

Bob Ward and Katrine Petersen—written evidence (FOJ0069)

Submission to the inquiry into 'The future of journalism' by the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee

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Summary

1. This submission addresses the future of journalism specifically in relation to the issue of climate change. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of their institutions.
2. Journalists are a major source of information about climate change for the UK public. While most reporting of climate change is still carried out by specialist journalists, usually science and environment correspondents, a wider range of journalists are also providing additional coverage across a wide range of broadcast, print and online media.
3. Information about climate change provided by journalists is not always trusted. This is undoubtedly connected to generally low levels of trust in journalists to tell the truth. However, there is some evidence that trust in journalists is also related to the extent that they reflect the same views as their audiences.
4. There is evidence that some broadcast, print and online media promote climate change denial and other inaccurate and misleading information about climate change, although this is not usually provided by journalists. Climate change denial is usually found in right-leaning newspapers and online media, which are not required to be impartial. Systematically inaccurate and misleading information about climate change is most often, but not always, promoted in newspaper opinion articles, often written by individuals who are not journalists and who have no scientific training or qualifications. Comment desks rarely fact-check opinion articles about climate change.
5. The requirement by broadcast journalists to be impartial can also sometimes lead to 'false balance' with the over-representation of views promoting climate change denial. The presenters of broadcast news and current affairs programmes are often unable or unwilling to challenge inaccurate and misleading claims about climate change during interviews.
6. The regulators of both broadcast and print media have a track record of allowing the dissemination of inaccurate and misleading information about climate change as 'opinions', even though it puts audiences at risk and undermines informed decision-making.
7. The accuracy of information about climate change that is disseminated by the media would be improved by allowing science and environment reporters to participate in the quality control processes (e.g. fact-checking) for opinion articles and broadcast news interviews.

8. The standards of journalism, properly upheld, should ensure that it is a more trusted source of information about climate change than social media.

Journalists as sources of information about climate change

9. Journalists are a major source of information about climate change for the UK public. They play a vital role by framing the issue, and in reporting on the latest findings and policy developments in an accessible way. Journalists promote the public interest by providing information that allows individuals to make better decisions in their own lives and to participate in policy-making processes. Media coverage of climate change has increased markedly since 2018 (see for instance Boykoff et al., 2020). Climate change is not only a science or environmental story, but also affects lifestyle choices, health, politics, business, economics, foreign affairs etc. While most reporting of climate change is still carried out by specialist journalists, usually science and environment correspondents, a wider range of journalists are also providing additional coverage across a wide range of broadcast, print and online media.
10. However, there have been many changes in journalistic practices and the competitive and regulatory environments within which journalists operate. The places where people find their news continues to diversify. These are also changing the way in which news about climate change is reported and consumed.
11. Most of the news coverage of climate change in the UK national broadcast, print and online media is still produced by environment and science reporters. These specialists often have extensive experience of covering new research results about climate change, and are well-equipped to critically evaluate the credibility of information. They usually have good networks of expert contacts who can provide comments and insights, either on- or off-the record. They are often also members of networks, such as the Association of British Science Writers (ABSW; one of us, Ward, is a co-opted member of the ABSW Executive Board). As a result of their training and experience, environment and science reporters are able to apply a level of understanding and knowledge that general reporters cannot, and so play a particularly important role in communicating relevant, timely and accurate information to the public about climate change. However, it is important to remember that environment and science reporters are journalists and should not be expected to promote uncritically the work of scientists and other researchers. Instead, they serve the public interest by providing scrutiny, and, when they occur, uncovering and reporting any examples of mistakes, incompetence or misconduct by researchers.
12. Many news organisations are experiencing greater financial pressures as a result of the growth of digital media, increases in competition and changes in business models (particularly for newspapers and magazines). Under these circumstances, some specialist roles, including science and environment reporters, may be under threat. The quality and quantity of reporting on climate change is likely to suffer if there is a reduction in the contributions of science and environment reporters.
13. Recent surveys confirm that the public relies heavily on journalists for information about environmental issues, but an increasing percentage also use social media sources. A survey in 2019 conducted across the European Union (European Commission, 2020) found that 68 per cent of the UK public listed television news among their three main sources of information about the environment, with 62 per cent selecting 'social networks and the internet' and 32 per cent choosing newspapers. The percentage for each source was higher than recorded in a previous survey in 2017.

14. This is broadly in line with general patterns of news consumption. The most recent research for Ofcom (2019) about news consumption by the UK public in 2018-19 found that 49 per cent use social media, compared with 75 per cent who rely on television and 49 per cent who use print or online newspapers. Of those obtaining news from social media, three-quarters claim to use Facebook, with around one-third using Twitter and WhatsApp. The research found that of those using social media, 41 per cent mostly rely on posts for news, while 30 per cent mostly get their news directly from news organisations' websites or apps, and 25 per cent depend on both equally. Overall 47 per cent said that television was the single most important sources of news, followed by social media (16 per cent) and newspapers (7 per cent). Among those aged 16 to 24, social media was the most important source for 43 per cent, followed by television (23 per cent).
15. Much of the public, and the majority of young people, believe that the media does not provide enough coverage of climate change. An opinion poll carried out in early March 2020 by YouGov (Conner, 2020) found that 40 per cent of the British public believe the media does not pay enough attention to climate change, while 26 per cent believe it pays too much attention to the issue. Among those aged 18-24, 60 per cent think that not enough attention is paid to climate change by the media, and only 15 per cent feel there is too much attention.
16. However, despite the widespread desire for more coverage about climate change, the public do not necessarily trust journalists and the information they provide about the issue. A survey by Steentjes et al. (2020) found that when a representative sample of the British public were presented with a list of organisations and individuals, and asked to indicate which they would "go to in order to find out information about climate change", only 14 per cent selected "journalists/the media", compared with, for example, 42 per cent who chose the Environment Agency and 38 per cent who identified "scientists". Only 25 per cent of respondents indicated that they would somewhat or strongly trust "journalists/the media" as "sources of information about climate change and its potential impacts".
17. There is a marked difference in how much the public trusts newspapers and television news as sources of information about climate change. A survey in March 2019 of a representative sample of the UK public, which was commissioned by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2019), asked respondents: "How much do you trust each of the following to provide accurate information about climate change?" When asked about newspapers or newspaper websites, 39 per cent said they "trust a great deal" or "trust to some extent", while 55 per cent indicated that they "do not have much trust" or "do not trust at all". When asked about "TV news such as BBC, ITV, Sky", 59 per cent said they "trust a great deal" or "trust to some extent", while 39 per cent indicated that they "do not have much trust" or "do not trust at all".
18. This is broadly consistent with the results of the annual public opinion survey by Ipsos MORI of 'Trust in Professions' which show relatively low levels of trust in journalists, compared with, for instance, television newsreaders and scientists. The most recent results (Clemence, 2019) show that only 26 per cent of the public generally trust journalists to tell the truth, compared with 61 per cent for television newsreaders and 84 per cent for scientists.
19. The Ofcom (2019) survey about news consumption by the UK public in 2018-19 found that 71 per cent who rely on television, 67 per cent who depend on radio and 66 per cent who use print editions of newspapers believe that they are trustworthy, while only 38 per cent of social media users think it is a trustworthy source. These figures mirror the views about the accuracy of news sources, with

72, 67 and 66 per cent who rely on, respectively, television, radio and print editions of newspapers believe the news they receive is accurate. However, of those who use social media, only 39 per cent believe the news is accurate.

20. There is a large variation in how much readers highly rate the trustworthiness of the newspapers they read, from 58 per cent for the 'Evening Standard' to 79 per cent for 'The Guardian'/'The Observer'. These closely match the ratings for accuracy for each newspaper.

Public understanding of climate change and journalists

21. There is a strong consensus among researchers that the rise in global mean surface temperature since the late 19th century, and associated changes in the climate, are due to human activities, particularly emissions of carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases from the consumption of fossil fuels. A special report published in October 2018 by the world's most authoritative source of the scientific evidence, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, concluded: "Reflecting the long-term warming trend since pre-industrial times, observed global mean surface temperature (GMST) for the decade 2006–2015 was 0.87°C (likely between 0.75°C and 0.99°C) higher than the average over the 1850–1900 period (very high confidence). Estimated anthropogenic global warming matches the level of observed warming to within ±20% (likely range)." A recent study by Cook et al. (2016) concluded that between 90 and 100 per cent of publishing climate scientists agree that "humans are causing recent global warming", based on a review of six independent analyses.
22. However, only a large minority among the UK public recognises that human activities are overwhelmingly the largest driver of climate change. A regular survey of public attitudes commissioned by the UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2019), found that, in March 2019, 48 per cent of the public agreed that climate change is caused mainly or entirely by human activities, 40 per cent believed human activities and "natural processes" are both partly responsible, and 6 per cent indicated that natural processes are mainly or entirely the cause. By comparison, the same survey carried out in June 2012 found that 38 per cent of the public accepted that climate change is mainly or entirely due to human activities, 42 per cent said both human activities and natural processes are the cause, and 15 per cent thought natural processes are mainly or entirely responsible.
23. It is not completely clear why more of the population does not accept the scientific consensus on the causes of climate change, but it may be that there is a lack of awareness of the extent to which scientists are in agreement. A survey of four European countries carried out in 2016 (Steentjes et al., 2017) asked respondents: "To the best of your knowledge, what proportion of scientists agree that climate change is happening and that humans are largely causing it?" Only 30 per cent of UK respondents answered: "The vast majority of scientists agree (80% or more)". A study of four European nations (France, Germany, Norway, UK) found that, in countries where the perceived extent of the scientific consensus was lower (Germany and the UK), respondents also believed less in the reality of climate change and in its anthropogenic origin (Bertoldo et al., 2019). Previous research has indicated that a significant proportion of the UK population are unaware of the extent of the scientific consensus.

Journalistic accuracy and impartiality on climate change

24. News journalists in the print, online and broadcast media are all subject to some form of regulation that requires them to seek accuracy in their reporting.

25. Broadcast journalists are subject to statutory regulation through Ofcom. Section five of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code (2019) on "due impartiality and due accuracy and undue prominence of views and opinions" states: "News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality". BBC journalists are also subject to the broadcaster's Editorial Guidelines, section three of which states: "The BBC is committed to achieving due accuracy in all its output. This commitment is fundamental to our reputation and the trust of audiences. The term 'due' means that the accuracy must be adequate and appropriate to the output, taking account of the subject and nature of the content, the likely audience expectation and any signposting that may influence that expectation."
26. Newspaper journalists are subject to a fragmented framework of self-regulation. Following the phone-hacking scandal, the Press Complaints Commission, to which almost all newspapers subscribed, closed in 2014. Although the Leveson Inquiry (2012) recommended the creation of a new regulator with a clearer mandate and stronger powers, a lack of agreement between the Government and the newspaper industry has led to the development of different self-regulatory processes. Some newspapers, such as 'The Guardian', 'The Observer', 'The i', 'The Independent', and 'Financial Times', now rely solely on their own internal processes for dealing with complaints, including about the publication of inaccurate and misleading information. Other newspapers have also established the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO), whose Complaints Committee considers cases of potential breaches of the Editors' Code of Practice (Editors' Code Committee, 2019). Clause 1i) of the Code states: "The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text".
27. Broadcast journalists are required to practice "due impartiality" by the Ofcom Broadcasting Code, which describes the meaning of the term as follows: "'Due' is an important qualification to the concept of impartiality. Impartiality itself means not favouring one side over another. 'Due' means adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme. So 'due impartiality' does not mean an equal division of time has to be given to every view, or that every argument and every facet of every argument has to be represented. The approach to due impartiality may vary according to the nature of the subject, the type of programme and channel, the likely expectation of the audience as to content, and the extent to which the content and approach is signalled to the audience. Context, as defined in Section Two: Harm and Offence of the Code, is important."
28. Newspaper journalists are not required to practice impartiality by the Editors' Code of Practice, Clause 1iv) of which states: "The Press, while free to editorialise and campaign, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact."
29. Despite this statutory and self-regulatory systems, there are clear examples of inaccurate and misleading information about climate change being disseminated to the public because of the way in which "due impartiality" and "due accuracy" have been interpreted by newspapers and broadcasters.
30. For instance, the requirement for broadcast journalists to practice "due impartiality" has sometimes led to 'false balance' with the over-representation of views promoting climate change denial. There have been examples of 'climate change sceptics' being interviewed by journalists on news programmes during which inaccurate and misleading claims have been made without their veracity being challenged. Although the interviewers are often experienced journalists, they are usually not science or environment correspondents or editors. Complaints about these breaches of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code have occasionally succeeded (Ward, 2014; BBC, 2018). However, not all complaints about these breaches have

been upheld (Ward, 2017), with regulators arguing that inaccurate and misleading claims can be broadcast as 'points of view'.

31. A study of the presence of climate change denial in UK newspapers between 2007 and 2011 (Painter and Gavin, 2016) found that "uncontested skeptical voices were particularly prevalent in opinion pieces and editorials in right-leaning newspapers" particularly in the period between 2009 and 2010. In addition, the researchers discovered that "skeptical voices or opinions were more likely to be included in pieces written by in-house non-specialist columnists than by environment editors or correspondents". A study by Brüggemann and Engesser (2017) also found that the promotion of climate change denial in UK newspapers was almost exclusively found in right-leaning titles.
32. Painter and Gavin (2016) suggested that inaccurate and misleading articles which promote climate change denial may both reflect and reinforce the views of readers of right-leaning newspapers, which frame the existence of climate change in terms of politics as well as science. Numerous studies have found that an individual's view on climate change is often related to his or her political beliefs. A meta-analysis of 25 polls and 171 academic studies across 56 nations (Hornsey et al., 2016) concluded that "people who intend to vote for more liberal political parties are more likely to believe in climate change than those who align themselves with relatively conservative political parties".
33. Right-leaning newspapers, particularly 'The Daily Telegraph', 'Daily Mail', 'The Times', 'Daily Express', 'The Sunday Telegraph' and 'The Mail on Sunday', continue to promote climate change denial to some extent (Ward, 2016). Most, but not all, inaccurate and misleading information about climate change is disseminated in opinion articles. Complaints about these articles, which breach the Editors' Code of Practice, are rarely upheld by IPSO. Of 15 complaints about the accuracy of articles on climate change since IPSO was established in 2014, only three have been found to be in breach by its Complaints Committee, while another was resolved through mediation. It does not seek expert advice on climate change when considering complaints, even when it is clear that the inaccuracies have put readers at risk of harm (Ward, 2019). Scientists who have submitted complaints have often criticised the outcome (Williamson and Sloan, 2017).

Social media as a source of information about climate change

34. As noted in paragraph 19, a recent survey by Ofcom (2019) found that less than 40 per cent of the public who use social media as a main source of news believe that it is trustworthy or accurate, whereas television, radio and printed newspapers are rated much more highly. This may be because journalists have professional standards, often reinforced by regulation, that value accuracy and fact-checking. Such standards can be absent from social media, including for information about climate change (Stover, 2019). For instance, Allgaier (2019) found that, in a random sample of 200 videos about climate change on YouTube, 107 promoted views denying the existence of anthropogenic climate change or which "propagate straightforward conspiracy theories about climate engineering and climate change". These videos had more views than those presenting views that are consistent with the scientific consensus on climate change. A preliminary study by Marlow et al. (2020) identified the importance of automated users, or 'bots', in spreading false information, including 'news' stories promoting climate change denial, on Twitter. It is also known that social media can facilitate homophily, a tendency to seek out the views of like-minded individuals. A study by Williams et al. (2015) of Twitter users concluded that "social media discussions of climate change often occur within polarising 'echo chambers', but also within 'open forums', mixed-attitude communities that reduce polarisation and stimulate debate". Social media

companies, such as Google (Schindler, 2018) have pledged to tackle the spread of misinformation but have yet to purge inaccurate and misleading content from their platforms.

35. The European Commission (2020) survey found that the UK was well above the average for the 28 Member States of 48 per cent listing social networks and the internet as a main source of information about environmental issues. Among those relying on social networks and the internet as a main source of news about the environment, 77 per cent were using Facebook, followed by YouTube (31 per cent), Instagram (26 per cent), WhatsApp (20 per cent) and Twitter (19 per cent).

Conclusion and recommendations

36. Journalists, particularly environment and science reporters, serve the public interest by communicating relevant, timely and accurate information about climate change. This promotes informed decision-making by the public, businesses and policy-makers. Journalists are, in general, a more reliable source of information than social media due to their established professional standards and practices (eg fact-checking).
37. However, parts of the broadcast, print and online media have been criticised for providing too little coverage of climate change or promoting climate change denial. Most, but not all, of the dissemination of inaccurate and misleading information occurs under the guise of 'opinions' or 'points of view'. In the case of broadcast media, interviewees may be experienced journalists but may not have the requisite knowledge or understanding of climate change needed to challenge misinformation. Similarly, comment desks of newspapers are unwilling or unable to fact-check articles about climate change before they are published. The dissemination of inaccurate and misleading information about climate change contributes to the public's lack of trust in journalists and the media.
38. The public interest would be better served if science and environment reporters played a stronger role in ensuring the accuracy of information disseminated by the broadcast, print and online media. Specifically, broadcast interviews about climate change are likely to be more enlightening if carried out by journalists, such as science or environment reporters, who are well-informed about the issue. Similarly, comment desks of newspapers would be more able to ensure the accuracy of opinion articles about climate change if they were fact-checked before publication by journalists, such as science or environment reporters, who are well-informed about the issue.
39. Regulatory processes, particularly those operated by IPSO and Ofcom, should include consultation with relevant experts when investigating complaints of inaccurate and misleading coverage about climate change.

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