

Sameer Padania—written evidence (FOJ0065)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee The Future of Journalism Inquiry

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Why I am submitting evidence to the Inquiry:

I currently work as a consultant and advisor on public interest journalism, innovation and philanthropy. I have worked since 2001 at the intersection of journalism, technology and civil society. As such I have seen and analysed the journalism and media field from several angles — as a radio editor, a media development practitioner, editor of the ‘YouTube for human rights’, a digital rights advocate, a media policy analyst, a philanthropic grantmaker, assessor for a journalism innovation fund, evaluator - and in many different parts of the world. I started my career working in the global south, but for the last 5 years have been increasingly (though not exclusively) focused on the UK and Europe (including a mid-career MSc on New Media and Society in Europe). I write here in my capacity as Director of Macroscope London - though the submission that follows does not represent the views or opinions of clients or collaborators.

Current relevant clients and affiliations:

- [Nesta Future News Pilot Fund](#), Journalism Advisor
- [Journalism Funders Forum](#), Consultant
- [First Draft](#), Advisory Board Member
- [Doc Society](#), Trustee
- [Public Benefit Journalism Research Centre](#), Advisory Committee

Recent relevant publications:

- [An Introduction to Funding Journalism and Media](#) (2018, Ariadne Network/Transparency and Accountability Initiative)
- [How to fund investigative journalism](#) (2019, Deutsche Welle Akademie)
- [Journalism Funders Confidential](#) (2019-20, Journalism Funders Forum)

(I apologise that I have not had time to include or standardise all references or footnotes. If it is helpful, I can submit a revised and clean version with the proper resources included in due course.)

Overview:

This submission focuses on the public interest and public benefit dimensions of journalism in the UK.

Journalism has changed, is changing and will continue to do so, as the information, technology and communication environment it operates in and the information needs of citizens themselves continue to evolve. There is no single definition of what journalism is, who is a journalist, and what skills or credentials they need in order to be able to practice journalism - as is laid out in multiple international standards, as well as in UK practice (as in the recent recognition by the UK government of journalists, not just ‘public service journalists’ as originally stated, as Key Workers).

Public interest journalism is carried out to varying degrees by organisations, networks and individuals across the country at all levels, by the public service media, private media, newspapers at national, regional and local levels, digital media, co-operatively owned newsrooms, non-profit investigative newsrooms (including those hosted or founded by civil society groups - e.g. Liberty Investigates (Liberty), Unearthed (Greenpeace) and Finance Uncovered (Tax Justice Network)), ethnic media, freelancers, networks of experts and/or citizens, and numerous others. (See e.g. membership list of Independent Community News Network, the partner list of Bureau Local, the regulated publication list of IMPRESS, and the UK grantee lists of philanthropic foundations like Luminate Group, Open Society Foundations, or the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust.)

Public interest journalism is intertwined with other fields of truth-seeking and investigation, including access to/freedom of information, freedom of expression, whistleblowing, documentary, transparency and accountability, digital rights and related fields in UK civil society. These are also affected by many of the same forces that are well-documented elsewhere - technological, economic, social, political, trust - as well as a systemic lack of funding and resources to innovate.

Much of the public interest journalism field in the UK, writ large, is in an extended period of decline and turmoil, because it cannot pay for itself, it can't spare the resources to innovate and transform, and because external subsidy or philanthropic funding for it is thin on the ground or inadvertently throttled. (See e.g. recent Ender Analysis reports showing >50% decline in ad revenue for already threadbare local media due to Covid-19). It is also under political attack, which draws perfectly legitimate public interest journalism into agonistic battles with authorities, and which reinforces already low trust levels. (See April 2020 RSF ranking, in which the UK has dropped to 35th place, despite its international commitments to media freedom in partnership with the Government of Canada, for example.)

Media ownership in the UK remains a matter of concern, both because of mergers and acquisitions at the national level, but more ruinously the widely documented impacts at the local and regional levels in the UK (see e.g. Moore and Ramsay's work at Kings College London). Regional press groups are struggling, making layoffs, closing or merging titles, and leaving news deserts; local independents and hyperlocals are resource-constrained, unable to grow, and starved of funding. At the same time as localism and local democracy and scrutiny should be growing, local media are withering away (see e.g. Megan Lucero oral evidence to Inquiry) with negative effects for local information ecosystems, for citizenship and for democratic participation.

Information inequality in the UK affects multiple aspects of citizens' lives, whether through lack of access to technology, socio-economic status, active news avoidance, or dwindling genuinely local news sources ('news deserts') [e.g. research from RISJ, doteveryone, Nesta forthcoming research]. This phenomenon is still under-prioritised, under-studied and insufficiently understood, perhaps because of an assumed safety net in the shape of the BBC's universal service obligations.

While there has not yet been systematic national-level work to map information inequality in the UK (nor is it yet part of the OCSI deprivation data set), and the place of journalism within this, it seems that one widely-felt outcome of the Covid-19 crisis is a renewed appreciation (in some quarters) of journalism manifestly explaining and exposing in the public interest. This is particularly needed on the local level, as campaigns such as #ThereWithYou and #SaveIndependentNews show. Place-based philanthropic funders like Lankelly Chase are becoming more attuned to this, and are starting to think about how they

can support public interest journalism as part of local ecosystems - this may also become true over time of the UK community foundations.

This comes within the context of what the WHO has called an 'infodemic', in the latest wave of concern over misinformation (on which First Draft remains a key voice that may be too busy to make a submission, but whose experience should be taken into account by the Inquiry). While misinformation (as a catch-all term for a range of information disorders, as explained by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan) is rife, especially in private messaging networks, and methods to counter this are finding support, perhaps because they feel practical and tangible, it is crucial that there is also investment in credible information with clear and transparent provenance. Sectors like healthcare, justice, education, and business all rely on the integrity, quality and accessibility of information – and journalism is a key pillar of gathering, testing and distributing such trustworthy information.

There needs to be broad-based debate on how this role is evolving, and how it gets funded in a way that secures its long-term future, encourages continued innovation and new entrants, and protects its integrity and independence. If the Lords could stimulate such a debate – perhaps by publishing an open and commentable version of their report, or holding some form

Potential responses to these challenges:

- Whether through a patchwork of organisations, networks and institutions, or through the endowment of a new standalone independent institution (the IPIN proposed by Dame Frances Cairncross in her 2019 report), the public interest journalism (and information) field in the UK needs a centre of gravity. This can help better map and understand the field, coordinate and resource research, mobilise, align and aggregate funding, and represent the field more effectively than is currently done. The government's grounds for not founding/funding such a body at the time were about whether it was appropriate for the government to be involved in establishing such a body and whether this might run counter to press freedom principles. While the financial environment for such a measure might have changed, the rationale is stronger than before. Currently the field has no dispassionate venue that sits apart from the fray, in which the many parts of the field - journalists, unions, tech giants, startups, legacy media, nationals, regionals, philanthropy and investors - can meet and discuss the challenges that face the field, outside of e.g. the Advisory Board of the Nesta Future News Pilot Fund. Press freedom principles are more threatened by not having such a centre and advocate for the field and its standards than by the government establishing or endowing such a centre, perhaps in partnership with other funders - philanthropic, individual or citizen crowdfunding.
- Engagement with philanthropic funders and investors to explore joint mechanisms whereby - perhaps like the recently announced Future Fund, or the EU's InvestEU programme, or in mission-oriented investment methods advocated by the Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose at UCL - greater amounts of money can be made available to stimulate the public interest news and information ecosystem (in addition to a renewal and upgrade of funds for innovation through the Nesta Future News Fund). Perhaps some of this could be, in the manner of Channel 4, be channelled through public and private news media, in the form of commissioning budgets to catalyse and support a diverse independent journalism and information sector - a flotilla of genuinely diverse smaller organisations and units spread across the country.

- The U-turn on considering the case for charitable status for journalism - which Dame Frances noted in her report as the area that received the most diverse and positive input in the corpus of submissions - needs to be reconsidered. The case is most persuasively and forensically argued in a parallel submission from the Public Benefit Journalism Research Centre (PBJRC), a research body that has been formed by a range of stakeholders - including me - in the journalism field in the UK who believe strongly that the conditions and the criteria for considering journalism as a standalone charitable purpose in its own right have changed, and that the arguments now are quite compelling. My work involves working with many philanthropic funders across the UK and beyond, and the single thing they say would unlock their ability to fund public interest, public benefit and investigative journalism to a much higher degree is if journalism organisations had a clear pathway and criteria for establishing charitable status.

Responses to specific questions:

How should journalism be defined?

Since journalism as a profession, trade or mindset (however one chooses to define it) has evolved and must evolve further¹, notions of what a journalist is or should be can vary wildly, likewise assessments of its value, as the range of submissions are likely to reflect.

It may not be productive for the Committee to try to too narrowly or definitively define journalism. As part of my work for Nesta on the Future News Pilot Fund, for example, I researched and read 31 separate definitions - each by respected and credible organisations and networks in the journalism field - of 'public interest journalism', ranging from public service media to investigative journalism, from the perspective of minorities to that of millennials. While there certainly are commonalities between these definitions, each reflects the mission and ideology of the organisation itself, the conditions under which it was created, and the particular priorities and needs of the communities these organisations serve.

One of the major learnings emerging from the research I conducted on investigative journalism around the world (including in the UK) in 2019 was that, while some had very clear ideas about what investigative journalism was, others, particularly those working nearer the grassroots, or within particularly straitened circumstances, were more fluid and flexible about what constitutes investigative journalism, according to the context in which it was being conducted. Journalism has - in many contexts - disaggregated into smaller pieces of formerly integrated journalistic work, and this has meant that smaller, more specialised units doing pieces of the puzzle can also be part of the journalism field.

It is worth reiterating - partly in response to the question *What qualifications do professional journalists need?* - that there is no single definition of what journalism is, who is a journalist, and what skills or credentials they need in order to be able to practice journalism. This was reflected in the recent guidance allowing journalists - confirmed by the government as Key Workers, and journalism as an essential service - to continue working during the Covid-19 lockdown, if they were carrying a press card, or a letter from their employer.

¹ Mark Deuze and Tamara Witschge, Beyond journalism: Theorizing the transformation of journalism (Journalism 19(2), 2017)

It is also well-established in international standards. The London-based Media Legal Defence Initiative's *Training Manual on International and Comparative Media and Freedom of Expression Law* quotes the *Inter-American Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression*: "[t]he requirement of a university degree for the practice of journalism constitute[s] an unlawful restriction of freedom of expression." The three special mandates on freedom of expression at the OAS, UN and OSCE have stated that: "[T]here should be no legal restrictions on who may practise journalism.""

In paragraph 44 of its General Comment 34, the UN's Human Rights Council stated: "Journalism is a function shared by a wide range of actors, including professional full-time reporters and analysts, as well as bloggers and others who engage in forms of self publication in print, on the internet or elsewhere, and general State systems of registration or licensing of journalists are incompatible with [freedom of expression as a vehicle for transparency and accountability]."

And, as noted by UK freedom of expression NGO Article 19 in 2013: "The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (COE) has adopted an equally broad definition of the term 'journalist' [as "any natural or legal person who is regularly or professionally engaged in the collection and dissemination of information to the public via any means of mass communication."] It has also called on member states to:

"Adopt a new, broad notion of media which encompasses all actors involved in the production and dissemination, to potentially large numbers of people, of content (for example information, analysis, comment, opinion, education, culture, art and entertainment in text, audio, visual, audiovisual or other form) and applications which are designed to facilitate interactive mass communication (for example social networks) or other content-based large-scale interactive experiences (for example online games), while retaining (in all these cases) editorial control or oversight of the contents."

What is the difference between 'citizen journalism' and other forms of journalism?

I refer the Committee to the international standards mentioned above.

Both in respect of 'citizen journalism', and in terms of others that may be proposed to the Committee (e.g. 'solutions journalism', 'constructive journalism', 'engaged journalism' among others), it may be instructive to look at this extract from a Hans-Bredow-Institut research project called [X Journalism](#)², which seeks to capture the many different sub-genres of journalism, through the following typology:

1. a specific motivation or reporting style (e.g., 'solutions', 'green', 'partisan' journalism, but also classical forms, such as investigative journalism); (62 cases)
2. a (novel) technology or data-led approach used at different stages of the journalistic production process, for example, for gathering or presenting news (e.g., 'sensor', 'drone', 'augmented' journalism); (27 cases)
3. a thematic focus or beat (e.g. 'politics', 'sports', 'technology' journalism); (23 cases)

² Wiebke Loosen, Laura Ahva, Julius Reimer, Paul Solbach, Mark Deuze & Lorenz Matzat. "X Journalism". Exploring journalism's diverse meanings through the names we give it" (Submitted to 'Journalism' in Dec 2019)

4. a particular kind of audience relationship in terms of participatory openness, publics reached, etc. (e.g., 'engagement', 'millennial', 'citizen' journalism); (21 cases)
5. a particular type of (distribution) medium or channel ('print', 'Facebook', 'Snapchat' journalism) (21 cases)
6. a distinct form of organizational or economic model in terms of a particular structure or process of newswork, funding or business arrangement, etc. (e.g., 'crowdfunded', 'post-industrial', 'process' journalism); (20 cases)
7. a particular place or locus or, conversely, the decreasing importance of place when it comes to news use (e.g. 'hyperlocal', 'global', 'mobile' journalism); (13 cases)
8. a time-related dimension as expressed in 'slow journalism' or 'real-time journalism', which refers to the speed of journalistic production and publication cycles. (3 cases)

This typology classifies 'citizen' journalism as one driven by a particular kind of audience relationship, which in this case means involvement of citizens particularly in the gathering and dissemination of eyewitness or participant journalistic material. Even this term sits only as one among 17 terms they identify in this area over 40 years (see figure on p15).

One key difference between journalism and what the call for evidence perhaps has in mind as 'citizen journalism' is that journalism is produced to transparent codes of conduct and ethics, in line with an editorial policy, and usually with a form of accountability or redress - whether through a self-regulatory procedure, a mandatory regulator, an ombudsman system, a Readers' Editor or representative, or similar structure.

How can public policy improve media literacy, particularly among those who have a low level of digital literacy?

It is extremely difficult to present and entrench a culture of understanding of and respect for the best parts of journalism through public policy in an environment where those leading public policy are also attacking the institutions producing journalism individually and collectively. Given that public attitudes research shows that trust in journalism (without disaggregating sub-categories with potentially higher trust ratings like 'local' or 'investigative') is already low, this is a dangerous gambit, the consequences of which can be seen during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It strikes me that, in addition to a broad, evidence-based and sustained public debate about the media we want and need, before prescribing media literacy as the silver bullet, policy makers, legislators, funders, investors and even journalists themselves could benefit from accessible overviews of the different theories about journalism and media that have been developed over the last century. This would better inform policy, public debate and programme design. If we can discuss epidemiology as a society, we can discuss media theory.

What are the main challenges for freelance journalists? How could public policy better support them?

The Committee should already be aware of the [National Union of Journalists' advocacy to the government](#) during the current Covid-19 crisis on behalf of freelance journalists. Rates of pay are a huge source of frustration for freelancers, and commentators like Heidi N Moore have called much recent public attention to the issue of exploitative pay practices in the journalism field.

Why is the journalism profession not more representative of the population? How could this be addressed?

The Committee should be aware through its own research and through other submissions of key research and groups in this area - the NCTJ, the Sutton Trust, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, the Nesta Future News Pilot Fund, among others. Initiatives run by the Media Trust, the BBC, startup PressPad, and the Guardian, among others, specifically attempt to address matters of under-representation (including gender, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic, regional, LGBTQI) in the sector. Others may address diversity questions within larger news media organisations, like the BBC, NewsUK or the regional news groups.

My own contribution focuses on a case from the past which may offer inspiration for how public policy might intervene productively to stimulate diversity in the sector in a different way. (This derives from a recent conversation I had with Matt Locke, Director of Storythings, and of the forthcoming [Public Media Stack](#) project, about gaps in the UK public interest journalism ecosystem. I refer to this with his permission.) Matt suggested that the policy and structural questions around at the birth of Channel 4 might bear fruitful comparison with the current situation regarding a diversification and reorganization of the journalism field in the UK.

The following articles ([Prospect Magazine](#); [Lux Online](#)) illuminate different aspects of this history, particularly in how the independent film-making sector came together to find a home on Channel 4. [This piece](#) gives the most comprehensive overview, summing it up thus: "That [Channel 4] came into existence at all is amazing, given how vested interests operate in the UK and given the forces stacked against innovation and against pluralism within the reigning institutions. And yet, one day in 1982, a national television channel went on the air fed by some 200 new enterprises that had sprung into existence seemingly overnight."

The independent public interest sector in the UK has few comparable opportunities, and while there are many aspects of the origins of Channel 4 that do not map across to the current situation, there are others that might. The Covid-19 crisis is having ruinous effects on the already precarious journalism sector as it stands. It is accelerating the long-term trends that the sector has been ill-equipped to deal with, and may lead to mass closures and layoffs, leaving swathes of the country – and many of its most marginalized communities - media-dark. If some form of life-raft funding is forthcoming from the government to help mitigate the worst effects of this crisis on public interest media of all types across the country, it is to be hoped that a flotilla of small and medium-sized media, surrounding the larger vessels of the FT, BBC, NewsUK and so on, might survive to 2021 and beyond. These larger orgs could be incentivized or subsidised to support the wider ecosystem in some form of approach inspired by the Channel 4 example.

One question posed by an interviewee for my work on investigative journalism was "Should all organisations meeting certain criteria receive a public interest information subsidy, or a universal basic income for public interest or investigative journalism?" Something similar to this was proposed by Douglas McCabe of Enders Analysis in his set of proposals for emergency funding to the journalism sector in March 2020 – a grant to qualifying organisations of £5,000 per each FTE journalist role.

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