Andy Dickinson—written evidence (FOJ0056)

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

Summary

- *This submission addresses the issues of journalism skills, training and qualifications, including the related issues of diversity and media literacy.*

- *It argues that there is a tension between training that reflects the immediate demands of industry and longer-term concerns of sustainability and diversity.*

- *It suggests that journalism degrees go some way to addressing those concerns.*

- *It argues that there is a requirement for an 'honest broker' to oversee standards and investment in training and development.*

- *It asks the committee to consider two policy interventions.*

    o *The formation of an Institute for Journalism development to act as an independent body for journalism training and development.*

    o *The inclusion of a defined journalism curriculum for secondary and further education to develop practical media literacy skills and better understanding of the importance of journalism.*

Introduction.

1. Whilst the remit of the House of Lords Select committee on the Future of journalism takes in a number of areas, this submission focusses on the issues of training and skills development. As a provider of training for journalists, I recognise the key role we have shaping the industry through our graduates. First and foremost, we do that by giving graduates the skills they need to work in a modern news environment. So, I'll briefly explore the skills demanded of graduates entering the workplace. But that process of shaping is also done through introducing a greater diversity in experiences and perspectives of the people entering the workforce. So, this submission also touches on issues of diversity and access to training and the industry. Finally, considering those factors, it suggests the formation of an arm's length body to oversee education and training development in journalism.

Digital technologies and the changes to the production of journalism.

2. In a relatively short space of time, digital technology has fundamentally changed the practice of journalism. But mainstream acceptance of new working practices is often slow and more likely to be prompted by the widespread adoption of new technologies by a mass audience rather than innovation from within the sector; when the prospective audience is deemed large enough, there is a financial incentive to invest time and resources. This responsive approach can create tensions in the newsroom where journalists often feel under pressure to quickly adopt new, often challenging, ways of working with little or no training or resources. It's equally problematic for trainers who bear the brunt of

investment in skills and equipment for what can often be of passing interest to industry.

3. In that context, it's can be challenging to identify which skills might be deemed essential for journalists. Its perhaps more useful then to identify a small number of areas which reflect the underpinning skills that I would feel are essential:

4. First would be **convergence**. Production and editorial skills that were once considered as medium specific or specialist are now becoming core skills. The use of video or audio recording for example, is no longer the exclusive domain of broadcast journalists. Journalists have to be competent and confident in a basic ability to produce audio, video, text and images and when they can be used effectively. The ubiquity of mobile devices in particular has made multimedia skills an essential requirement for most roles.

5. Related to that would be the **data skills**. Again, these would often be the reserve of specialist reporters or data scientists bought in to assist on complex projects. But the increased reliance on data in public life means that if journalists are to fulfil their role as 'watchdogs', then they need the skills to interrogate and assess data as they would any other source. This is as true for those working in local and regional settings as it is at a national level.

6. Next, I would point to **audience**. Thanks primarily to social media, the audience is much closer to the process and more engaged and often more critical. Journalists need the skills to use and manage this changing relationship with the audience effectively. Most obviously that means skills to manage and use social media platforms appropriately and safely. But it should also include the skills to actively engage communities in process of journalism. Many believe that active participation has an important role in re-building audience trust. More fundamentally, it also has a role to play in lifting the lid of the journalistic process and helping build media literacy in the communities it serves.

7. Next would be **business/process** skills. In the same way that journalists are much more engaged with the practical production process and through social media, the audience, the business and commercial side of journalism is something that is no longer the preserver of others. A number of newsrooms I have worked with now have advertising and sales staff sitting in the newsroom alongside editorial staff – something that would have once been anathema to journalists. But individual journalists will need to get to grips with how the business and editorial demands interact in a much more dynamic way to understand how content and commerce work together. This is as important for those looking working outside the established media organisations.

8. Finally, I would note the importance of **soft skills**. Some in the industry seem to have an ongoing obsession with young people's alleged inability to pick up the phone or talk to people face-to-face! [1] Curmudgeonly attitude aside, it's clear that appropriate communication skills, creative thinking are all increasingly important to encouraging diversity of ideas and innovation whilst retaining a connection with personal interaction that defines the basic reporting process.

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[1] https://www.holdthefrontpage.co.uk/2019/news/trainer-launches-new-bid-to-fight-phone-phobia-among-journalism-students/

Journalism Qualifications: Immediate needs or long-term investment.

9. University level courses now dominate journalism training in the UK with around 70 undergraduate and over 90 postgraduate journalism courses[2] currently recruiting. The scale is in part due to growth in the education sector in general. But financial pressures on journalism organisations mean that as far back as the 1970's, industry began to cut back on its own in-house training and development schemes in favour of recruiting from external courses – essentially outsourcing the cost and responsibility of training new entrants to the industry.

10. The result is that university journalism courses retain a core focus on industry readiness; students should have the skills they need to step from university into the newsroom. This is a view reinforced by industry bodies who monitor and accredit journalism courses, most notably the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ).

11. But this alignment with industry is not without its tensions. In the university sector, the notion of employability is now a fundamental part of how we are assessed as a sector. I need to make sure that I prepare graduates, with core skills, who also have the critical skills to build careers beyond their first job. That's often at odds with the short-term demands of industry. As Professor Chris Frost points out, whilst many in industry recognise the need for graduates with a different set of skills from 10 years ago, there are "few who are interested enough in them having the skills and education to cope with the skills that may be required in 25–30 years" [3]

    The balancing act between what's right long term and what industry need 'right now' is a challenge that extends to working journalists. When I talk to journalists about the challenges of learning new skills and exploring how they might work for them and their newsroom, without fail, the top obstacle cited is lack of time. The immediate demands of the newsroom trump opportunities for personal and professional development.

12. I would argue that university, despite the criticisms it faces from some in the industry, remains an essential and appropriate place for journalism training. It offers students and industry **time with purpose**. It not only offers time to hone new skills and see them in a broader industry context. It also offers the space to explore a range of critical skills and share with industry what we learn.

13. I believe it also offers **a diversity of experience**. Many universities including Manchester Metropolitan offer the opportunity to do extra credit units. These include a range of subjects from coding, podcasting to fashion or history. That's not just broadening student's horizons in terms of subject knowledge. It also exposes them to different disciplines and ways of working. That's important in any field. But it's vital in journalism where newsrooms are growing to encompass a diverse range of disciplines. It's equally important that students from other disciplines experience the process of journalism. This is important for creating opportunities for innovation where multidisciplinary teams can add technical and business insight to solving journalism problems. But it is also vital in building a level of media literacy in other disciplines.

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[2] The actual number of courses at UG and PG level is higher, but these figures represent 'pure' journalism courses rather than courses where journalism is combined with another subject e.g. Journalism with history.

[3] Frost, C. (2018). *Five Challenges Facing Journalism Education in the UK. Asia Pacific Media Educator, 28(2), 153–163.* doi:10.1177/1326365x18812508

Access to training and development

14. There is of course, the question of who has the resources to take up the opportunities offered by a journalism qualification. It's important to recognise that the university sector like many others has a long way to go in properly representing the diversity of society and improving access to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

15. Some point to this lack of diversity in HE as a contributing factor to a lack of diversity in the journalism industry. There is a seductive logic to the 'skew in supply' argument. But the reality is that recruitment in the industry does not reflect the diversity in university journalism courses. As the NCTJ's Diversity in Journalism report states:

    a. *Journalism students are more likely to be working as journalists six months after graduation if they are male, do not have a disability, are white (or more specifically, not black), went to a privately funded school, are from higher social economic backgrounds and are not from a low HE participation neighbourhood. [4]*

16. Bias, unconscious or otherwise aside, there are other structural obstacles in industry that have an impact on diversity and access. It is generally expected that anyone entering the industry will work for free either through periods of 'work experience' or on unpaid internships. Putting the ethics of the practice to one side, this is a real problem for those from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. It's a situation made more acute by the consolidation of news media in London where temporary accommodation and living expenses can exclude all but the wealthiest from taking advantage of placement opportunities. It's a problem recognised by journalists like Olivia Crellin who started Press Pad[5] . It seeks to find places for work experience students and media interns to stay in London. But, valuable as the service is, it has had to seek crowdfunding to continue after Crellin ran up £76,000 of personal debt supporting the enterprise.

17. It would be unfair however, to say that the issue of diversity is ignored by the industry. There are initiatives that aim to address the issue directly. The NCTJ for example have a long running diversity scheme which gives financial support for their course fees and other support including mentoring. [6]

18. More recently, the NCTJ have partnered with Facebook to manage a fund to support the recruitment and training of community reporters with a view to increasing diversity and representation in newsrooms. But whilst the initiative is a welcome intervention, it represents a model of funding that is problematic.

19. Smaller and independent media operations in particular are increasingly excluded from opportunities to benefit from this kind of investment which favours the larger publishers. As part of the BBC Local Democracy Reporter scheme [7] for example, 85% of the reporter roles went to the three largest regional media groups[8]. This balance, similarly, skewed in the Facebook scheme, represents a missed opportunity to support local and independent media which could have a valuable role to play in improving diversity and representation.

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[4]   https://www.nctj.com/downloadlibrary/DIVERSITY%20JOURNALISM%204WEB.pdf
[5]   https://presspad.co.uk/
[6]   https://www.journalismdiversityfund.com/
[7]   https://www.bbc.com/lnp/ldrs
[8]   Reach PLC, Newsquest and JPI Media Ltd

20. Like the NCTJ Facebook scheme, the principle behind the BBC scheme is commendable, and the journalistic output is unquestionably excellent. But the money from these schemes is effectively a subsidy for the industry, born of admirable aims, but a subsidy none the less. Some might argue funding like this represents a corrective measure for the negative impact digital platforms have had on the journalism industry. It's telling that most of the funders for these schemes, Google, Facebook, the BBC, are often the target for criticism from the publishers now benefiting from their investment. But motivations aside, there is a more fundamental question of sustainability to consider.

21. Put bluntly, what will happen when the funding runs out?

Conclusion and policy responses

22. It's clear that economic factors underpin all of the issues highlighted here. The industry is in a dire financial position and, at the time of writing, the Covid19 crisis has highlighted just how vital but fragile the journalism industry is. The simple policy might be to echo calls for increased financial support for journalism. But in the context of this enquiry, there is little to show that there would be any incentive for industry to invest in long term, sustainable responses to the challenges of training and access.

23. We might look instead to those outside of industry with an active interest in journalism training. The Facebook/NCTJ partnership might suggest a possible model. But whilst organisations such as the NCTJ may offer an effective brokerage for external funding and industry, they remain too closely aligned to the big publishers to reflect the broader diversity of the journalism landscape. Equally, universities could be said to be similarly hampered by their own issues of short termism. Proximity to the demands of government policy, targets and the dynamics of the HE economy bring their own challenges.

24. With that in mind, I would like to suggest a policy intervention for the committee to consider.

25. **I would advocate for the creation of an Institute of Journalism Development. An organisation that would act as an 'honest broker' for managing sustainable education, training and development within journalism.**

26. There have been a number of calls for independent bodies to oversee the media and, in doing so, bring an element of regulatory and financial oversight to social media platforms[9]. But I would point the committee to Recommendation 9 of the Cairncross review as a starting point. [10] It suggests the creation of an Institute for Public Interest News. The idea as it is expressed in the review is problematic - I agree in part with the government response that 'public interest' is a difficult term to define. But the principle of an institute that acts as a single point of focus and one that, in scope, sits away the broader political, economic and legislative debates around social media platforms offers a good starting point.

27. The core activities for the IoJD might include:

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[9]   The Polis institute for example suggested a "News Innovation Centre" tied to a higher Independent Platform Agency http://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/T3-Report-Tackling-the-Information-Crisis.pdf
[10]   https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cairncross-review-a-sustainable-future-for-journalism

- Acting as a single point for attracting and managing funding from external stakeholders with a focus on sustainable development.

- Producing accreditation guidelines and monitoring training standards for journalism qualifications from apprenticeships to postgraduate level provision to ensure a rounded view of industry demands.

- Supporting opportunities for working journalists to undertake periods of secondment with other companies to learn and develop new skills.

- Monitoring diversity in the industry and creating financial support mechanisms to encourage participation at all levels.

- Supporting the development of journalism as a distinct subject area in secondary and further education to build media literacy.

28. The last activity on that list speaks to a final point concerning media literacy and policy.

29. Media literacy is a live topic for debate. But the current approaches often suffer from too diffuse an approach to building literacy. This is especially noticeable in the inclusion of media literacy in education. As government's own response to the Caincross review notes: [11]

    a. *Pupils are taught about critical thinking and the trust and reliability of sources (History), how to use internet search functions (Computing), how to read texts critically (English), analysis and evaluation of information (Science) and the importance of free speech and the press (Citizenship).*

30. Whilst the skillset is entirely appropriate, the delivery suggests a substantial feat of synthesis is required on the part of students if they are to develop a practical approach to media literacy. But strip away the traditional subject headings and you would have a set of learning outcomes that would not look out of place in any 'Introduction to journalism' lecture. I would argue that learning journalism (as appose to simply studying its output) offers a more effective approach to underpinning media literacy.

31. Policy that introduces a defined journalism curriculum for secondary and further education would not only introduce young people to the critical and practical process of assessing information. It would also give them a better understanding of how journalism works and its value in society.

32. With that practical experience and insight, perhaps the industry may find a more willing audience in young people and I would find an even more diverse, passionate and motivated cohort landing at my door.

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[11] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cairncross-review-a-sustainable-future-for-journalism/government-response-to-the-cairncross-review-a-sustainable-future-for-journalism

About the author

Andy Dickinson is a senior lecturer in journalism at Manchester Metropolitan University. He has over 20 years of teaching journalism at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. He was one of the founding team behind the MA online Journalism at the University of Central Lancashire, the first MA focussed on Online Journalism in the UK. He has also provided training and development for number of journalism organisations tackling the shift to digital which has included over 800 regional journalists at all levels.

April 2020