

BBC—written evidence (FON0059)

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

1. Summary

The BBC welcomes the chance to submit evidence to this timely inquiry considering the future of news.

The BBC has a social purpose that is integral to communities across the UK and to global audiences. As the number one most trusted news brand in the UK, the US and the rest of the world, and with BBC News journalists and supporting staff in 73 cities across 59 countries, the BBC plays a vital role in providing impartial, independent and trusted content the world over, across 43 languages reaching 447 million people weekly.

Trusted, impartial news and the journalism that supports it, is the bedrock of democracy. Its role is to keep people informed and enable them to participate in civic life. This remains more important than ever in the digital age.

But the latest World Press Freedom Index shows that journalism is completely or partially blocked in over 70% of the 180 countries it ranks, and the situation is ranked as “very serious” in a record 31 countries. While only around 20% of people now live in what are considered to be free countries, a proportion that’s halved in the past decade.

Meanwhile the growth of digital platforms has radically reshaped the media ecosystem. Yet Ofcom’s 2022 study revealed 30% of UK adults who go online (14.5 million) are unsure about, or don’t even consider, the truthfulness of online information. A further 6% – around one in every 20 internet users – believe everything they see online¹.

And all this comes at a time when traditional news providers face challenges of trust.

News organisations across the board are having to adapt to an evolving market and changing audience habits.

Almost eight in 10 UK adults (16+) consume BBC News services on average per week – double the next nearest provider and we are already reaching 1 in 3 UK adults on average per week with BBC News Online.

But we very much understand that the trust that brings people to BBC services is getting harder to earn.

The BBC is responding in a number of ways: maintaining our absolute commitment to impartial and trusted news; tackling misinformation and disinformation; working to make sure we reach everyone; listening to our audiences and modernising our operations to meet their demands and needs.

¹

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2022/one-in-three-internet-users-fail-to-question-misinformation>

2. Trusted Is Earned

The BBC is overwhelmingly seen to be the most trusted source of news for people across UK and the most trusted news provider in the world. While in the BBC's Mid Term Review, the Government concluded "*...there is clear evidence that adherence to impartiality and editorial standards is now at the heart of the BBC's priorities*"². This follows the Director General's 10 Point Plan to ensure high standards of impartiality across BBC content, announced in 2021³ with an update provided in 2022⁴.

We recognise the need to do more to prove we are worthy of audiences' trust and convince them of the BBC's record for and commitment to impartiality. This especially crucial when we consider the acceleration of Artificial Intelligence (particularly Generative AI) and the impact of disinformation which counters all the good journalistic work being done. Audiences are constantly bombarded.

Transparency is big part of the solution to maintaining and further building trust. We are proud that the BBC's journalism is of the highest standard but we need to consider how it is being delivered. The BBC's Editorial Guidelines⁵ anchor our journalism but we want to pull back the curtain and show people our working, how we check and double check, how we use multiple sources, eye witnesses and technology – to help them understand why they can trust what they are seeing, hearing and reading. Accuracy is essential ahead of any other priority.

The BBC's goal is to be a global leader in radically transparent journalism. We have been actively working to understand what audiences need from BBC News to ensure we are trusted, relevant and useful. Research has indicated the power of transparency in being both engaging for the audience, as well as having the potential to build trust. We have used this insight to create our BBC News mission statement:

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/bbc-mid-term-review-2024/summary-of-the-bbc-mid-term-review-2024#list-of-the-mtrs-conclusions-and-recommendations>

³ <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/reports/impartiality-and-editorial-standards-action-plan.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/2022/bbc-delivers-progress-on-impartiality-plan>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/>

What the audience want	TRUST IS EARNED
CLARITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In an increasingly chaotic and confusing world, people need clarity • For over a hundred years this has been our mission - across the UK and around the world • And we've heard our audiences - now they need us to go further • Working harder every single day to separate fact from fake • Cutting through the noise with information they can trust, to make up their own minds
COURAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We understand that our job is to hold power to account • So, we dedicate ourselves to the fearless pursuit of truth • And because we know it matters to our audiences, we will investigate wrongdoing with courage • Even when it takes us to hostile - and sometimes dangerous - places
FAIRNESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People value fairness - and so do we • We passionately believe in freedom of speech and will champion debate • We're here to reflect the breadth of public opinion - not to judge it • We're independent of Government and not driven by profit • Free from influence and here to serve you
RESPECT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our service is to the public. We work for you • We strive to be of value to all our audiences - to be useful and used • To earn our place in your daily life • We are committed to listening, respecting and responding so we can shape our work around your needs • And we know that means reporting not just on the problems, but also what we can all do to fix them
TRANSPARENCY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • And amid so much distortion and disinformation, people need evidence • Not just what we know but how we know it - and what we don't know • So, we'll be more transparent, showing you more of our work • If you know how it's made, you can trust what it says. That's what you've told us • And we will never forget that your trust is earned

We want audiences to know we are here for them; to demonstrate we are open and listening. This is a shift from telling people what they need, it is responding to what they want, where they want it. This means shifting our language and how we connect with and think about our audiences and our relationship with them.

Transparency is about demonstrating to our audiences how we know what we know. It includes how we interview people, the introductions to reports, the additional context we provide, the conversations in the news room. We lay out the journalism and what we are looking to learn and scrutinise first so audiences can understand the thinking.

Examples of this journalism include correspondent Anna Foster's lone work covering the Turkish earthquake, with only her iPhone and relying on the help of a local taxi driver. She shared her experiences with the audience so they could understand how the BBC operates and the challenges faced but also appreciate that teams are doing all they can to bring them the story.

For the documentary [Inside BBC Persian](#) the team set out how they covered the protests in Iran including verifying video. The award winning [Africa Eye](#) has pioneered the use of open source journalism to bring audiences extraordinary investigations which have made a huge impact across the continent. These include [Racism for Sale which revealed how African children](#) are being exploited to make personalised videos, including racist content, for sale on Chinese social media. By combining open-source analysis, traditional reporting and undercover journalism, the team tracked down and confronted one prolific producer who used very young children from rural Malawi to make and sell thousands of videos.

The BBC's Analysis Editor Ros Atkins and his now famous explainers champions 'assertive impartiality'. This means taking audiences in granular detail through every piece of the research and journalism to reach the conclusion so people can see how and why we got there. Importantly it is about taking people with us.

3. Tackling Misinformation and Disinformation

A central part of tackling misinformation and battling disinformation is trust. As mentioned, if people in the UK - and internationally through our international services such as the BBC World Service - can understand how our journalism is put together they may be more inclined to accept what we share. While they may not like what they hear or agree with it, they know the facts behind the story stand up.

Currently 45% of UK adults would turn to BBC for news they trust the most (more than any other broadcaster - e.g the Guardian, ITV News and Sky News all on 6%) and 62% of UK adults think the BBC is effective at providing news and current affairs that is accurate. And when asked which one source they are most likely to turn to for accurate news, the BBC was significantly ahead - 47% of UK adults named the BBC . The next nearest provider is Sky News at 8%.⁶

⁶ BBC Annual Report 2022-23

Indeed recent research by More in Common looking at the Israel Gaza conflict showed the highest proportion of people in Britain sees the BBC as neutral (36%). Almost equal numbers (15% and 17%, respectively) said the BBC is either pro-Palestinian or pro Israeli.⁷ And, as shown by a recent FT / YouGov survey, in the BBC the UK has a single source of news consumed and trusted by most people , regardless of their politics⁸.

While all these figures are heartening and support the BBC's role as an anchor voice providing impartial information, it means we have to work harder to ensure audiences understand and know they can trust what we deliver.

BBC Verify

We also act to counter misinformation and disinformation where audiences are seeking clarity.

BBC Verify, launched in May 2023, brought together and enhanced our existing investigative journalism teams including those in the World Service, BBC Monitoring, Data and Analysis, Reality Check and the User Generated Content (UGC) team. The clearly identifiable branded service also has a physical area in the BBC newsroom in London, from which its experts regularly appear across BBC News content, including on the BBC News website live pages, radio and the BBC News channel.

BBC Verify are tasked with fact-checking, verifying video, countering disinformation, analysing data and explaining complex stories in the pursuit of truth. They work to pull back the curtain on our journalism to show audiences the incredible hard work going on behind the scenes at BBC News to check and verify the information we share with our audiences.

One example saw BBC Verify working jointly with BBC Arabic and the World Service on an [investigation](#) into how Hamas built a force to attack Israel. The collated evidence shows how Hamas brought together Gaza's factions and carried out joint drills which closely resembled the tactics used on 7 October. BBC teams delved into open source channels for research and found that Hamas were using them to post updates across social media as early as 2020.

The team have also tackled Russian disinformation, including an [investigation into a Russian propaganda campaign](#) involving fake accounts on TikTok and how pro-Russian propaganda [influenced a US debate on Ukraine aid](#).

The BBC's disinformation correspondent Mariana Spring sits within BBC Verify. Her work includes investigating the UK conspiracy theory movement for a podcast series called [Marianna in Conspiracy land](#).

We are planning to expand the team this year recruiting three BBC Verify correspondents focussed on open source journalism, on fact checking and policy analysis and on AI.

⁷ More In Common, December 2023: [More than Choosing Sides \(moreincommon.org.uk\)](https://www.moreincommon.org.uk)

⁸ YouGov / Financial Times <https://www.ft.com/content/a2050877-124a-472d-925a-fc794737d814>

Beyond Verify we are creating BBC News Investigations which will include two new Investigations Correspondents, a Financial Investigations Correspondent and a Senior Investigative Journalist.

4. Reaching and Reflecting all Audiences

The BBC is committed to serving all audiences. Under the unique way the BBC is funded everybody pays so everyone has access. But we recognise we reach some audiences more than others and certain groups may not feel that BBC News reflects their lives. Targeting audiences who currently receive less value than others as been a particular focus as well as thinking about those people who may be actively avoiding news.

We have been looking at how our content can be useful to these groups, that they feel we are alongside them and are tackling the stories that matter to them. This has been particularly salient with our coverage of the cost of living crisis. Under the umbrella of 'Tackling it together', we have our Cost of Living correspondent Colletta Smith as well as a cost of living tab featuring prominently on the website. Explainers providing practical support have been particularly appealing to less affluent audiences. We are also appointing correspondents and reporters to specifically cover housing and employment.

While the BBC reaches more adults from low socio-economic groups than any other media organisation and is the most trusted news provider in the UK, to reflect audiences we understand the need to cover the stories that are of most importance to them, reporting on issues that impact their lives and their concerns.

For BBC Breakfast, last year 48% of the weekly audience was C2DE, rising to 49% so far this year. This is the equivalent of almost 4million people.

The figures for the 6.30pm bulletin highlights people's appetite for news about where they live. It remains the UK's biggest news show with an average audience of 3.8million adults in 2022 and regularly features as the most watched TV programme across all networks.

To strengthen our commitment to reflecting the audiences we serve and to move closer to our audiences, BBC News has made major changes as part of the pan BBC Across the UK programme⁹ including locating half of our UK story teams away from London, including:

- Birmingham – Data news unit; Newsbeat
- Salford - Business team for Radio output
- Leeds - Learning and Identity
- Cardiff - Climate and Science
- Glasgow – Tech

⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/across-the-uk>

We have also increased the amount of network news programming anchored away from London – including presentation of the Today programme, PM and Newsnight from locations across the UK. BBC News at One will relocate to Salford, where it will join BBC Breakfast, which has been presented from there since 2012. The new BBC News UK editor post will be also be based outside London.

We also need to think about the content and how we deliver it, with a focus on allowing the audience to lead us. An example is the Britain in a Box initiative which launched on Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg. A work in progress, it allows panels of viewers from across the UK and different walks of life to air their thoughts on the topics that matter to them.

Thinking beyond linear viewing, audiences increasingly stream video in all formats and genres on their mobile phones and smart TVs alike. The BBC is uniquely positioned to offer curated, high-quality journalism, rooted in reality, based on the values of impartiality, accuracy and transparency. From our last few years' experimentation, we can see the audience choose journalism when it is promoted, curated and published in a streaming-first way. Therefore we are looking at enhancing the news offer on BBC iPlayer that will make news central to the iPlayer experience, easy to discover, navigate and use when and how it suits the streaming audiences.

Currently, most audiences under 25 do not come to the BBC first for their news. The Reuters Digital News report has been tracking the growing trend towards news consumption on social platforms for some time. We therefore have adopted a strategy of targeting under 25s in the UK off-platform in the non-news spaces they inhabit such as TikTok and Instagram with high-quality, trusted and attributed news content. We are also undertaking pilots looking at podcast products, streaming and live page engagement to see what works most effectively for the audience. The Reliable Sauce podcast pilot is one example. Presented and co-produced by the BBC News social team, it is a collaboration with BBC Sounds.

Newsletters are also a powerful tool to engage audiences and drive habit. In BBC News we have largely relied on users to come to us to find the content they seek. Newsletters will play an important role in amplifying our journalism, by delivering our best content directly to users. They can also help increase trust in BBC News, giving our experts and talent a space to connect more directly with users and explain some of their workings. □ We have recently launched a newsletter from Laura Kuenssberg, complementing her work on Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg, Newscast and BBC News online and are aiming to launch a number of new newsletters this year on subjects ranging from the environment / climate issues, decoding tech to the US election.

5. AI, Tech Platforms and Regulation

Innovation has always been at the heart of the BBC, from the very first radio broadcasts in 1922 to colour television in the 1960s to the rapid development of our online and mobile services over the last 25 years. AI is no different: the BBC already has strong AI capabilities in areas such as data science, machine learning, and computer vision, built up over 10+ years.

The emergence of a new wave of AI, generative AI, could impact almost every field of human activity. As we [set out at the end of last year](#), we believe that gen AI could provide a significant opportunity for the BBC to deepen and amplify our mission, enabling us to deliver more value to audiences and society – from production workflows to our back office. We are undertaking a number of projects that explore the use of generative AI in both what we make and how we work – taking a targeted approach in order to understand the opportunities and the risks.

When it comes to our own use of generative AI, we are clear that it will be underpinned by three principles:

1. We will always act in the best interests of the public, exploring how we can harness generative AI to strengthen our public mission and deliver greater value to audiences, while seeking to mitigate the challenges it may create.
2. We will always prioritise talent and creativity, recognising that no technology can replicate or replace human creativity.
3. We will be open and transparent, with trust as the foundation of the BBC's relationship with audiences. We will be transparent and clear with audiences when gen AI output features in our content and services, and human oversight will remain an important step in any publication of generative AI content.

Generative AI models and services could have a significant impact on the media and creative sectors. The protection of IP rights is crucial to thriving media and creative sectors. The BBC and other public service broadcasters make a huge volume of content available through both broadcast and online platforms for example on the BBC's website, the BBC's TV and radio channels, BBC iPlayer and BBC Sounds.

Generative AI models are trained on huge amounts of data and content,¹⁰ and we believe that scraping of data and content without permission is widespread among gen AI developers.

Publishers should have control over how the content they have invested in is accessed and used when it comes to generative AI. As the BBC has set out previously, we want to agree a more structured and sustainable approach with technology companies when it comes to using our data, in a way that gives Licence Fee payers fair value.

The starting point for this should be transparency. We do not currently know what content is being used to train generative AI models, or how. We believe that developers should provide information such as what content has been used to train a generative AI model and the application of any copyright exceptions.

¹⁰ *The Washington Post*, "Inside the secret list of websites that make AI like ChatGPT sound smart" (2023).

Ofcom research as part of its media plurality workstream suggests that people do not understand how online news is served to them and are not clear about the extent of the influence of online intermediaries on the news they see.¹¹ The same is true of AI generated outputs. Many of the challenges generative AI outputs pose are not new, but are iterations on existing issues – but it's clear that audience and news publisher needs are not being met.

Generative AI could lead to a shift in how information is provided to and consumed by users, with potential negative impacts on our information ecosystem, accurate news provision and the business models of publishers. For example, "answer" engines, that amalgamate information from different sources rather than search engines that provide a selection of links to publishers, risk reducing the volume of traffic that flows to publisher websites.

In particular, we are concerned about how publisher content is displayed within gen AI services in addition to how that content has been acquired. For example:

- News publisher content can be taken out of context or incorrectly summarised, and generated output can include errors and inaccuracies.¹²
- Generative AI services frequently do not adequately attribute content to news providers.
- Generative AI services frequently do not give weight to high quality news sources in a way consumers would expect, and it is unclear why certain sources have been prioritised.
- Links back to owned and operated sites - sources can be incorrect and links back to publisher websites incorrect or hidden.
- And, as has been widely documented, generative AI is prone to "hallucinate" or make things up.¹³

Generative AI risks exacerbating the existing challenges around disinformation, with the potential for false stories, images, and even videos to proliferate online (whether deliberately or not). Generative AI is also likely to turbocharge the quality and ubiquity of fake content which could now be made by anyone at pace, even if they have very little technical skill.

5.2. Regulation and Interventions

There are a range of interventions, that can help improve the news ecosystem. These include areas such as content regulation and support for Public Service Broadcasting, which contribute to a well-resourced, plural media market. Any interventions should support consumer literacy and choice.

¹¹ Ofcom Media Plurality and Online News discussion document, 2022.

¹² Reuters Institute, "ChatGPT is now online: here's a look at how it browses and reports the latest news" (2023).

¹³ For example, see <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20181204-why-we-should-worry-when-machines-hallucinate>.

In relation to generative AI, the UK's approach to regulation must be sufficiently flexible and futureproof to address emerging challenges, including those we have highlighted above. Regulators may need new powers to implement and enforce rules on AI, in order to support consumer information and confidence.

Intellectual property will be key to supporting a vibrant UK ecosystem for tech, digital and the creative industries. Unless the right balance is struck between the legitimate interests of rightsholders and supporting the development of technologies such as generative AI.

We welcome the Digital Markets Unit and new digital competition regime, and believe that it provides a good route for resolving some of the issues Generative AI raises. We also welcome the Online Safety Act, which we think is a positive step forward in improving the online information ecosystem.

In addition the BBC participates in industry initiatives e.g. Project Origin, exploring how to develop signals that can be tied to media content to allow audiences to understand where content has come from and any changes made to it since it was originally released, and the Content for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA), an open standards body developing a technical specification for this. We are not looking to place a value judgment on that content, instead putting trust in the hands of users. We believe there is an important role for regulators to support the development/uptake of content provenance standards like C2PA (for example through codes of practice).

Looking ahead, the proposed Media Bill seeks to update the framework for TV and radio content and services to safeguard audiences' access to distinctive, high-quality, British content. We welcome the bill, but regarding access to PSB content including news and current affairs, we feel more could be done. For example protecting familiar and popular routes via which people access content, such as giving prominence for the electronic programme guide and ensuring that PSBs receive "significant" rather than "appropriate" prominence as recommended by the CMS Select Committee.

Regardless, being clear with Ofcom about the scope of their powers, and the objectives Parliament wishes to see, and then Ofcom being robust in implementing this new regime, will be critical to its effectiveness.

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