

Independent Press Standards Organisation—written evidence (FOJ0036)

Response to the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee's Inquiry into Future of Journalism

1. About IPSO

- 1.1 The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) is the independent regulator of most of the UK's newspaper and magazine industry. We regulate over 1,500 print and 1,100 online titles, comprising 95% of national daily newspapers (by circulation) and the majority of local and regional newspapers, including their online versions. We also regulate an increasing number of online-only hyperlocal publishers.
- 1.2 IPSO's framework is one of voluntary independent self-regulation underpinned by legally enforceable contractual agreements with our regulated entities. It is not obligatory for publishers to join IPSO but those that have done so set themselves apart by choosing to be independently regulated and held accountable to an agreed set of standards, the Editors' Code of Practice (the Code). Material produced by journalists for IPSO-regulated publishers must comply with the Code, and it also covers how journalists should behave during the newsgathering process.
- 1.3 IPSO investigates complaints about printed and online material that may breach the Code and can order newspapers and magazines to publish corrections or long-form rulings if the Code has been breached. We monitor standards and require member newspapers and magazines to submit an annual transparency statement. We can investigate standards failings and can fine publishers up to £1 million in cases where they are particularly serious and systemic. We provide advice and guidance to editors and journalists and to the public. We also run a compulsory arbitration scheme where members of the public can make low cost legal claims against participating publishers, a 24-hour helpline for people who are concerned about press intrusion, and a whistleblowing hotline for journalists. More information about our work can be found at www.ipso.co.uk

2. About our response

- 2.1 We draw on our experience as an independent self-regulator of newspapers and magazines, so this response covers the consultation questions most pertinent to our role. We of course recognise that journalism is a diverse industry, also including broadcast, but given our expertise, this response is focused primarily on journalism in newspapers and magazines.
- 2.2 Our mission is to uphold the highest professional standards in the UK press and we support journalists and editors to do this in a number of ways, including: holding publications to account by enforcing the Editors' Code; providing guidance to editors and journalists on the application of the Code, particularly around reporting of challenging topics; and undertaking training on how the Code works for journalists and editors.
- 2.3 We regularly engage with the industry, including editors, senior managers, journalists and other professionals, giving us a broad and varied understanding of many forms of journalism.

- 3. Question 1: How should journalism be defined and what is its value to society? What is the difference between 'citizen journalism' and other forms of journalism?**
- 3.1 The free flow of information is critical for a free society, and journalism plays an essential role in that. It serves the public interest by entertaining, informing, challenging, scrutinising and campaigning.
- 3.2 The existence of varied and diverse journalism, catering to differing views, tastes, opinions and perspectives, and using different media, ensures that consumers have access to the content of their choice suited to their interests, beliefs and worldview.
- 3.3 Journalism's value to society is not just in informative news and its quality should not be defined by the tastes of a particular section of society. Nor should it be viewed through the simplistic prism of what is considered 'highbrow' or 'low-brow'. Discussion around "quality" journalism is subjective and influenced by individuals' own beliefs and perspectives. Quality in newspapers and magazines can take many forms and is not limited to the 'quality press' or broadsheets. Tabloid newspapers, citizen journalism and online-only publications are no less important to the diversity of the wider media landscape.
- 3.4 A key differentiator between journalism and other content (including social media content) is accountability. IPSO-regulated publishers demonstrably hold their journalism to an agreed set of externally verifiable standards in the Editors' Code and if things go wrong, the public can seek redress through an independent regulator. While the Editors' Code is the most widely used regulatory code across the UK press, it is not the only set of standards used by newspaper publishers. The Guardian and The Financial Times have chosen not to be regulated and both have arranged processes with external and independent oversight to deal with complaints against them. The Financial Times uses the FT Editorial Code (which is based on the Editors' Code) and works with an independent complaints commissioner. The Guardian uses the Guardian News Media's Editorial Code and works with an independent readers' editor and an independent review panel. A relatively small number of hyperlocal and online publications have chosen to be regulated by the Independent Monitor of the Press (IMPRESS) and use their standards code
- 3.5 Digital technologies lower the cost of starting a publication, and therefore widen opportunities for people to become journalists. The concept of a "citizen journalist" is ill-defined, but IPSO now regulates a number of small hyperlocal publishers, often run by individuals who might be recognised as citizen journalists.¹ Citizen journalists are expected to adhere to the Editors' Code where the publisher is regulated by IPSO. The Code itself is broad and simple and can be followed by anyone working on any scale. There is no bar to joining IPSO, and we welcome all publications who wish to be independently regulated and held accountable.
- 3.6 Digital technologies are challenging and changing what journalism looks like. A printed newspaper now almost certainly has an online version, which may include embedded video, audio or commentary from social media. Alternatively, it may be offered through an app, podcast or video. Journalists themselves are more accessible and contactable than ever through social media, and many use Twitter in particular as a way of breaking stories, rather than traditional

¹ See <https://www.ipso.co.uk/news-press-releases/news/welcome-new-ipso-members/> for examples

channels. The media landscape is more connected, and the flow of information between journalists and consumers is more symbiotic than ever before.

- 3.7 This presents challenges for regulation, which must be responsive to this environment. IPSO regulates content both in print and online, which includes any embedded video or audio in online versions and social media accounts controlled by regulated publications. We can require remedial action to be included on social media if appropriate.
- 3.8 Digital technologies are also changing how people access news, and many people now choose to access journalism through non-traditional sources like social media, which has led to well-documented problems around disinformation. This makes regulated, accountable journalism more important than ever before.

4. Question 3: How can public policy improve media literacy, particularly among those who have a low level of digital literacy?

- 4.1 Media literacy is a crucial skill. It supports people to act as informed citizens and gives the public the skills and knowledge to understand, analyse and critique the content they are consuming and allows them to make informed decisions about how to engage with it and how to manage any potential risk.
- 4.2 All citizens should be equipped with appropriate levels of media literacy to make informed decisions about what sorts of content they would like to access. They should be able to identify and avoid harmful “fake” news² and know how to identify curated and edited content displaying high-quality journalism. Readers should have a basic understanding of how to seek redress from the regulated press when journalists do get things wrong.
- 4.3 We were pleased to see a commitment to media literacy included in the Government’s response to the Cairncross Review and also noted the work of many other organisations working to improve public media literacy in our own response to the Review.³
- 4.4 We would suggest that any approach to improve media literacy needs to include input from organisations working widely across the media landscape including the newspaper industry, internet platforms, regulators and those interested in the reporting of particular issues.
- 4.5 Effective independent regulation can support the public’s media literacy, as well as bolstering accountable journalism. In December 2017, we launched the IPSO mark, a simple visual symbol that can be used by all its publications to show their commitment to professional standards. The mark is a way for publishers to communicate to readers, both on and offline, that their journalism is regulated and distinguishes it from other content. The mark now features in most national newspapers regulated by IPSO, as well as many local newspapers and magazines.
- 4.6 Increasing the public’s understanding of journalistic practice would be beneficial for improving media literacy. There is often confusion around what journalists can and can’t do. IPSO has produced information for the public explaining the rules which journalists should follow when reporting on deaths, when taking information from social media, or when reporting on court proceedings; we have

² See DCMS Inquiry into fake news final report: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomeds/1791/1791.pdf>

³ See <https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/1570/ipso-submission-to-the-cairncross-review.pdf>

also produced information for survivors of sexual offences. In addition to these leaflets, we have also produced short videos covering the same topics and have a podcast and blog about media standards more generally. This information is designed to address misconceptions and also to empower citizens to engage with journalists and journalism more effectively.

5. A note on threats to the future of journalism

- 5.1 This consultation response has been written during the Coronavirus pandemic. In these unprecedented times, journalism is more crucial than ever but there have been a number of worrying developments which fundamentally threaten its future. Thousands of journalists have been furloughed or have lost their jobs, and a number of publications both local and national have been crippled by lack of revenue, particularly from loss of advertising revenues. We do not know what the industry or journalism will look like after this time, but it is vital that there remains a future for journalism.

6. Conclusion

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to submit this evidence to the Review and our Chairman, Lord Faulks, would be happy to appear in front of the Committee to discuss it further.

April 2020