

## **Association of British Science Writers—written evidence (FOJ0062)**

### **House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry on the future of journalism**

1. The Association of British Science Writers (ABSW) represents science and technology journalism in this country. We are contributing to this enquiry because our future is entwined with the future of journalism.
2. At time of writing, many of our members are busy covering the science around COVID-19. Many of our members also face threats to their livelihoods from the pandemic. We believe that this crisis will likely show up some of the real weaknesses — and strengths — in journalism today.
3. This evidence tackles the questions posed by the inquiry one by one, and as such will not include an executive summary.
4. **How should journalism be defined and what is its value to society? What is the difference between 'citizen journalism' and other forms of journalism?**
5. In 1931 Lord Reith famously explained that the BBC's role was to educate, inform and entertain. Any definition of journalism should definitely include the educate and inform aspects of this mission. However, in its broadest sense journalism should also challenge, seeking to be one of the main ways in which society as a whole can hold people and institutions to account.
6. Journalism's main value can therefore be seen in these three aspects that define it, its power to educate, inform and challenge. This is why the ABSW's vision states that "[For science and technology to truly benefit society they need to be clearly communicated but also held accountable.](#)"
7. The distinction between citizen journalism and other forms of journalism might be seen in the fact that good journalism takes a great deal of hard work, training, experience and an understanding of media law. The level of explanation, collaboration and creation in the best examples is done by expert teams in large media institutions. Yet the modern media landscape means that financial support for such teams is under threat.
8. Citizen journalism has in part arisen to fill this gap. It is generally independent of the large mainstream media organisations, but usually struggles to attain the same standards due to a lack of resources. One notable exception is the Bellingcat investigative journalism group, which brings together a variety of citizen journalists with high levels of expertise. [Their work identifying the culprits in the Salisbury poisoning case](#) is a great example of citizen journalism that has attracted the ABSW's attention due to the role of Novichok nerve agents.
9. **How have digital technologies changed the consumption of journalism?**
10. It can't be said often enough that the impact of the move to the web, and the rise of social media, is still being felt in journalism business models. Social media and apps like Apple News and Google News now dominate how people access journalism. As such, some outlets who freely publish content seeking advertising revenue are at the mercy of changes in social media algorithms. There have been examples of [publishers going bust after a seemingly innocuous](#)

[change in the Facebook algorithm determining which posts people see](#). Ironically changes from big tech companies sometimes seek to lead the consumption of journalism, but fail. The key example of this is [when Facebook's enthusiasm for video content drove publishers to make more video content, only to find a lack of engagement](#). COVID-19, a crisis that has science at its core, exemplifies these challenges. According to [the Press Gazette](#) the journalism industry is "experiencing record demand for news at the same time as an unprecedented squeeze on advertising revenue".

11. For publishers chasing these trends, there is clear motivation to produce high volumes of content without necessarily checking quality. However, those publishers that held onto the subscriber model tend to be better able to fund the high-quality journalism described above. Perhaps the best example of this in science journalism is the excellent health, science and technology reporters and editors at The Economist. In recent years, more subscription outlets have emerged. It would be interesting to explore whether this indicates improved media literacy amongst some, such that they realise the low quality of output from certain publishers relying on the social media advertising model.
12. Science and technology writing as a profession on average is more secure than much of the rest of journalism. That's because there are many niche publications, some of which are subscription-only, within the profitable academic publishing industry. Some outlets are even supported by research funds from governmental bodies. However this work's penetration is deep but narrow. It supports the UK's key scientific and technological activities but rarely reaches the population more broadly.
13. By contrast, science and technology writers at large mainstream outlets tend to be among the least secure. In response to our call for input for this inquiry, the ABSW has received testimony saying that when issues like revenue loss caused by COVID-19 emerge, science correspondents at such outlets are often the first to be laid off. There have been many examples of this down the years, but some recent ones include Channel 4 News eliminating its dedicated science reporters. As such, coverage during situations like the current crisis can fall upon non-expert journalists. This results in poorer information reaching the country at a time when it needs it the most.
14. **How can public policy improve media literacy, particularly among those who have a low level of digital literacy?**
15. This is a major challenge and we would encourage governments to engage with academics to develop an evidence-based approach. However it might be envisaged to include public education and advertising campaigns designed to alert the public to how the media works.
16. **How have digital technologies changed the production of journalism? Do journalists have access to the training necessary to adapt to the digital world?**
17. The rise of digital journalism has significant implications for the training of specialist reporters. Specifically, it is more important than ever that journalists be trained in the difference between primary and secondary sources, and between established fact and opinion. Just because someone, however prominent, has said something does not make it true and worthy of being treated as news. Sources must be challenged to back up their statements with evidence and, if it's not forthcoming, it is up to journalists to try to verify or falsify them based on their own research.

18. To do this, they need sufficient expertise to be able to read and understand scientific papers themselves or, if they cannot, must know how to be able to find reliable, independent, technical people to decipher and explain them. Further, they must have a deep understanding of the processes that allow science, technology, engineering, and medicine to progress. Finally, they need the research skills to find the right information, the writing skills to make something of the story, and an understanding of the ethics of journalism.
19. In the area of video journalism, it is now possible to produce good quality content primarily using mobile phones. Video journalism is however just another example of how digital technologies have opened up journalism to people in a variety of circumstances. The ability to work remotely using just an internet connection has provided access to an army of freelancers. Yet new technologies keep emerging, for example AI-based speech-to-text tools that can automatically transcribe interviews. It can be hard to stay up-to-date with such developments, however organisations like the ABSW and NUJ do regularly inform their members on these topics.
20. **What qualifications do professional journalists need? How could public policy better support non-degree routes into journalism?**
21. Training is an obvious way the government can support quality journalism. For instance, universities can offer modules in science and technology journalism aimed at students doing STEM degrees. This way, writers are learning both about the subject area and the discipline of journalism at the same time. These modules could either be options taken within a technical course, or Masters-level degrees taken afterwards.
22. For those who are already working in science communication, online training opportunities and certification could also make an important contribution. Although no-one would reject an established science journalist for a job just because they lacked such a certificate, it could give writers an edge at the beginning of their careers and, in a generation, could become standard. Such online qualifications need not be expensive.
23. **What are the main challenges for freelance journalists? How could public policy better support them?**
24. Many science writers and journalists work as freelancers. They rely on freelancing for their livelihood and need to pay their bills regularly. However, the rates paid for their work have been stagnating, or even decreasing. In addition to poor rates, freelancers face various practices and expectations that hamper them in their work. This can include waiting weeks for an editor to reply to a pitch, having to repeatedly chase a late or forgotten payment, or having a story fall through the cracks when there is a change in editors at a publication.
25. The ABSW has therefore [drafted an aspirational manifesto to highlight some of the common challenges that freelance science writers face, with the goal of improving their working conditions and wellbeing](#). Many of these measures might be adopted and made policy. For example, the government could introduce legislation specifying payment of 'kill fees' when a commissioned article isn't published, mandating minimum fee structures, and a shorter payment window than the standard 30 days.
26. **Why is the journalism profession not more representative of the population? How could this be addressed?**

27. The way in which the ABSW is unrepresentative of the population may or may not differ from journalism as a whole. Roughly 53% of our membership is female as of March 2020. This slight over-representation may be due to the flexibility of freelance science writing roles that make it easier to juggle work with other responsibilities, such as childcare. This might be welcomed, but there are concerns that this is evidence that women are more likely to need to take on precarious freelance-type roles than men.
28. **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?**
29. Science writers sit in a strange middle ground between scientists, who the public trust highly, and journalists, who they trust less. From this middle-ground it seems the careful reliance on robust evidence in science is an important aspect of building trust. As such, much as some publishers might resist it, a strong press regulator that can meaningfully publish those publishing misinformation could help in this regard.
30. Again, the ABSW may be unusual in that over half of its members are located outside London, often as technology-enabled freelancers. That may or may not be reflected in their work, as editorial agendas are likely to be set by London-based publications. However at least some members work for new subscription-model hyperlocal news outlets like The Bristol Cable, which are successfully offering regional agendas in innovative ways.
31. **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?**
32. Founded in 2010, [The Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#) is a promising example of a relatively new, innovative organisation set up to deliver quality reporting. Its sponsorship funding model promises to be largely independent of the troubles facing standard industry advertising. The ABSW is encouraged that it has recently established a dedicated global health team with support from The Bill and Melinda Gates foundation. Yet few organisations can reasonably be expected to run in this way.
33. As previously mentioned, there are many small, innovative subscription-focussed outlets that appear to be demonstrating that it is possible to pursue journalism sustainably.
34. **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?**
35. Public policy must support the rights of journalists to hold people and institutions to account. On this front the UK does reasonably well in comparison to other countries, based on what we have heard from science journalists in countries where they struggle to practice their trade freely at conferences. Recent reform of the UK libel laws seems to have diminished the problem of 'libel chill' slightly, which had posed a significant problem in science coverage. However it is important to be vigilant that these rights are not eroded.