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**Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry
The Future of Journalism**

Summary

1. **Professional standards are important.** High quality, ethical journalism is essential to a healthy, thriving and informed democracy. As the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated, journalism is vital for allowing citizens to make educated choices as well as holding political decision-makers to account at national, regional and local level. Professional training and codes of conduct help to ensure that these tasks are carried out according to appropriate legal and ethical principles (when they are properly implemented), within newsrooms that should foster public confidence.
2. **Levels of trust differ widely across media.** In the UK, different kinds of journalism attract very different levels of public trust. News consumers clearly distinguish between both broadcast and print journalism (including the online platforms of newspaper publishers), and between different categories of newspaper publisher. Trust surveys consistently show that broadcast journalism is highly trusted, that broadsheet newspaper journalism is moderately trusted, but that journalism in midmarket and red top newspapers (including their online platforms) is barely trusted at all. It is therefore very important that the notion of “trust in journalism” is disaggregated.
3. **Lack of trust in the press reflects poor self-regulation.** Differential levels of trust reflect both newsroom culture and the distinct regulatory frameworks governing print, online and broadcast journalism. While broadcasting is subject to independent regulatory scrutiny by Ofcom, the main newspaper publishers are subject only to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) which the publishers themselves run and which has proved wholly ineffectual in upholding professional standards. The newspapers’ persistent refusal to follow the recommendations of the 2012 Leveson report, while other smaller publishers submit themselves to proper independent scrutiny, should raise questions about their entitlement to public subsidies.
4. **Charitable status for journalism enterprises should be easier.** The crisis in local journalism is particularly grave, with growing evidence of a severe democratic deficit in many local areas. A more flexible approach to allowing non-profit publishing ventures to become charitable, and thus to access the financial and benefactor advantages, would be cost-free and could be implemented relatively quickly by the Charity Commission (CC). This committee should reiterate the recommendations of its previous enquiry to both the CC and government.
5. **Establish an IPIN.** The 2019 Cairncross Review recommended an Institute for Public Interest News (IPIN) as a new centre of journalistic excellence which would distribute private and public finance to public interest, high quality journalism. Despite accepting all other recommendations, the government rejected this central plank. The committee should urge government to change its mind.
6. **Set up a Community Journalism Fund:** DCMS should match the £400,000 currently distributed to community radio stations with a similar fund for community journalism, to be distributed by IPIN.

7. **Change the Local Democracy Reporter Scheme.** This BBC funded scheme currently distributes £8 million of licence payers' money a year mostly to the three dominant regional publishers. While producing some important public interest stories – which can be accessed by some independent publishers – the scheme raises serious problems of transparency and accountability. There should be no further appropriation of BBC money or expansion of the scheme until the funds are more equitably distributed and scrutiny is radically improved. A forthcoming and detailed critique of the scheme will be published in the *British Journalism Review* next month.

Introduction

8. I am submitting brief comments as an independent academic and commentator on communications policy at the University of Westminster. I have been involved in research and policy analysis on journalism, regulation and media ownership for over 30 years, have directed a number of relevant research projects, and have authored books, book chapters and articles on journalism and media policy. In 2013/14, I directed an 18 month project on media plurality supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.¹ Some of the thinking presented here derives from that project.
9. I have acted as specialist adviser to this committee on several occasions, most recently for last year's inquiry into Public Service Broadcasting. I also acted in that capacity for the committee's 2011/12 inquiry into Investigative Journalism. In 2012, I was twice called to give oral evidence to the Leveson Inquiry.
10. I have been a member of the NUJ for over 35 years, was a columnist on the Observer newspaper from 2000-2004, and still write for the national, online and specialist press. I was a founding member of the *British Journalism Review* in 1989, and continue to sit on both its management and editorial boards. I am on the advisory committee of the newly constituted Public Benefit Journalism Research Centre, who have submitted separately.
11. Perhaps most relevant is that, for over 25 years, I have been involved in the education of many hundreds of aspiring journalists. Some have progressed to successful careers in journalism, while others (in increasing numbers) have chosen a career in public relations, advertising or internal corporate communications – sometimes through choice, but often because the career opportunities in journalism have become both limited and poorly remunerated. There is no shortage of talented, trained, ethical and enthusiastic young journalists - from all backgrounds and ethnicities – who understand the democratic significance of their chosen profession but lack the opportunities to practise it. This is particularly true for those from poorer backgrounds who lack the family resources to help them through inevitable periods of low income.
12. I will restrict my comments essentially to three areas of the committee's Call for Evidence: definitions of journalism; issues of trust; and public policy initiatives to support good journalism.

Journalism and its value to society

13. Drawing on what he called the "classic liberal theory of a free press", James Curran identified three democratic functions of the media as watchdog, voice of the people, and information and debate.² In previous work for Ofcom, I added a fourth to provide a conceptual framework for assessing journalism's contribution to democratic and civic life.³ These can be abbreviated to informing; representing; campaigning; and interrogating.

¹ *Plurality and Media Power: new policy approaches to protecting the public interest in the 21st century* Funded under the AHRC Fellowship scheme (grant number AH/K002864/1)

² James Curran, "Mediations of Democracy" in *Mass Media and Society*, edited by James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, Hodder Arnold, 2005, pp122-149.

³ Steven Barnett, *Journalism, Democracy and the Public Interest: rethinking media pluralism for the Digital Age*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism working paper. 2009

14. Each of these criteria are essential to a healthy, thriving democracy, and in each case their fundamental importance has been acutely demonstrated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Accurate, timely information has been vital to ensuring that citizens can make educated choices in the interests of their own health and that of the wider community - as well as countering some of the dangerous conspiracy theories circulating on social media and the websites of some tabloid newspapers. Equally, the role of journalism has been essential in ensuring that information flows in the opposite direction, from voters to their representatives via media outlets. Journalism has also been instrumental in facilitating community campaigns, for example around the need for adequate PPE in care homes. And throughout the crisis, journalists have interrogated political leaders and ensured that decisions have been properly scrutinised. That watchdog role is integral to maintaining a functioning democracy in which political decision-making – at national, regional and local level – is transparent and accountable.
15. Theoretically, these tasks could be carried out by any member of the public, running their own blog from a laptop. And, indeed, there are examples of community sites which have been developed by enthusiasts and amateurs with little formal training in journalism. Successful examples of such citizen journalism, however, tend to be the exception rather than the rule for two reasons. First, to have any influence and credibility, any media outlet needs to reach a certain scale even at the very local level. This takes time and a certain level of technical expertise in both production (whether online or for broadcast) and distribution. While this can be acquired over time, the levels of professionalism required to capture people’s attention is more easily learned in dedicated classes.
16. Second, and more importantly, there are ethical and legal aspects to journalism which are generally communicated in professional news environments or via appropriate professional and higher education courses. These are important not only to protect any media outlet from litigation but also to allow them to understand the limits of any journalistic exceptions to laws such as the Data Protection Act. Both the constraints (around difficult areas like privacy, intrusion into grief, and reporting on minorities) and the freedoms (such as the journalistic exemptions mentioned above) need careful navigation which is learned partly through professional training and partly through newsroom experience. Professional codes of conduct which govern most professional journalism are essential to engendering trust, which in turn is vital for combating the growing problem of disinformation flowing through much social media.

The importance of Trust

17. The committee has rightly highlighted the issue of trust, and the importance of maintaining public confidence in professional journalism. If trust diminishes to irrevocably low levels, we risk as a society becoming far more susceptible to the burgeoning volume of disinformation. This in turn will have serious consequences for democracy and everyday life, well beyond the current unprecedented public health crisis.
18. There is however a potentially serious misconception in assuming that all journalism is regarded with similar degrees of confidence or suspicion. There is clear and long-standing evidence that different kinds of journalism in the UK command different levels of trust. Crucially, news consumers in the UK have long distinguished between broadcast and print journalism (including the online platforms of newspaper publishers), and between different categories of newspaper publisher.
19. This can be seen most recently in a YouGov report in March this year which compared

responses across different media to the question "how much do you trust the following to tell the truth?". For broadsheet newspapers, two fifths (40%) responded that they trust journalists to tell the truth while just over half (52%) said they did not. But for midmarket and red top tabloid newspapers the trust figures were far worse: just 14% said that they trusted the midmarket titles and fewer than one in 10 (8%) said that they trusted the red tops. Those saying that they did not trust them were, respectively, 74% and 84%.⁴ This distinction has a long history: my own research in 2008 showed that over half the UK population felt they could trust TV journalists (nearly two thirds for the BBC) compared to 43% for broadsheet newspaper journalists, and just 15% for tabloid journalists.⁵

20. Thus, even within established news publishers, there is a vast difference in levels of public confidence. Moreover, this lack of trust in newspaper publishers contrast starkly with public confidence in broadcast journalism. Ofcom has started tracking trust for various sources of information during the Covid pandemic. Its results for week three showed a net positive trust of 74% for BBC television, 78% for BBC radio, 76% for BBC online, ITV, and Channel 4, and 72% for Sky News. This contrasted with 55% for printed newspapers and 45% for online newspapers. Asked for their most important source for news about coronavirus, 6 out of 10 named a broadcaster (mostly the BBC) while just 7% named newspapers, whether printed or online.⁶
21. These relative trust figures are confirmed on a comparative basis by annual surveys of trust in the media carried out by the EBU amongst the 28 (as was) members of the European Union. The UK's written press performance has come consistently at or near the bottom. According to the EBU's most recent figures (May 2019), just 28% of UK consumers said they "tend to trust" the written press, placing the UK above only Greece and Macedonia in the trust table. By contrast, 48% said that tended to trust TV and 53% radio.⁷
22. These results are not surprising because Britain's broadcast journalism has a reputation – internationally as well as at home – for being robust, independent, ethical and accurate. It is the product of both institutional evolution and thoughtful regulation, and demonstrates that a well constructed and genuinely independent regulatory regime can promote high journalistic standards. It is a framework which, through Ofcom, ensures that essential investigative journalism is protected and journalistic freedom guaranteed without compromising accuracy or professional codes of conduct. It is also a framework which ensures that effective sanctions are imposed when standards are breached.
23. By contrast, the regulatory framework governing the main newspaper publishers, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), is weak and ineffectual in upholding editorial and professional standards. While claiming to follow the "spirit" of reforms recommended by Sir Brian Leveson following the 2011 phone hacking scandal, it in fact recreates all the flaws of its discredited predecessor, the Press Complaints Commission. It is manifestly not independent, being both funded and run by the main newspaper publishers. Nor is it effective, failing in over five years of existence to launch a single investigation or impose any fines on member

⁴ YouGov, "How much do we trust journalists?" <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/03/26/trust-newspaper-journalists> Accessed 21/4/20

⁵ Steven Barnett, "On the Road to Self-Destruction" in *British Journalism Review*, Vol 19 No 2, 2008, pp5-13.

⁶ Ofcom, "Covid-19 news and information: consumption and attitudes" <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/news-media/coronavirus-news-consumption-attitudes-behaviour/> Accessed 21/4/20

⁷ EBU, "Trust in Media 2019", https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/MIS/login_only/market_insights/EBU-MIS-Trust_in_Media_2019.pdf Accessed 21/4/20

publishers. A recent independent analysis by the Media Standards Trust demonstrated that, of 38 Leveson recommendations relating to a new self-regulatory system, IPSO satisfies just 13 and fails to satisfy 25.⁸

24. Despite promises of self-reform in light of the phone hacking scandal, there have been many egregious breaches of fundamental journalistic standards by newspapers under the IPSO umbrella without any serious regulatory sanctions. As just one example, it is worth quoting directly from the Kerslake Report into the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing atrocity: "the Panel was shocked and dismayed by the accounts of the families of their experiences with some of the media. They spoke of being 'hounded', of a 'lack of respect', and of 'sneaky' attempt to take photos when families were receiving bad news".⁹ Many other examples have been documented over the years of IPSO's existence.¹⁰
25. There are public policy consequences that flow from this lack of accountability for journalistic standards from the nation's largest newspaper publishers. Following the Leveson recommendations, we now have a working structure for genuinely effective and independent self-regulation of the press in place, giving the Press Recognition Panel powers to approve self-regulators that meet the Leveson standards. That the major publishers can refuse to engage with this framework with impunity is a serious problem for journalistic integrity and trust. The main incentive for encouraging cooperation, through section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act, has been abandoned with no thought for what might take its place. If we are serious about trying to engender more trust in mainstream, professional journalism, we need to find ways of incentivising those publishers to respect and implement their own codes of professional conduct. At the very least, if they continue to refuse, they should not be given preferential access to taxpayers money or subsidies while other publishers submit themselves to proper scrutiny for their standards of journalism.

Public policy initiatives – thoughts on 4 possible options

i. charitable journalism

26. In other countries, and particularly in the United States, there are recognisable policy and regulatory mechanisms for non-profit journalism ventures to qualify as charitable. This status bestows a number of advantages, the most obvious being their attraction to foundations and philanthropic funders – whether organisations or individuals – who through choice or under the terms of their own rules will only donate to charitable organisations.
27. While there is historically a more entrenched culture of philanthropic contributions to journalism in the US, there is no reason why such a culture could not be fostered in the UK through creative policy and regulatory intervention. At the local level, in

⁸ Media Standards Trust, "The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) – Five Years On: a reassessment", October 2019. <http://mediastandardstrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MST-IPSO-2019-Final-Version.pdf>

⁹ "The Kerslake Report: An independent review into the preparedness for, and emergency response to, the Manchester Arena attack on 22nd May 2017", p9: https://www.jesip.org.uk/uploads/media/Documents%20Products/Kerslake_Report_Manchester_Are.pdf

¹⁰ See for example, "Thrown to the Wolves" compiled by Hacked Off: <https://hackinginquiry.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ThrowntotheWolves.pdf>; and Prof Brian Cathcart's report of the shocking treatment by the Mail on Sunday of Danielle Hindley: <https://bylinetimes.com/2020/02/25/the-beautician-and-the-beast-danielle-hindley-v-the-mail-on-sunday/>

particular – where a serious democratic deficit has been identified in many areas across the UK – there is a growing culture of entrepreneurial journalism using digital media outlets which are clearly capable of fulfilling some of the key informational, watchdog and investigative functions that local communities require to function effectively.

28. As part of the AHRC project mentioned above, we carried out a representative survey of more than 150 hyperlocal sites in the UK¹¹ which clearly demonstrated the journalistic potential of these operations. Many provided examples of the kind of investigative or campaigning journalism traditionally associated with mainstream local publishers (such as campaigns around road safety and declining standards of council services) as well as some impressive instances of accountability journalism such as damaging cuts to local youth services. There is plenty of scope for allowing these kinds of enterprises access to the reputational and financial benefits of charitable status.
29. This committee, in its 2012 inquiry on investigative journalism which I advised, called on the Charity Commission to consider journalism’s vital democratic significance when interpreting the law and “to provide greater clarity and guidelines on which activities related to the media, and in particular investigative journalism, are charitable in the current state of the law.” It also recommended that the government reconsider its reluctance to legislate given that “reform of charity law is the only way in which certainty in this area could be achieved.”¹² There has been no discernible movement on either front.
30. The detailed case for a more flexible and discretionary approach by the Charity Commission to helping journalism enterprises achieve charitable status is in the submission from the Public Benefit Journalism Research Centre. It would be very helpful if the committee could repeated its call to the CC for greater clarity and perhaps to consider whether government and Parliament should take the lead and legislate in this area.

ii. Institute for Public Interest News

31. At the core of Dame Frances Cairncross’ recommendations for a more sustainable future for journalism was the Institute for Public Interest News (IPIN), designed to “become a centre of excellence and good practice, carrying out or commissioning research, building partnerships with universities, and developing the intellectual basis for measures to improve the accessibility and readership of quality news online”. It was to be the rough equivalent of the Arts Council, “channelling a combination of public and private finance into those parts of the industry it deemed most worthy of support”. One of its tasks would be to distribute the proceeds of a new “innovation fund” designed to improve the supply of public interest news.¹³
32. This is exactly the kind of creative solution required to ensure that public money is properly directed towards high quality, professionally conducted journalism in the public interest. It could also have a role in advising the Charity Commission on whether charitable journalism enterprises have properly fulfilled their remit. Despite being a central plank of the Review commissioned by the government, the

¹¹ In collaboration with Cardiff and Birmingham City universities, full report here: <https://hyperlocalsurvey.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/hyperlocal-community-news-in-the-uk-2014.pdf>

¹² <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201012/ldselect/ldcomuni/256/25608.htm#n152> pars 201 and 202

¹³ The Cairncross Review: a sustainable future for journalism. February 2019, p11: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779882/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf

government chose to reject it. According to the then Culture Secretary, Baroness Nicky Morgan, the idea “risks perceptions of inappropriate government interference with the press”.¹⁴

33. This objection makes no sense, particularly in an environment where journalism is suffering and badly needs creative solutions for the distribution of public subsidies. It smacks, unfortunately, of compromise in the face of opposition from the major news publishers who have traditionally opposed any independent mechanisms for distributing public money beyond those from which they themselves might benefit (such as VAT exemptions). Given that new levies are now being canvassed on big tech companies such as Google and Facebook, which exploit the original journalism of others without making any financial contribution themselves, it will be vital to have carefully formulated criteria for assessing i. who will benefit from the distribution of such revenue and ii. how journalistic performance will be assessed against the principles articulated above of high quality information, investigation, accountability and representation.
34. We are well accustomed to independent and respected regulatory bodies performing scrutiny functions in the public interest. Ofcom has established a formidable track record in this area. The Press Recognition Panel was an object lesson in setting up a wholly independent body, without any political or industry influence. A new body would have the advantage of a fresh remit entirely devoted to high-quality, public interest journalism start, and their responsibility could be expanded to monitoring the public benefit return on existing levies such as VAT exemptions and local authority statutory notices. It could also lay down criteria for diversity, training and BAME recruitment as conditions for distributing funds. With enough political will, it is perfectly possible to establish such a body on strictly independent and non-partisan lines.
35. I would therefore urge the committee to recommend that the Institute for Public Interest News be established as soon as possible, precisely along the lines recommended by Dame Frances.

iii. **Community journalism fund**

36. Both Facebook and Google have established emergency Journalism Funds for which journalism enterprises can bid. These are welcome but private initiatives, run according to rules set by the tech companies themselves, and are global in scope. With local journalism in particular suffering from a collapse in advertising and closure of local papers, we need a dedicated fund for small, dynamic, entrepreneurial local publishers for whom very small amount of money can make the difference between survival and extinction.
37. A model already exists for generating and distributing funds in respect of community radio stations, on the basis that they enhance local communities. For the financial year 2018/19, DCMS allocated £400,000 to the Community Radio Fund which was distributed by Ofcom to 25 stations with annual grants averaging around £16,000.¹⁵ While paltry amounts of money for very large publishers, this could make a huge difference for a local independent news operation. Between them, the Independent

¹⁴ Government response to the Cairncross Review: a sustainable future for journalism, updated 27 January 2020. <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#response-to-recommendations> Accessed 21/4/20.

¹⁵ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/158141/annual-report-community-radio-fund-2018-19.pdf

Community News Network (ICNN) and Impress regulate over 150 small publishers. Both operate and implement a professional code of journalistic conduct which would ensure that recipients of any such funds spend it according to the principles of high quality public interest journalism.

38. I would urge the committee to recommend that DCMS match funds its Community Radio Fund with an equivalent contribution for community journalism, to be administered in the short term by ICNN and Impress. In the longer term, if the committee agrees with the Cairncross IPIN recommendation, responsibility for distribution and monitoring could be taken over by IPIN.

iv. Local democracy reporter scheme

39. In February 2017, the BBC reached agreement with one section of the newspaper industry (represented by the News Media Association) on a new Local Democracy Reporter Scheme, described by the BBC as "a public service news agency". Under the scheme, the BBC agreed to invest around £8m per annum in, amongst other things, funding 150 local reporters to be attached to (and be run by) local news organisations. Their stories would provide "impartial coverage of the regular business and workings of local authorities in the UK, and other relevant democratic institutions" and would be shared with other qualifying partners.
40. In practice, 140 of the 150 reporter contracts have gone to the three dominant regional publishers Reach PLC (formerly Trinity Mirror), Newsquest, and JPI (formerly Johnston Press). All are members of the powerful publishers' NMA umbrella group.
41. While there is no question that some public interest stories are been published that would otherwise remain hidden, and that some small publishers are able to take advantage of the service and republish through a shared hub, the scheme raises some very worrying questions; in particular, there are major concerns about the lack of transparency in its operation, the lack of accountability for expenditure of BBC licence payers money, and most importantly why the vast majority of this money is going to corporate giants whose recent track record in making journalists redundant and closing papers sits uncomfortably with their receipt of public money.
42. Along with Prof Roy Greenslade of City University, I have written a fairly long article for the next issue of the *British Journalism Review* drawing attention to the scheme's deficiencies as well as its positives.¹⁶
43. In the meantime, I would ask that the committee recommend against any further appropriation of BBC licence payers' money to finance a scheme which is barely scrutinised and whose value for money is, at best, contestable. BBC journalism is already suffering from deep cuts as a result of successive government funding settlements. To remove yet more resources in order to subsidise the journalism of corporations with a dubious track record would be entirely contrary to the public interest.

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¹⁶ Steven Barnett and Roy Greenslade, "Not the way to use our money" in *British Journalism Review*, Vol 31 No 2, 2020, pp43-49: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0956474820931404> Accessed 18 June 2020.