the public interest. Search engines generally offer a better range of information but, since they are designed to respond only to users' search queries, do not keep users informed. Google, in particular, is also increasingly presenting sponsored search results and its own AI-generated answers to search queries ahead of links to online sources.
5. Perspectives on impartiality have changed significantly and it's now more important than ever to clearly state the incentives and agendas of outlets, journalists, sources and commentators. 'Neutral' organisations like the BBC should avoid false balance - 'bothsidesism' - and focus on establishing the truth. Ofcom's working definition of 'impartiality' should be updated accordingly.
6. The news media is still heavily consolidated and therefore the dominant organisations will largely determine the response to declining revenues and declining trust, but new reader and community driven funding models are emerging, which represent hope for a more democratic, representative and

sustainable news media.

7. Ofcom's 'due impartiality' and media plurality remits should be extended to cover all major online and print news publishers and social media and aggregation platforms carrying or signposting news, not only broadcasters; and membership of a Leveson-compliant regulatory body should be made mandatory for news publishers.
8. Public money should be made available to support existing and new public interest news organisations that meet stringent criteria on funding models, ownership, impartiality and open access. News media essential to the functioning of our democracy should be funded according to the principle of 'public money for public goods'.

### **Key questions**

#### **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?**

9. First, it's important to define **media plurality**. Ofcom's discussion document on *Media plurality and online news*<sup>1</sup> paints a somewhat rosy picture of media plurality before the ascendancy of the internet. But traditional media before the web was not an Eden of balanced diversity. The UK has a highly concentrated media landscape. The national newspapers, many of which are owned by wealthy individuals, between them represent only a small range of the views held by members of the public and there are significant areas of public debate - like the continuation of the monarchy, the nationalisation of the railways or the prohibition of nuclear weapons - where major outlets largely converge. The mainstream media has long had issues around client and lobby journalism, over-reliance on establishment sources, lack of diversity in its workforce and the perverse incentives of the advertising funding model.
10. To achieve true media plurality the public needs access to a much wider range of sources than just dominant mainstream media. The public needs a plurality of politics and opinions, but also a range of ownership and funding structures, identities and locations. As the discussion document identifies: "search engines, social media platforms and aggregators have taken on an increasingly significant role in... the curation, discovery and monetisation of news." Technology platforms of this sort indeed have a lot of potential to improve media plurality. **Whereas media bias operates at the outlet level, media plurality operates at the industry or ecosystem level.** But the type of technology platform and its objectives matter greatly. True media plurality is very difficult to achieve and is unlikely to happen by accident, so only tech platforms that are explicitly designed for the task are likely to achieve an effective plurality of ownership and funding models, political alignment and representation. True media plurality is not just about volume - or even variety - of content. Like a healthy food diet, there has to have been a deliberate attempt to ensure representation from every

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0030/247548/discussion-media-plurality.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0030/247548/discussion-media-plurality.pdf)

major group and to develop a suitable balance between them. A junk food diet is made worse, not better, by offering more junk food.

11. Responsible **news aggregation** platforms form a central part of a healthy news ecosystem. They facilitate public access to a true plurality of credible news sources and present those sources in a context that makes them easy to compare and contrast. At NewsNow we assess all sources of information against stringent standards, meaning that unlike social media and search, our news is not mixed in with content with no or low information value. Our systems are specifically designed to exclude the misinformation and disinformation that plagues other platforms. We provide users with access to a huge range of outlets, right down to small, independent niche and local outlets - and, in so doing, provide the outlets themselves with crucial audiences they would otherwise find it hard to reach. We are constantly working to maintain and update our comprehensive range of sources, topics and articles. That job is not being done by the dominant tech platforms and it can not be done by individual outlets, since no news outlet can unilaterally offer a genuinely diverse range of perspectives. Without responsible news aggregation platforms it is very difficult for the public to read widely from a true plurality of credible sources.
12. **Social media** platforms are generally designed to maximise attention. In so doing they work in the opposite direction to true media plurality. They are ambivalent about the quality, provenance and subject matter of the content that receives the attention. This is irrelevant to their business model. They start with a new user by surfacing the content that most people look at for the longest, and then, based on the individual user's responses, surface the content that the user engages with the most. This will offer only a superficial plurality, where there may be many different sources but each post the user sees will be a variation on whatever type of content they find most compelling. The resulting echo chamber will also predictably tend towards polarisation, since the algorithm will learn to show the user the content they most agree with and most disagree with (since 'engaging' or 'enraging' can be equally compelling and likely to lead to user interactions).
13. News content that appears on social media platforms is not systematically selected or presented for plurality or breadth of coverage. It is not assessed for quality and it is not differentiated from user generated content or other types of content whose goal is not to inform, such as marketing and propaganda or even 'fake news'. The content is recommended by opaque algorithms, whose effects are hard to judge because the experience of each social media user is unique to them. All of this makes social media an especially bad discovery mechanism for news. Social media platforms have no requirement or incentive to include a range of (or any) important information since it is not part of their consumer offering to be comprehensive.
14. **Search engines** are similarly not designed to provide a healthy news diet. They generally aim to prioritise relevance, not reliability or diversity of content, and increasingly prioritise sponsored search results. Unlike social media they do have a business incentive to be comprehensive in coverage,

but they are skewed towards returning *the* answer, rather than a series of alternative answers to any particular search query (research from First Page<sup>2</sup> shows that the top three results on a Google results page receive nearly 70% of all clicks). Search engines will suggest the content that seems most relevant to the query, with little regard for the motives or credentials of the author. Increasingly, Google is presenting sponsored search results and its own AI-generated answers to search queries ahead of links to online sources. This reduces plurality further. Search is also a bad method for news discovery because a user needs to start their user journey with a search query. News, by definition, should be new information, making it hard to find through active search. In addition, confirmation bias will always be at play in any search query a user types, making it more likely users will find information that supports their existing beliefs about the world. Google and Apple do have news aggregation offerings but, like the social media platforms, they tend only to extend and entrench the position of dominant media in the public conversation.

15. We believe consumers should be encouraged to seek out media plurality in exactly the way that they are encouraged to seek a balanced diet of food. The majority of people are living on a diet of junk information and it's no less serious a public health crisis than if they were living on a diet of junk food. Evidence from the *Reuters Digital News Report 2023*<sup>3</sup> shows that direct discovery from news outlets is decreasing rapidly, and an increasing amount of both browsing and searching is happening on digital intermediaries. This is indicative of an appetite for plurality among the general public, which can only be properly met by responsible aggregators, not by social media or search platforms or individual news publications. The same report identifies that people trust social media news the least and broadcast news the most, but this does not change their consumption habits which are heading in exactly the reverse direction. Meta, Alphabet and X Corp control 10 of the top 15 platforms used to access news online<sup>4</sup>. These companies do not operate in the public interest, have no public service obligations and have no requirement or incentive to offer media plurality.

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

16. AI represents both huge challenges and potential opportunities to news media business models. Large Language Models (LLMs) can be used to make both summarising and rewriting content much easier and quicker. This means that search engines can give information to users directly without the need to send them to original sources of information. At the moment, when a user searches for information on Google, for example, they are likely to be presented with a link to an original text article on another website. They will click through and visit that website, getting the information in its original context. Where LLMs can be used to 'read' articles

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<sup>2</sup> <https://firstpagesage.com/reports/google-click-through-rates-ctr-by-ranking-position/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Who-Owns-the-UK-Media\\_final2.pdf](https://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Who-Owns-the-UK-Media_final2.pdf)

instead, and to summarise them, search engines can provide answers directly to users without the need to refer them to (or even identify) the original source. Google and Bing have already begun doing this. Similarly, on social media, rather than a user posting a link to an article, they could choose simply to summarise what it said with an LLM and post the summary as original material. For news publishers reliant on users visiting their sites directly - especially those dependent on advertising revenue models - this will reduce traffic levels and revenues. Publishers with membership and supporter models may not be so impaired, and might even benefit, if appropriate attribution is given, as their revenues rest on public understanding of their brand values rather than the reader's attention and data.

17. The ability of LLMs to rewrite whole articles is likely to disproportionately affect news media. In news, the intellectual property value is not in the factual information itself, which cannot be protected by copyright, but in the presentation of the information, which is contained on the publisher's site. But LLMs will allow a third-party publisher to create a convincing rewrite of another publisher's content with all of the same factual information and to publish it on their own website, thereby bypassing the original publisher altogether. Rewrites of factual articles already happen of course, and, as above, with appropriate citation or attribution they can draw attention to original works. But LLMs will make this process trivially easy to achieve at a much larger scale.
18. Google News, which, again, is incentivised to provide answers, not to protect publishers, is already pointing to websites doing exactly that, according to original reporting done by 404Media<sup>5</sup>. The outlet reports "Google told 404 Media that although it tries to address spam on Google News, the company ultimately does not focus on whether a news article was written by an AI or a human, opening the way for more AI-generated content making its way onto Google News." A distinction may need to be made, in digital intermediaries' terms of service, if not in regulations, between linking to, summarising and rewriting original articles. The first two should be considered fair use, but the latter only with appropriate citation and attribution and when significant additional value is added. Social media, search engines and aggregators have a responsibility to penalise organisations that routinely rewrite entire articles from other publishers.
19. We should not assume AI will be a net cost to news publishers. It may also offer all sorts of benefits. Many publishers are experimenting with using AI to increase production efficiency, create imagery, personalise content, analyse data and more and there is certainly room for cautious optimism from news media businesses. However, there is an immediate need for consultation and policy development on AI governance, ethics and labelling.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.404media.co/email/5dfba771-7226-48d5-8682-5185746868c4/>

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

20. The Ofcom Broadcasting Code<sup>6</sup> defines 'due impartiality' as follows: "Impartiality itself means not favouring one side over another. 'Due' means adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme." This is an increasingly old-fashioned notion of how bias operates. There are rarely only two sides on any significant issue, and even if there were, there would be no perfect balance to be struck by presenting them equally prominently - there is no 'midway point' that is impartial. The 'centre ground' on any issue can be equally as contentious as any other position. 'Bothsidesing' is now a recognised verb<sup>7</sup>, drawing attention to the simplistic tendency of some in the news media to think that difficult issues can be dealt with impartially by presenting a view from each of the left and right sides of the overton window. Impartiality cannot help inform the public whether one plus one in fact equals two, or whether it equals three, or indeed whether it equals two-and-a-half.
21. This issue was brought to wide public attention by coverage from the BBC and others of the issue of climate change, which aimed at 'impartiality' by counterpoising a qualified scientist, representing a consensus interpretation of comprehensive empirical evidence with an unqualified but high-profile climate sceptic. The BBC was rightly ridiculed for this effort and it shows that in the fullness of time, society's perspectives may shift, but the truth does not. Impartiality is subjective, as Ofcom's own research report *Drivers of perceptions of due impartiality*<sup>8</sup> identifies. What appears impartial to any given reader is based on their own views, not only of the issue being discussed, but of the institution and individuals discussing it. Truth, not impartiality, should therefore be the goal of a news organisation.
22. Where balance is sought, a much wider range of views should be considered and comment sought from credible people with relevant expertise or first-hand knowledge. In every case, the basis of their expertise or knowledge should be explained and any commercial influence they might be under or ideological affiliation they might have should be clearly stated. The weight and treatment of their comments should be in proportion to its evidential support and sufficient effort should be made to contextualise and reconcile the viewpoints. This is the 'view from everywhere', rather than the 'view from nowhere' and it is much more powerful as an information tool. Pretending that perfect neutrality is possible, let alone achieved, will not increase consumer trust. Individual commentators or outlets cannot realistically represent a wide enough range of contradictory views to give viewers a proper understanding of the issues.
23. At NewsNow, this is exactly what we are trying to achieve. We do not present 'both sides' of an issue and sit in some perceived neutral centre

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/bothsidesing-bothsidesism-new-words-were-watching>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0027/239175/4-Drivers-of-perceptions-of-due-impartiality-the-BBC-and-the-wider-news-landscape.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/239175/4-Drivers-of-perceptions-of-due-impartiality-the-BBC-and-the-wider-news-landscape.pdf)

point between them. Instead, we present all of the sides of the issue that are put forward by sources meeting minimum editorial standards. We seek to rank them according to their trustworthiness, judged by a complex mixture of factors, including: how well they are set up to resist influence by systems of power in terms of ownership, group and organisational structure, funding, lobbying and governance; how much they are driven by transparent truth-telling in the public interest in terms of their mission, ethics, transparency and accountability; and the extent to which they are achieving that goal with content that is original, accurate, accessible, substantive and consequential. A responsible aggregator is best positioned to achieve this, but individual outlets, like the BBC, should take a similar approach when selecting commentators to appear on its news and discussion shows and to be quoted in its articles.

#### **4. What factors affect trust in news and how might this evolve? To what extent is trust linked to perceptions of impartiality, or to other trends in online news?**

24. Trust is linked to perceptions of impartiality but, as above, impartiality must go much further than bothsidesism to earn the trust of modern consumers, who are very used to seeing a wide range of perspectives on the same topics.

#### ***Evaluation***

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

25. The concentration of media ownership creates a barrier to innovative responses to these challenges. Just three companies - DMG Media, News UK and Reach - control 90% of national papers and 40% of online reach. Six companies together control three quarters of the local news industry, with the three biggest - Newsquest, Reach and National World - controlling a fifth of the market each (or 60% of the market between them)<sup>9</sup>. How they choose to respond determines most of the market. And they have been responding for some time, by prioritising attention over quality, making programmatic advertising all-pervasive on their platforms and generally maximising short-term profits at the cost of long-term value. Changes in privacy regulation and the deprecation of third-party cookies will massively undercut the value of advertising over the next year (which was already a fraction of the value of traditional advertising) and the already swathing job cuts, especially in local news, will continue.
26. Some brands have had luck disappearing behind paywalls and this will no doubt become more common, but these can be expensive for users, restricting access to information for those in society with the least, and incentivising people to obtain all their information from a single source. Neither improves the health of the news ecosystem or is good for democracy. A Reuters report on *Paying for News* from September 2023<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Who-Owns-the-UK-Media\\_final2.pdf](https://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Who-Owns-the-UK-Media_final2.pdf)

showed that consumers who pay for news tend to be male, older, richer, and better educated. The same report showed that just 9% of UK consumers pay for news. Of those that do, most are paying for news from a politically partisan outlet.

27. There are a number of new independent local outlets, like *The Mill*, *The Tribune*, *The Post*, *The Bristol cable* and *Social Spider* titles in London, with different funding and ownership structures and with community and public interest at their hearts. They should be encouraged, but only time will tell whether their models can spread fast and wide enough to fill the many local news gaps left by retrenching commercial publishers. There are also successful examples of non-local reader-funded 'alternative' news media outlets like *Byline Times*, *Double Down News* and *Declassified UK*. Reader-funded and nonprofit local startups should be supported by a much better-funded BBC Local Democracy Supporter Scheme and by being given preferential access to Public Notice Income, rather than that money going to commercial publishers. Public money should also be made available to support existing and new public interest news organisations that meet stringent criteria on funding models, ownership, impartiality and open access. News media essential to the functioning of our democracy should be funded according to the principle of 'public money for public goods'.

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

28. Though public service broadcast news organisations rightly attempt to provide impartial news, for commercial publishers it is not necessarily a good business model. Niches, including political niches, represent better business opportunities. As observed above, a user's perception of whether an outlet is impartial and trustworthy, is likely to have less to do with whether they are trying to be neutral than whether the user agrees with the outlet. Therefore trusted commercial news outlets are likely to be partisan. The BBC has a special place in our media ecosystem, but its approach to news is unlikely to work for a commercial outlet. We can see, through the entry into broadcast news of GB News and Talk TV, that commercial approaches are likely to be as political as they can get away with. In such a context, a healthy news diet must come from platforms that expose numerous perspectives, omitting those that fall below a certain standard. Where publications are under commercial pressures they are unlikely to set themselves a goal of comprehensivity. Where news is a privately produced commodity, like food, it is unlikely to be in any individual producer's best interests to try to provide all the elements needed for a healthy diet. In information, as in food, there needs to be a superstructure of aggregation or intermediation that is designed to ensure nothing important is missed.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/paying-news-price-conscious-consumers-look-value-amid-cost-living-crisis>

**3. How adequately are news media organisations ensuring that efforts to provide trusted information and tackle disinformation do not alienate some sections of society in the process?**

29. Again, news organisations should be driven by truth, not impartiality. If some sections of society feel alienated because their views are not represented in the media, that is a concern that should be met with better information, not by balancing information underpinned by evidence against uninformed opinions. A key approach is to do a better job of explaining the news and the processes that go into gathering it and communicating it. News media should challenge people's perceptions, and it is the news organisation's responsibility to explain the context for doing so, how they know what they know and what people and processes were involved. Context and transparency are key to tackling perceived bias.

**4. How well is regulatory oversight working? Are any changes needed, for example: In the way Ofcom oversees due impartiality and the extent of its remit? In the way Ofcom oversees media plurality?**

30. Ofcom has newly become the regulator for online safety. This is important but not sufficient to tackle the problem of news discovery rapidly moving to digital platforms. The digital platforms that are increasingly dominating news discovery have no public service remit. They are run for profit, not in the public interest, yet they have become our largest sources of information. While it is important that illegal and harmful content is dealt with, there is no legislation that requires any digital platform to provide a certain standard of news coverage or even to provide a certain quality of information. Major tech and social media platforms could be required to maintain standards of quality and to offer a plurality of sources, subjects and viewpoints. They should be more transparent about their algorithms and the incentives that are built into them.
31. Disinformation and misinformation are currently only treated as problematic if they harm someone specifically. They should also be treated as problematic if they harm people collectively by polluting our information ecosystem. Ofcom's 'due impartiality' and media plurality remits should be extended from covering only broadcasters to cover all major online and print news publishers and social media and aggregation platforms carrying or signposting news, because in today's world of mass video streaming the 'broadcasting' distinction is simply no longer relevant. The scope of 'due impartiality' should be explicitly updated to exclude simplistic 'bothsiding' for the reasons detailed above.
32. Ofcom is of course not the only relevant regulator in news media. Non-broadcast media operates in effect under self-regulation through IPSO, run by and for mainstream publishers. The Leveson Inquiry of 2011 was an extensive review of the culture, practices and ethics of the British press. In his report of the following year, Lord Leveson proposed a new independent regulator with legislative underpinning to be recognised and overseen by the Press Recognition Panel (PRP). IMPRESS, the only regulator recognised by the PRP, was set up in 2016, but most major news publishers have not joined. Some publishers have tried to argue that regulation undermines

press freedom, but broadcast publishers are subject to much more stringent regulations with no evidence of a chilling effect in the exercise of their journalistic freedom. Media freedom, whether in broadcast, print or online, must be balanced with robust regulation if we are to ensure a healthy news ecosystem that minimises misinformation and disinformation, reduces polarisation and engenders public trust. Leveson's recommendation is as appropriate today as it was then and we would call for membership of a PRP-recognised regulatory body to be made mandatory for news publishers.

33. More should be done to break down concentration in media ownership. Instead Ofcom's light-touch approach to mergers and consolidation in the news media industry has allowed control to fall to fewer and fewer people. This undermines public trust.

**5. Are there any actions the Government should take to address concerns around due impartiality, trust, and the influence of technology platforms? Are changes needed to the Media Bill?[10] Are changes needed to the way the Government addresses mis- and dis-information?**

34. As the Call for Evidence begins, "a healthy news ecosystem is vital to our democratic society". But the government's approach to media policy does not reflect the absolutely crucial role of media in our society. Governments have been too focused on smoothing the way for dominant media markets and approaching the creative industries as revenue generators, rather than considering the needs of the public and of society. The Media Bill does very little to bring about real change. More thoroughgoing and informed change will be needed, since the trends we are witnessing will not reverse without significant intervention and the rapid development of AI may change the media landscape even more radically. We would join with the Media Reform Coalition in calling for a Public Commission on Media and Democracy to give these issues the attention they deserve.
35. Legislation should not be focussed on protecting the legacy media from the monopoly power of digital platforms. So-called 'link tax' or 'bargaining code' approaches will only create a commercial disincentive for tech platforms to surface factual information and have a chilling effect on public discussion of news coverage (though a different form of hypothecated tax on tech platforms, if distributed properly, could provide much needed funds to genuinely public interest news organisations). Rather, legislative changes should focus on breaking monopolies and walled gardens, while supporting new democratic approaches to public interest media at the national and local levels.

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