

Written evidence submitted by the National Council for the Training of Journalists

The Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors – an inquiry by the House of Commons Digital, Media, Culture & Sport Select Committee

Summary

1. The NCTJ exists to maintain high standards of journalism training and to promote onward skills development among working journalists in the UK.
2. As a charity which relies on financial support from the media industry, it faces potentially significant challenges in light of the major economic downturn being experienced by the journalism sector.
3. The uncertainty in the further and higher education sectors, around both exam sittings and future student numbers means the NCTJ could face a major squeeze to its other major revenue stream.
4. Disruption to the practical journalism training overseen by the NCTJ will have significant consequences in turn to the journalism sector, which relies on a steady stream of “newsroom-ready” junior journalists who have been taught the fundamentals of the trade to a high standard.
5. At a time when the news sector already faces the challenges of combatting the fake news and conspiracy theories that run rife in public discourse, damage to the pipeline of trained talent will erode trust by impacting on the quality of output.
6. Aside from training of students (and the development of trainees in work), the NCTJ oversees a number of innovative projects (such as the Facebook-funded Community News Project) and is in the midst of developing new e-learning platforms to aid the delivery both of existing distance learning courses and new skills development programmes. It also conducts regular research on the journalism sector, to inform both its own work and the outlook of the industry. A squeeze on funding for future projects puts these work strands in jeopardy.
7. Diversifying the journalism sector lies at the heart of the NCTJ’s mission. It oversees the Journalism Diversity Fund, which distributes bursaries enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds with financial need to undertake professional NCTJ qualifications. A fundraising drive to grow the fund is likely to stall as a result of present circumstances.
8. The NCTJ recognises that frontline journalism outlets have immediate and urgent needs, due to the advertising and circulation decline witnessed in recent weeks. It believes it is vital that the sector receives aid at the coal face if it is to survive the crisis created by the pandemic.

9. However, it urges government to bear in mind that parts of the journalism sector which at first glance may seem peripheral, are in fact fundamental to its future sustainability and health. Professional training is a key example and the NCTJ hopes policy-makers will consider its needs in the months ahead.

Introduction

10. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the news media sector has been profound. It has highlighted fundamental editorial strengths, while simultaneously emphasising structural, economic weaknesses. It has also called into question the relationship between politics and the media, and the public's attitude towards journalism.
11. For the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), matters which affect the media industry inevitably have knock-on consequences. We submit this response to the Committee's call for evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors, focussing specifically on the media and journalism – and especially with regard to the consequences for journalism training, qualifications, standards and diversity.

The NCTJ

12. The NCTJ exists to maintain high standards of journalism training and to promote onward skills development in the UK news media. The production of high-quality journalism is the NCTJ's ultimate aim and achievement.
13. It is an industry-backed and supported charity which was set up in 1951. For nearly 70 years it has catered for the changing skills needs of the news media sector. It is an awarding organisation, regulated by Ofqual in England, and works closely with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IFATE) to develop and assess journalism apprenticeships. The NCTJ is the only organisation in the UK which is solely focussed on developing and awarding journalism qualifications.
14. While the charity's roots were in print journalism, today it prepares students for careers in all forms of media – print, digital and broadcast – and for jobs beyond traditional journalism. Our qualifications have evolved in line with industry requirements thanks to input from journalism practitioners across the industry. We also work increasingly to upskill journalists throughout their careers.
15. The NCTJ works with – and is supported by – strategic partners from across the media sector. The NCTJ has an income of around £1m per annum.

Impact of Covid-19 on the NCTJ

16. At the most obvious end of the scale, a financial squeeze for publishers and broadcasters is likely to put pressure on the portion of the NCTJ's income which comes directly from media companies. Approximately one third of the

charity's revenue currently comes via annual donations from our strategic partners within the sector, and from various sponsorship arrangements in respect of specific events.

17. Even prior to the coronavirus outbreak, some smaller news publishers had indicated that budgetary pressures might in due time compromise their ability to make financial contributions to the NCTJ. With training-related costs often regarded as discretionary, we are naturally concerned that there is significant potential for a downturn in the monies received by the NCTJ from the industry it serves.
18. Of equal concern, however, is that the present emergency has created significant uncertainty in the further and higher education sectors.
19. In the short-term, this is manifested in challenges around sitting exams. For practical, occupational competency qualifications such as the NCTJ's Diploma in Journalism (the principal, pre-entry qualification taken by prospective journalists), substituting exams for tutor-based assessments is not a conceivable option since it would compromise the qualifications' validity. Consequently, at the present time NCTJ exams have been postponed rather than cancelled. We are also working hard to test remote exam solutions which will maintain the integrity of our qualifications.
20. Whatever the outcome of those efforts, there will be a significant cost to the NCTJ. A viable, remote exams system will have a price tag attached, which the charity will have to fund from its core budget, unless an external backer can be found. The likely cost of a remote proctoring service is in the region of £30,000.
21. If remote solutions prove not to be viable, and if we are left with no alternative but to cancel exams, there will be a subsequent cost via lost exam fees.
22. In the longer term, there is a broader question mark over the ability of the further and higher education sectors to withstand the financial consequences of the pandemic. Some institutions are planning for an 80 to 100 per cent reduction in overseas student numbers for the next academic year. There has also been discussion about placing a cap on the number of students any one university may accept in September. Government bailouts may be required by the hardest hit institutions.
23. Add to this the uncertain economic outlook for the news media – and the potential impact on job numbers – it is a matter of serious concern to the NCTJ that the number of people studying for the industry-backed Diploma in Journalism (which can be taught as part of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree, or as a standalone qualification) could decline significantly in the coming year.
24. Once again, there will be a financial consequence for the NCTJ itself if such a decline comes to pass, since almost two thirds of the charity's revenue is generated by the income associated with accrediting courses and awarding qualifications to successful candidates. While the NCTJ has appropriate

reserves for a charity of its size, plainly the worst-case scenario – in which student numbers see a sustained decline and news publishers continue to be squeezed – would be existential.

Why does this matter for the news media sector?

25. In the long run, problems experienced by the NCTJ will, in their turn, have knock on consequences for the industry it services.
26. A major disruption to the established pipeline of journalistic talent will eventually undermine the fundamental strength of news organisations which rely on new recruits being largely “newsroom ready” and which, for the most part, do not have the capacity to train unqualified journalists solely on the job.
27. At a time when the role of the news media in all its forms has been demonstrated to be so crucial, the ongoing quality of UK journalism is patently paramount. In the coming months, as the sector endeavours to surmount the economic legacy of the pandemic, the excellence imperative will be heightened. After all, it is clear that some sections of the public continue to question the merits of some parts of the industry: the need to restore trust will plainly be affected if those entering the profession do not have suitable training in the fundamentals of the trade.
28. Quality training already plays a key part in media messaging around trust. The NCTJ has recently discussed whether a publisher or broadcaster’s commitment to employing qualified editorial staff could be a part of a kitemarking scheme, similar to that deployed in respect of membership of the self-regulatory regime overseen by IPSO.
29. Some publishers already highlight this point to their readers – and indeed have specifically done so during the coronavirus emergency. The following note from the editor appeared on online articles published by JPI titles:

Thank you for reading this story on our website.

But I also have an urgent plea to make of you.

In order for us to continue to provide high quality local news on this free-to-read site and in print, please purchase a copy of our newspaper as well. With the coronavirus lockdown having a major impact on our town centres and many of our valued advertisers - and consequently the advertising that we receive - we are more reliant than ever on you buying a copy.

Our journalists are highly trained by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) and our content is independently regulated by IPSO to some of the most rigorous standards anywhere in the world. Our content is universally trusted - as all independent research proves...

...We thank all our readers and advertisers for their understanding and support - and we wish YOU all the best in the coming weeks. Keep safe, and follow the Government advice. Thank you.

30. Given that 65 per cent of UK journalists hold an NCTJ qualification, the organisation’s importance ought to be clear enough. With plans to launch new e-learning platforms and a more structured programme of continued professional development later this year, the NCTJ’s role was set to take on

even greater significance: plainly those plans rely on raising additional funds, which must now be in doubt.

Impact on additional projects

31. Beyond its traditional position as an accrediting body and awarding organisation, the NCTJ has recently taken on a management and quality assurance role in several discrete projects that benefit the wider industry.
32. Most notable perhaps is its oversight of the Community News Project (the CNP), a partnership between the NCTJ, Facebook and nine regional news publishers. The CNP has enabled the employment of more than 80 reporters into positions focussed on communities which had been previously underserved. These journalists are receiving formal training during their two-year contracts, and are focussed on using digital as well as traditional methods of engagement with audiences.
33. With diversity set out as a key objective of the project, and recruitment processes adjusted in many instances, we have attained a remarkable 69 per cent per cent diversity rate, judged against a range of criteria (ethnicity, socio-economic background, sexuality, disability and educational attainment).
34. In 2019, the NCTJ entered into an innovative partnership with Nike, and one of our accredited training centres, PA Training, to create a bespoke course for individuals with no prior experience who had an interest in women's sports journalism. Built around our introductory qualification, the Certificate in Foundation Journalism (CFJ), the free course for around 20 students was an enormous success – both in terms of attracting a diverse cohort, and in developing some fundamental journalistic skills which will enable them either to study for a higher level qualification or seek work experience or internships with media companies.
35. And this year, the NCTJ has worked with disability charity, Ability Today, to create a bespoke course built around the CFJ qualification specifically targeted at prospective disabled journalists.
36. Plainly all these innovations have relied on external funding; funding which in turn has enabled the NCTJ to grow its capacity to develop existing and new areas of work. The loss of this type of funding would therefore not only have negative consequences for those learners from diverse backgrounds who are looking for opportunities to enter the industry, it would also have wider ramifications for the NCTJ's outreach efforts.

The impact on diversity in news

37. Diversity lies at the heart of the NCTJ's vision for training and the development of talent for the news media industry. Indeed, it has been a leader of efforts to make newsrooms more representative of their audiences, having established the Journalism Diversity Fund (JDF) in 2005 via a generous grant from the Newspaper Licensing Agency (NLA Media Access).

38. In the last 15 years, the JDF has awarded bursaries (at an average cost of £8,000 each) to 360 prospective students from diverse backgrounds who would otherwise not have been financially able to undertake a professional journalism qualification. 80 per cent of JDF recipients remain in the news media sector – a striking proportion when you consider the changing face of the industry. The fund is now sponsored by 13 media organisations.
39. This year, to mark the JDF's 15th anniversary, the NCTJ launched a fundraising drive, with the aim of boosting the JDF's annual income to half a million pounds (last year its revenue was a little over £300,000). While some early successes were achieved, the coronavirus outbreak has unsurprisingly put the brakes on our plans.
40. Notwithstanding the concerns already set out about potential uncertainty around student numbers in the coming academic years, it would plainly be a significant setback if the NCTJ was no longer in a position to offer financial assistance to deserving candidates. Indeed, given the wider economic downturn, it goes without saying that there is every likelihood of there being a high number of individuals in need of support when it comes to course fees or living costs.
41. While numerous initiatives in the arena of diversity and inclusion have emerged in recent years – many of them positive – the JDF remains a tried and tested programme, which is why so many employers have got behind it. Recipients of bursaries regularly say that they would not have entered journalism careers had it not been for the JDF.
42. The scheme's evolution since 2018 to include mentoring and work experience elements has been hugely beneficial to students and sponsors alike. If funding permits, the NCTJ has plans to expand the work of the scheme to tackle questions around career progression in particular.
43. If the positive work of the JDF is disrupted, the impact will be felt not only by centres running NCTJ courses, but also by the many publishers and broadcasters which have benefitted from the diverse talent unearthed and nurtured thanks to the scheme.

Continuous professional development

44. The NCTJ currently offers continuous professional development (CPD) to individuals and corporate clients – both via scheduled training events and bespoke short courses. Some of the NCTJ's strategic partners have worked with us to develop specific, accredited qualifications to use in-house as a means to develop staff skills.
45. Having recognised that there was – even before the coronavirus pandemic – an increasing training gap for in-work journalists, the NCTJ has recently been working to expand its CPD offer across the sector, beyond its existing qualifications.

46. The development of a new e-learning platform is well underway, enabling better access to existing distance learning options for students and trainee journalists. It will also open up new possibilities for training of more advanced professionals.
47. However, as things stand, the NCTJ will not – as is its preference – be in a position to offer CPD to in-work journalists on a charitable (i.e. free) basis. Courses and events will, for the most part, be commercial offerings. With media companies even more likely to have alternative financial priorities, we are concerned that CPD opportunities will not be taken up. Once again, the longer-term health of the industry will suffer.

Research

48. The NCTJ has long been committed to an on-going programme of research to provide the industry with up-to-date labour market information about journalism. This is used to inform our current and future strategy and to help us develop our projects and services so that they benefit everyone the charity helps.
49. Examples of recent research projects include:
[Destinations of Diploma Students](#), 2019
[Journalists at Work](#), 2018
[Diversity in Journalism](#), 2017
[Exploring Freelance Journalism](#), 2016
[Emerging Skills for Journalists](#), 2014
50. Self-evidently, commissioning a new research project every year is not a cheap endeavour. It is, however, a key demonstration of the NCTJ's service to the news media industry, since the findings of our research offer insights that go beyond the training arena.

Support during the present crisis

51. The NCTJ cannot offer a conclusive view as to the support offered to other parts of the news media industry (or the FE and higher education sectors) to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.
52. What we can assert is that the NCTJ itself has not been able to access support of any sort, either from government, grant-makers or the corporate sector. That largely reflects the very obvious urgency of others' needs, as well perhaps as underscoring the difficult position of organisations which fill a very niche role – even one which is very plainly in the public interest (especially in the medium to long term).

Conclusion and proposals

53. The NCTJ recognises of course that news publishers and broadcasters have immediate – and in some cases very urgent – needs as a result of the ongoing emergency. It is right that the government should support journalism at the front line; and the NCTJ welcomes initiatives to secure the short-term

future of journalistic outlets at the local and national level. The deployment of a public advertising and information campaign is one key element of that.

54. But looking to the future, the NCTJ urges government to consider the impact of the present circumstances on what might (perhaps unfairly) be regarded as the ancillary parts of the industry. After all, even in the worst-case scenario, journalism will survive in the UK. But its quality will not be sustained if the organisation responsible for serving the industry with vocationally qualified practitioners cannot continue its vital work.
55. The NCTJ is not a controversial organisation, nor a politicised one; nor is it one that tends to shout loudly about either its achievements or its needs. Yet its emphasis on top-class practical training, high ethical standards and industry-approved qualifications serves both the requirements of the sector, as well, ultimately, as the needs of those who wish to consume quality news media. The NCTJ is one of the only organisations to bring all parts of the news media, and all the major employers of journalists around the same table.
56. The NCTJ tends to be easily taken for granted. That puts it in a potentially difficult position. We trust that government will consider the broader needs of the sector, beyond the most immediate requirements of news providers themselves.

Areas of NCTJ work where financial support is most immediately needed:

- ❖ Transition to remote exam proctoring
- ❖ Introduction of new programme of professional skills development
- ❖ Journalism Diversity Fund
- ❖ Ongoing research programme

57. To end, we feel it prudent to note that the NCTJ had already expressed the view – prior to the onset of the Covid-19 emergency – that the time had come for policy interventions in the arena of journalism training.
58. In a submission to the ongoing enquiry by the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee into the future of journalism, the NCTJ set out a number of specific areas for policy-makers to consider, summarised as follows:
- A. Backing for NCTJ proposals around the delivery of skills development for in-work journalists (via NQJ-delivery and other upskilling programmes);
 - B. Greater incentives around the employment of apprentices (at both junior, and the upcoming senior, level)
 - C. Encouragement/incentives for universities to incorporate the practical, industry-backed Diploma in Journalism into journalism degree courses, to better equip those starting out in the industry
 - D. Backing for the Journalism Diversity Fund

- E. Support for raising the profile of journalism (and professional training) among school children
 - F. Recognition of the role played by regional media companies in journalism training via support for those putting candidates forward for the NQJ (senior journalist exam).
59. The detail of these suggestions, as set out to the House of Lords' committee, is set out in Appendix A.
60. The points made in that submission still stand, and are only made more urgent by current events. But there is perhaps a broader opportunity, as we move into an uncertain future, to re-emphasise the core values of trust, quality and rigour in our news media – all already hallmarks of the best that UK has to offer, and of the training structure overseen by the NCTJ.
61. We would welcome the chance to discuss the impact of the present crisis on journalism training and skills development with the DCMS Committee should it be possible.

Appendix A

The following extract is taken from Part III of the NCTJ's submission to the ongoing enquiry by the House of Lords' Communications and Digital Committee into the Future of Journalism. The numbering below relates to paragraph numbers of that earlier submission.

Proposals for policy-makers

103. Other parts of the creative industries (notably the screen sectors) have previously benefitted from public funding, in recognition of their value to the UK economy. The British Film Institute's Future Film Skills initiative in 2017 benefitted from £20m of National Lottery funding over five years, plus a £1m annual grant from the Department of Education – in addition to support from partners in industry and in the educational sector. Even putting the additional challenges of the coronavirus pandemic to one side, the NCTJ believes there is a degree of urgency for the journalism sector to be seen through that same lens of support (bearing in mind not only journalism's vital role to democratic accountability and public discourse, but also the value of journalism skills to the broader economy).
104. The news media sector plainly faces economic challenges – some parts of the industry more than others. And while governments have historically (and perhaps understandably) been cautious about direct funding for journalism (especially with regard to private companies), there is a strong case to support – at the least – ancillary services such as training, especially bearing in mind that training budgets have been squeezed in recent times. Ultimately, ensuring that journalists have professional skills helps to secure quality, and to engender trust between the news media and audiences. The present coronavirus crisis has demonstrated just how crucial it is to have professional journalists informing the public during challenging times.

105. As to specific public policy interventions, the NCTJ has a number of proposals which it hopes the Committee might consider.

Continuous professional development

106. The NCTJ plays a significant role in the continuous professional development of journalists, primarily through its senior level qualification, the NQJ. However, the number of people taking the NQJ is in decline (in part due to pressures on training budgets; partly because of the changing nature of career progression in the sector). The NCTJ's offer beyond the NQJ includes a range of events, seminars, bespoke courses and online learning; but due to a lack of funds, it can (for the most part) only be offered on a commercial basis – at a time when training budgets at most media companies have been cut.
107. We propose to move our work in the CPD arena onto a more formal/structured footing. Our plan is supported by the industry via our board of trustees, but it requires external funding if it is to be offered as a charitable endeavour, benefitting the entire sector (including freelancers and “non-mainstream” outlets).
108. Delivery of CPD training throughout the industry would enable us to strengthen existing partnerships both with industry organisations and our accredited training centres (as well as specialist organisations, for instance in the area of fact-checking and verification). It would ensure journalists developed their skills throughout their career (beyond “learning on the job”), and underscore the centrality of standards through learning. We see the proposal as intrinsically collaborative.

Support for apprenticeships

109. The junior journalist apprenticeship (which includes the NCTJ diploma as an integral element) has created a way into industry for people who do not wish (or cannot afford) to undertake degree courses. Many employers have taken advantage of the programme and have seen the benefits on a range of fronts.
110. However, because the apprenticeship levy cannot currently be used to fund salaries, some employers have not felt able to take apprentices on.
111. A senior level apprenticeship (incorporating the NQJ) is due to be launched this year. This will incentivise employers to upskill existing staff. Again, however, the limitations on the use of levy money may be off-putting to some employers.
112. Greater government support for/funding of apprenticeships in journalism would be very welcome. After all, apprenticeships help to address some of the key issues facing the sector: skills development, standards and diversity.

Incentivising universities to teach industry-backed qualification

113. The NCTJ is the only awarding body in the UK which focusses solely on developing and awarding journalism qualifications. We work with the industry (print, digital, broadcast) to ensure the qualifications remain relevant and practical. The Diploma in Journalism, our key pre-entry level qualification, currently prepares around 1,500 students each year for life in a newsroom.
114. At present, 56 courses at 34 training centres are accredited to provide diploma training (variously at universities, FE colleges and independent providers) in a variety of settings (BA, MA, standalone). There is, however, a burden on those

centres which teach the diploma – cost of accreditation, exam fees and the risk of student “failure” (the Diploma in Journalism is a challenging qualification, with only 20-30% of students attaining the “gold standard” of all As-Cs and 100 words per minute in shorthand). Yet we know from the available data that students with an NCTJ qualification are much more likely to enter the industry than those without, since editors know they will be able to hit the ground running.

115. A recognition of the importance of this industry standard, and financial incentives for those universities prepared to offer the diploma within their BA or MA programmes would ensure the pipeline of practically-trained talent does not dry up. It would also ensure students are better equipped to choose courses that give them the best chance of career success at the least cost (we note, for instance, that many would-be journalists take the NCTJ Diploma in Journalism *after* having already completed a non-accredited journalism degree because they realise too late that they need an additional qualification to get a job).

Backing for the Journalism Diversity Fund

116. The NCTJ launched the JDF 15 years ago and has supported 347 people from diverse backgrounds (all of whom had financial need) through diploma courses. It is a tried and tested scheme but we are currently seeking to increase revenues to the fund to £500k per year: a) to meet demand for bursaries from deserving would-be students; and b) to develop the scheme so that it can tackle challenges around career progression, not just entry into the sector.
117. A regular contribution from government to this well-established programme (perhaps match-funding industry contributions) would ensure it can remain fit for purpose and offer support to those in need throughout their careers.

Raising the profile of journalism in schools

118. It is abundantly clear that many schoolchildren do not even consider careers in journalism, let alone explore the options around training. The NCTJ is increasingly targeting younger age groups with information about the vital role of journalism in the UK’s democracy and about how best to get into the sector; but there remains more to be done. Government support in this arena – for the work done by the NCTJ on behalf of the news media sector, and by others such as The Student View – would also be welcome.

Recognising the role of local media companies in training

119. The local news media sector has for decades been at the forefront of journalism training, demanding high standards of training among entrants and putting scores of trainees through the NQJ programme in order to raise their skills levels before they become senior journalists.
120. Recognition of this valuable role – which remains crucial despite the broad decline in the local print sector – and subsidising of NQJ training would encourage regional media companies to retain their emphasis on early-career skills development as a means to raising standards and building a well-equipped workforce for the whole of the industry. It is notable that many news stories which appear in the national media start out life in the regional press.