

Edward Iliffe, Chief Executive Officer, Iliffe Media—written evidence (FOJ0024)

Select Committee on Communications and Digital: Inquiry into the Future of Journalism

The following is in response to the call for evidence on the value of Journalism on behalf of Iliffe Media.

My name is Edward Iliffe the owner of Iliffe Media.

Iliffe Media comprises around 38 local newspapers with associated websites, radio stations and paid for App. They include the oldest UK newspapers, The Stamford Mercury and Kentish Gazette as well as two of the newest the Cambridge Independent and Bishops Stortford Independent. These titles are all printed at Iliffe Print based in Cambridge. The business has a half share in Highland News and Media with 17 local papers covering the North of Scotland and a half share in the Newbury Weekly News. In March 2020 there were over 9 million unique readers and a paid for circulation of around 150,000. The overall audience is now larger than ever. However, advertising has moved more online and away from print. The suppliers of this market are mostly off shore businesses taking no responsibility for the content.

The business is owned by the Iliffe family who have been in publishing since 1891 and have operated and owned many newspapers over this period. It is operated along geographical lines utilising centralised production where possible but enabling local journalists to run and control the news agendas. The policy is local only with very limited generic content. The intention is to be positive, constructive and a part of the local community in which we serve. We strongly believe that there is a long term future for local trusted news brands and for this reason welcome the opportunity to share our thoughts and be part of the debate initiated by this call for evidence. The financial viability going forwards will be predicated on us improving our Trust and being able to operate on a level playing field.

How should journalism be defined and what is its value to society? What is the difference between "citizen journalism" and other forms of journalism?

Citizen journalism is a term that has evolved over its relatively recent lifespan. Originally it simply meant readers who were content to submit their own material for publication. In truth, this was not a new concept - readers have always sent in material to newspapers. The only difference was the rise in social media made it easier than ever for people to contribute.

The term in 2020 can now be more broadly defined as somebody regularly generating content - be that on a hyperlocal website or blog - without being attached to a 'traditional' publisher.

This type of citizen journalist often has a very clear political point of view or strong feelings on a sole issue. This differs from a traditional journalist - at least at local and regional level - who will attempt to convey all sides of a story, even if campaigning on a particular issue.

How have digital technologies changed the consumption of journalism?

New technologies have enabled journalism to be circulated in a much more immediate way and have allowed the content to be meshed with more interactive media. To some this may lead to a faster adoption of an untruth because it looks so believable. Digital technologies have also created, in some instances, echo chambers where people seek out publications that express only the views with which they agree. In other instances, consumption has changed as readers may be less loyal to one particular brand, especially if their first encounter with an article is via social media.

How can public policy improve media literacy, particularly among those who have a low level of digital literacy?

Public policy should promote an inquisitive and questioning mindset towards information and what it is trying to convey. The value of digital over analogue is not relevant as this more about accessibility. It is more important to understand the level of trust of content you are consuming. How it is regulated? Can it be trusted? The audience needs to be questioning these points. It is incumbent on the publisher to establish and maintain its trusted audience within the regulated framework in which it operates.

I believe if asked the public believe that all content contained on social media platforms conforms to the same level of legal scrutiny that is published by traditional publishers. This is not the case.

How have digital technologies changed the production of journalism?

Digital technologies have allowed us as an organisation to focus more on the story as we automate many elements of the production process. So whilst overall staffing numbers have reduced frontline reporting remains the core objective. The issue is that the revenues are now more broadly controlled by those that control the means of distribution online. These platforms do not currently have to conform to any publishing standards. It is no longer a level playing field.

On a positive we have greater access to data and far more insight into what our readers want to consume. This is powerful information but must be used sparingly and carefully to avoid narrowing the scope of our output and ignoring stories which have huge societal value which gain a valued audience.

Do journalists have access to the training necessary to adapt to the digital world?

New technologies should not undermine or change the pure process of journalism as skills for researching and telling a story. The choice of which medium to output the content will clearly require knowledge of how but not what.

Trainee reporters joining us from university courses will, without fail, be adept at digital storytelling. It is important they also learn the basics - engaging with a community and talking to people in real life situations.

What qualifications do professional journalists need? How could public policy better support non-degree routes into journalism?

Qualifications are helpful but as with any industry not mandatory at entry level. At Iliffe Media we encourage and take on apprentices, many of whom are now in senior managerial positions. Our apprentice courses are overseen by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) . We also expect our trainee journalists to sit NCTJ

'final' exams, so we are confident they are knowledgeable about the machinery of local government, expert in the Editors' Code and aware of all legal requirements.

We have a very good success rate with our apprenticeship schemes and would simply suggest these are promoted wherever possible as a valid alternative to further education.

What are the main challenges for freelance journalists? How could public policy better support them?

Freelance journalism is an individual choice. It provides greater freedom, with the trade off being a higher degree of uncertainty of employment.

Why is journalism profession not more representative of the population? How could this be addressed?

Where is the evidence that journalism is not representative of the population? Within the online world one would argue that every possible idea is being debated by someone somewhere. Even within the printed world there is nothing to stop a publication starting.

It has oft been stated that journalism excludes those from working class or ethnically-diverse backgrounds. As our apprenticeship schemes have demonstrated, this is not the case for and need not be the case for others. All publications should aspire to reflect the communities they serve.

Why has trust in journalism declined? How could it be improved? How can journalists better understand and convey the concerns and priorities of people who do not live in London or other metropolitan hubs?

Trust in journalism has declined but equally many other professions have experienced similar declines. Local newsbrands are thought to be more trusted and remain with high trust ratings. The phone hacking scandal was poorly resolved as far as the public were concerned and took too long to hold people to account. The BBC is also often accused of bias and there is little appetite for its annual fee. News has tended to be sensationalised and more about celebrity than quality fact finding and sharing of positive news and ideas for the general good. The local news brands do represent the priorities of those outside the metropolitan and London areas.

How can innovation and collaboration help news providers of all types to maintain sustainable business models and adapt what they produce to audience demand? What lessons can be learnt from successful innovations, including in other countries?

Areas for innovation are as follows:

1. Regulate the social media platforms so that they adhere to the same high standards that the established industry follows. There have been various debates on this with Australia most recently indicating that regulation will be enforced in light of the Pandemic. The details have still to be released.
2. Utilise technology to improve dissemination of primary data. For example, this would work well with the Courts where transcripts could be made available to news desks. The closing down of many regional and local court rooms has made it too expensive to cover local legal cases because the distances to travel have become too great.

Are there any other ways in which public policy could better support journalists and news organisations, now and in the future? Are there examples from other countries from which the Government could learn?

Public policy could include areas within education that encourage the young to be inquisitive and understand information sources so that they can be better informed. Educate the impact of fake news.

In summary the news industry is broadly and should remain independent of the state. However, the state has over many years developed regulations that have defined its legal status within civil society. The costs to the industry in maintaining its responsibilities and liabilities in this regard are high. There is no intention of requesting that these be diluted. However, for these high standards to be maintained and for the industry to remain accountable others that enter into the world of publishing should adhere to the same set of rules otherwise there will two outcomes 1, existing news organisations will cease to exist and or 2, existing organisations will develop similar unregulated platforms.

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