

OpenNews—written evidence (FOJ0058)

House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital The future of journalism call for evidence response

1. OpenNews is a professional organization of technologists in journalism working to make the industry more open, collaborative, and inclusive. OpenNews is based in the U.S., and has hosted fellows internationally including at the BBC, The Guardian, Zeit Online, Correct!v, Internews-Kenya, La Nacion (Argentina), and Al Jazeera, as well as at U.S.-based organizations including The New York Times, ProPublica, NPR, The Texas Tribune, Los Angeles Times, Vox Media, and Reveal/The Center for Investigative Reporting. Working with journalists from an international network of news organizations of all types, OpenNews deeply understands the challenges and opportunities facing journalism as it adapts to the web and to the quickly changing needs of audiences.

Technology has changed a lot about journalism, but relationships remain core

2. It used to be that “computer-assisted reporting” was something just a few journalists even knew existed. Now, especially with many journalists working from home during the pandemic, it is one way of describing all journalism being done. Moving from pneumatic tubes and printing plants to apps and push notifications has been a tremendous shift for this industry, both rapid and unfolding over decades. OpenNews works with the journalists at the center of this shift, the developers, designers, reporters, data scientists, product managers, editors, and others who help make information more engaging online and develop and sustain the platforms we all use to access news in its many forms.
3. While the pace of change in technology can be a challenge, always with something new to learn or research, [OpenNews](#) and research efforts like [The Coral Project](#) have found that even technology is still reliant on people. Many newsroom challenges sound like they need a technical solution, but often, the real solutions require changing how the humans using the technology work and communicate. This is where the changes facing journalism are most difficult: digital journalism has completely upended the old ways of working. Hierarchies and training systems that made sense for creating a single print product no longer work for 24/7 news cycles. Training on new tools is part of the solution, but OpenNews’ network has demonstrated that [communication, peer support, and translation between different teams](#) and ways of working are critically important at this time of ongoing transition.
4. The “news nerd” community of technologists in journalism often sit between many departments in newsrooms that are otherwise siloed, [giving this community a perspective few other journalists have](#) and a deep understanding of the challenges journalism faces technically and culturally as a workplace.

It’s not a pipeline problem: representation and equity can come from within

5. In 2020, the pipeline problem is a myth, yet many newsroom leaders default to thinking that the only reason they don’t have more representation amongst their staff is because journalists from marginalized communities lack the necessary skills.

Therefore, the discussion has for too long been focused on more training for students or other new hires — but the journalism industry has been stuck at this point in the conversation for generations. In the U.S., news organizations have known about this problem for [more than 50 years](#). Over that time, new processes [have been put into place that have resulted in newsrooms that are more reflective](#) of the communities they serve. But then, the programs end, layoffs happen, hiring from personal networks again becomes the default.

6. To effectively change this cycle, newsrooms must permanently alter how they operate. They must [implement the known best practices](#)—simple steps like actually posting job openings, ensuring that interview pools include people of color and members of other under-represented groups, and stopping discriminatory practices like unpaid internships. In addition to hiring the well qualified journalists from marginalized backgrounds who usually face numerous barriers to entering full-time jobs at news organizations, they must also work to *retain* the journalists of color who already work in their news organizations.
7. Creating welcoming, inclusive workplaces with investment in professional development will support the career growth of the under-represented journalists already within their organizations. Working on hiring and retention together is the only way news organizations will begin to address these harms. And once inside of newsrooms, journalists from marginalized backgrounds must be given authority to make real decisions about coverage and direction of the organization.
8. These steps must be undertaken even in a crisis, and OpenNews’ Director of Programs Sisi Wei [detailed how managers and executives can continue to uphold values of diversity, equity, and inclusion](#) during this difficult time for many newsrooms. This is also an area where external groups can help put pressure on news organizations to ensure they are more representative, whether it be foundations and other funders requiring reporting around staff demographics, including for leadership roles, or awards bodies requiring demographic data as part of their application processes. When diversity, equity, and inclusion are embedded in all existing work, rather than being an add-on that can be overlooked in a crisis, the industry will be on the right path to address these longstanding issues.

Cooperation and openness seed innovation

9. The news nerd community has collaboration as a core value. Many technologists in journalism have experience in the open source technology space as well, where collaboration is key. This accessible way of working has been critical for collaborations across news organizations, where news organizations collaborate on publicly available digital tools to understand public data and then separately write stories based on that data.
10. Technology in journalism hasn’t just changed how journalism functions, it has changed the Internet itself. Django, a web framework that powers sites like Instagram and Disqus, was developed at the *Lawrence Journal-World* newspaper in Kansas in the U.S. by Adrian Holovaty and Simon Willison. D3, a popular data visualisation tool used in numerous industries beyond journalism, was further developed while its co-creator Mike Bostock worked at the *New York Times*. “[Snowfall](#)” — now an 8-year-old piece of digital storytelling and design, changed how visual design was done on the Internet. The speed and scale of creating technology for journalism results in innovative ways of thinking that are beneficial

to other news organizations, and the many other fields that need to display information easily and reliably to audiences.

11. OpenNews has learned how these collaborations, combined with an openness to learning and listening to one another, means much wisdom and expertise is already within newsrooms. While so many organizations are trying to figure out how to respond to the same challenges, there are individuals within those organizations who listen, understand, and seek out support from colleagues. Rather than always looking outside for expertise, news organizations should listen to the people within their organizations who already have solutions. Digital journalists have exactly the expertise and perspectives that news organizations need to meet the challenges of fiscal sustainability and serving wider audiences, but top newsroom leadership continually dismisses this input because it comes from outside of the familiar hierarchies and pathways for career development. The very journalists who are [making sense of complex data and models](#) to help audiences respond to this pandemic, are also the ones least likely to even get authorship credit and support for their work. As OpenNews has seen, many smaller news organizations face a “[support gap, not a skills gap](#),” in doing more innovative work—they already have staff with the tenacity and capacity to take on new challenges, they sometimes just need a bit of support from peers and respect from bosses.
12. Especially with the pandemic and the already immense economic impact on journalism, it is all the more important to band together and find ways to support and learn from one another. When news organizations are able to [operate from a position of clear values and vision](#), it’s possible to [operate more thoughtfully and build for the future in innovative ways](#). Luckily for the journalism industry, there are a wealth of resources to learn from (and share back) with peers including: [OpenNews’ site Source](#), [the Center for Collaborative Media](#), [Membership Puzzle Project](#), and European Journalism Centre’s [Engaged Journalism Accelerator](#).
13. OpenNews began as an effort to encourage more news organizations to embrace open source technology, sharing and documenting their technical work. As the news nerd community has grown and evolved, its interests shifted from being about not only opening up tech, but opening up discussions about what journalism is for and who it serves. OpenNews is grateful for these questions about how journalism can more effectively meet its highest aspirations, and for this chance to share the perspective of the news nerd community on some possible answers.

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