

The Society of Editors—written evidence (PSB0030)

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

Introduction

The Society of Editors welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's Inquiry into The Future of Journalism. As an organisation that represents members in all sectors of the media, including broadcasting and new media, it is heartening that another sector of the government has recognised the importance of supporting the role of journalism in the UK.

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, the work of the mainstream media in keeping the public informed with timely news and updates has been [widely recognised across government as a vital service](#). The Society has welcomed the designation of all journalists in the UK as key workers and we have welcomed the government's recognition of the challenges facing the UK media at the time in respect of falling advertising revenues and disruption to distribution mechanisms. The Society will be responding in due course to the [Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's \(DCMS\) inquiry into the impact of Covid-19](#) on the media sector and I know that the News Media Association (NMA) has called on the government, on behalf of the media, for further support including an extension to the 100% business rates holiday for news publishers and a share of public information campaign advertising for the regional press. The work of the mainstream media during this time of national crisis has never been more important and the Society strongly believes that the measures outlined above are essential to ensure the survival of struggling print titles.

The Covid-19 crisis has laid bare the dangers and reach of misinformation available on social media platforms. In respect of the current public health emergency, the scope of misinformation around the novel coronavirus circulating on the likes of Facebook, Twitter and Youtube has been deeply concerning. The Society [warned on 5 March that conspiracy theories and false information were circulating online](#) and we have cautiously welcomed the attempts across government to tackle this issue.

The Society has acknowledged the call by the [DCMS sub-committee on online harms and disinformation for members of the public to flag up examples of disinformation online](#) and we agree with the need for further discussions with social media companies on what can be done to tackle deliberate attempts to present false narratives about COVID-19. We are also aware that DCMS continues to work alongside a new Whitehall unit to tackle fake news and this work will continue.

The calling out of fake news and disinformation regarding the Covid-19 crisis on social media is important. However, the Society is cautious of calls, such as those made by [former committee chairman Damian Collins MP, to criminalise misinformation online](#). There are legitimate concerns in taking too draconian steps to try and prevent the spread of misinformation during this time.

We must be careful that in any attempt to suppress misinformation, rumour and speculation that the digital platform providers are not backed into a corner where they take too broad an approach to removing or preventing the spread of false information. We do not want genuine news being suppressed by algorithms created in haste to trawl the net removing poorly identified content.

The best method of combating false information and fake news is to shout-out and debunk such examples and to urge the public to rely on the mainstream media which is founded on well researched and edited, fact-based content.

The importance of the mainstream media in supplying the public with accurate and fact-based content is at the forefront of the [Society's Campaign for Real News launched in February 2020](#). The raison d'être of the campaign is to support both the mainstream media and emerging new media that both recognise high standards of editorial excellence, in the battle to combat fake news and disinformation.

The media here in the UK continue to adhere to high editorial standards through both the Editors' Code of Practice and the Ofcom Code which is voluntarily adhered to by the vast majority of the UK print and broadcast media. The Society has previously outlined our concerns that the high standards promoted by the UK media have been undermined by the rise of individuals and organisations that are choosing to act as their own publishers without care for established standards of journalistic standards – particularly in respect of accuracy and transparency.

While social media has allowed news organisations to reach larger audiences than ever before, it has also provided a platform for fake news and disinformation to flourish. As outlined above, the Covid-19 crisis has laid bare these problems and we welcome the government's efforts in this area. In the same way, however, the ability of anyone to now act as their own publisher and disseminate information via their own social media channels has resulted in the traditional role of the media being circumvented in favour of some public bodies choosing to publish their often one-sided 'news' without scrutiny or care for balance and context. Such actions, alongside being a massive waste of public money and resources, grossly undermines the role of a free press in holding power to account.

The Society calls on your committee to look at what more can be done to support the role of journalists in the UK alongside calling on social media companies to work harder to remove fake news and disinformation from their platforms – rightly so, current efforts are focused on misinformation surrounding Covid-19 but inaccuracies and fake news has been available unchecked on social media platforms long before the onset of the current public health emergency.

We would also welcome your thoughts on whether the continued choice by some political parties, local councils and police press offices to compete with the mainstream media in respect of producing newspapers, magazines and publishing 'news' on their social media channels in place of speaking to journalists is an appropriate use of public funds.

Our response

The future of journalism and news information by trusted media platforms is at the forefront of the Society's Campaign for Real News which is mentioned above.

Alongside turning a spotlight on attacks on press freedom, particularly through the use of fake newspapers and news sites and the rise of unbalanced, partisan non-media operations, the Society's campaign has grown from the continued threat to the future of trusted journalism that is posed by those that continue to publish fake or distorted news without care for editorial standards. As detailed in our introduction, the current Covid-19 crisis has laid bare the problems of misinformation circulating online.

The Society recognises that the traditional means and platforms for reporting and consuming news has changed dramatically in recent years. We now recognise news as

available, at the touch of a button, 24/7. The traditional news platforms such as newspapers, television and radio are still the most trusted brands, but news is now widely recognised as consumed, by many, primarily online through news websites and social media channels.

While social media has undoubtedly helped UK media gain traction around the world and given individuals a greater freedom to publish news and analysis themselves promoting diversity and plurality of voices, we have also seen a number of downsides. Social media channels continue to provide a platform for providers of fake or distorted news published without care for editorial standards. Despite this, companies such as Google and Facebook continue to absorb the lion's share of online advertising revenues while relying on the content of mainstream media outlets to feed discussion on their platforms. While the Society recognises that social media companies are taking steps to tackle the spread of misinformation online and [support struggling news titles during the challenges posed by Covid-19](#) more needs to be done to tackle this issue moving forward.

For the purposes of your inquiry, the Society would like to focus the breadth of our response on the ongoing threat to news publishers by the rise of disinformation and fake news on various platforms by both public bodies and social media companies.

Fake news is not a new phenomenon but it is one that needs tackling. In recent years we have seen a rise in the amount and reach of disinformation on social channels.

The current crisis surrounding Covid-19 has laid bare to us the dangers that the spread of misinformation can pose. Following reports in The Guardian early in March that a post on Twitter wrongly claiming that antibacterial hand sanitiser is useless against the virus racked up a quarter of a million likes and almost 100,000 retweets before it was deleted, the Society also [warned that social media platforms should not be considered accurate sources of news information on the virus](#). Since then we have seen conspiracy theories linking the novel coronavirus to the role of 5G run rampant and, as a result, a number of telephone masts have been vandalised across the country and YouTube has now confirmed that it will remove all 5G conspiracy theories around the virus from its platform.

The Society has supported the various government initiatives to tackle the issue of misinformation on social media platforms. This has included a [Whitehall unit to identify disinformation](#), the launch of an inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 by the DCMS select committee and call by the same committee to flag up examples of misinformation available online. We are supportive of government attempts to discuss this issue with social media companies and to hold them to account. That said and as outlined in our introduction, we remain cautious of calls, such as those made by former committee chairman Damian Collins MP, to look to criminalise disinformation online. The public must only look to the precedent set by Hungary [which the Society has highlighted](#) of how the scope of such extreme measures during a time of national crisis can be open to abuse and outlive any current health emergency. There are legitimate concerns that any decision to introduce draconian steps to try and prevent the spread of misinformation during this time could cause serious issues and implications for free speech further down the line.

The best method of combating false information and fake news is to promote the work of the mainstream media and new media that adhere to high editorial standards and to shout-out and debunk false examples online and urge the public to rely on the mainstream media which is founded on well researched and edited, fact-based content.

At a time when the public is rightly concerned over this pandemic, the provision, distribution and reputation of true, fact-based, balanced news and information provision by the mainstream media and qualified journalists has never been so important.

There are particular areas where the SoE believes is in agreement with the industry as a whole that government action is imperative during the current Covid-19 crisis.

These are:

- Government adspend: Government to use trusted news channels as part of their ongoing public information advertising campaign to ensure important messages are communicated to readers.
- Adblocking: Help to bring about a swift end to the practice of keyword blocking which at present is preventing ads from appearing next to Coronavirus news content online.
- Business rates holiday: Extend 100% business rates holiday offered to retail, hospitality and leisure businesses to news providers.
- Delay employer taxes: Defer employer taxes, PAYE/National Insurance contributions for news media businesses.
- VAT zero rating: Bring forward VAT exemption for e-newspapers and back-date to 1 January 2020, with additional targeted tax relief for local publishers who will not benefit from VAT exemption in the next 2-3 years.
- Cash grants: Open up additional £25,000 grants to smaller local news providers.
- Journalist support package: Introduce a direct per capita payment to companies currently employing news journalists.

Operational:

- Key workers status: Guarantee that news media providers will be treated as an 'essential service' in the event of further movement restrictions, including keeping journalists, publishers, retailers, paperboys and girls and wholesale operating and able to deliver papers.
- Government promotion of reliable news sources: To counter the proliferation of disinformation online, government to encourage the public to rely on trusted news brands (print and online) rather than social media and less reliable online sources for important news and information about the crisis.
- Newspaper availability in stores: Mandate major supermarkets to continue to carry newspapers at current levels as an essential item.
- News site traffic: Prioritise news website traffic through ISPs should the internet become congested.
- Supply chain: Government to step in to ensure the wholesale distribution network stays in place.

Outside of the current Covid-19 crisis and to ensure the future of journalism and the vital role that journalists play, government officials and public bodies must play their part in supporting the vital role of the news media rather than undermining it. Alongside well-documented access issues at both a central and local level, we are also seeing an

increase in political parties and public bodies choosing to circumnavigate the mainstream media in favour of acting as their own publisher. This is a worrying trend.

In many cases, the 'news' published by such platforms – party political newspapers, local councils, police press offices and fake fact-checking sites – are unbalanced and have not been scrutinised by trained journalists before publication.

The Society strongly believes that political parties, local councils and police press offices should not be in competition with the mainstream media. It is the job of trained journalists to scrutinise those in power on behalf of the public and, increasingly, we are hearing reports that the public is at risk of being denied information of legitimate public interest by officials who wish to control what is reported and by whom. Such actions, alongside often being a massive waste of public money and resources, grossly undermines the role of a free press in holding power to account. All of these issues continue to restrict the ability of legitimate news platforms to report, and be heard, by the public.

The committed focus of your inquiry on the importance of diversity in the newsroom mirrors the work of the Society in this area. We believe strongly that it is of vital importance for media to reflect the communities that are being served and this will only enhance trust in the sector.

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