BBC—written evidence (FOJ0077)

Select Committee on Communications and Digital
Inquiry into the future of journalism

1: Executive Summary

1. The BBC welcomes the chance to submit evidence on the future of journalism. As the largest and most trusted broadcaster in the UK, and with more correspondents in more countries than any other news provider, the BBC plays a vital role in journalism.

2. Trusted and impartial journalism is the bedrock of democracy. Its role is to keep people informed and enable them to participate in civic life. This remains more important than ever in the digital age.

3. The recent growth of digital platforms has radically reshaped the media ecosystem. The BBC and other news organisations are adapting to an evolving market and changing audience habits. This comes at a time when traditional news providers face challenges of trust.[1]

4. The BBC is responding in a number of ways: maintaining our absolute commitment to impartial and trusted news; tackling misinformation; increasing people's media literacy; and modernising our newsroom and news agenda to meet audience demand and need.

5. The role and skills of journalists also remain central. Whilst the core qualities of journalism will never change, modern reporters need to be armed with new skills to navigate the digital age, in fields such as verification and data journalism. We also want to achieve a more diverse workforce to deliver a broad agenda that reflects all audiences.

6. The Committee may wish to consider broader points that we believe could support journalism. These include the challenge of making trusted news easy to find online; protecting journalists from harm; and finding longer term solutions to funding, to enable trusted news organisations to continue supporting citizens across the world.

2: The Purpose of Journalism and the Role of the BBC

7. Trusted and impartial journalism is essential for democracy. It holds power to account, informs citizens so they can participate in civic life, and brings the nation together at key moments.

8. The BBC is the UK's leading public service broadcaster, with a mission to inform, educate and entertain. Our first public purpose is to provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them, and we deliver this through news on Radio, TV and Online to local, regional and national audiences in the UK and across the world.[2]

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[1]   Reuters Digital News Report 2019, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf p.68
[2]   https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/mission

9. BBC News reaches 8 in 10 UK adults every week[3] and is the most used news provider for all adults and young adults across all platforms.[4] It's also – by a significant measure – the provider that audiences turn to for the news they trust the most.[5] This means that the BBC can bring audiences together for events that shape the UK and the world. In 2019, more than 9 in 10 people in the UK came to BBC News for coverage around the UK General Election, with 26.5m people tuning in for the TV results programme[6], and BBC News online seeing 27.3m unique browsers in the UK on results day, a then record.[7]

10. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, trusted journalism has a critical role in times of emergency. 82% of people say they are most likely to turn to the BBC's TV, radio and online services for the latest news on the crisis – significantly more than any other source. Audiences say they come to the BBC because of its reputation for accuracy and trust[8], and so far during COVID-19 83% of people trust our coverage on BBC TV.[9] In the week of 16th March, BBC News online had 84m UK unique browsers, the biggest week it has ever seen.[10] These unprecedented events have underlined the importance of BBC news.

11. The BBC's network of journalists throughout the UK ensure devolved, regional, and local institutions are accountable to their communities, around 65% of the content on BBC News Online comes from local teams,[11] and in an average week 10% of the BBC's UK audiences online look at local news exclusively.[12] In March 2020, the weekly average audience of the 18:30 regional news bulletin across the UK was 6.8m, significantly up on the 5.0m seen in March 2019. Audiences have been consistently above average during the coronavirus period, reaching a high of 8.3m in the week commencing 23rd March.[13]

12. The BBC also supports the wider industry through the Local News Partnerships initiative, which has funded 150 local democracy reporters to cover local councils and other public bodies, and share this journalism across the whole network.[14]

13. Globally, BBC World Service provides trusted news to audiences around the world in 43 languages including English, across TV, radio and online. BBC's global news services reach 394m people weekly,[15] and cover the topics that state sponsored news organisations cannot or will not.[16] At a time when Britain is forging new

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3   Kantar Media for the BBC, Annual Report & Accounts 2018/19
4   Ofcom: News Consumption in the UK: 2019, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/news-media/news-consumption (News consumption in the UK: 2019 data tables (XLSX)
5   51% of UK news consumers say they turn to the BBC for the news they trust the most. The next closest trusted provider was ITV with 9%. Ipsos MORI, 1,829 UK adults 15+ who follow news, April-May 2019, https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/annualreport/2018-19.pdf p.19
6   Barb, 3min+ reach
7   BBC: AT Internet, unique visitors
8   Ofcom Review of BBC News and Current Affairs, 24 October 2019 https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0025/173734/bbc-news-review.pdf
9   Ofcom weekly online survey, 9 April 2020 https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/half-of-uk-adults-exposed-to-false-claims-about-coronavirus
10   AT Internet
11   BBC: AT Internet, w/c 15th April – w/c 6th May 2019. 'Local' in this context also includes pan-England and Nations content.
12   BBC: AT Internet, w/c 16th September, 14th October, 18th November, 16th December 2019. UK-only
13   Barb, 4+
14   https://www.bbc.com/lnp/
15   GAM 2019, BBC's global news services include BBC World Service and BBC World News and BBC.com.
16   For example, the investigation's programme Africa Eye has had huge impact across society, media and politics. Their recent Sex for Grades investigation into sexual harassment at Nigerian and Ghanaian universities led to the suspension of lecturers and a new bill by the Nigerian government to criminalise sexual harassment by professors on campuses. The leader of the Nigerian House of Representatives Femi Gbajabiamila commented that "*we owe a debt of gratitude to the BBC Africa journalists whose efforts have exposed this scourge. Their efforts are a reminder of what can be*

relationships globally, and there is a rise in state sponsored media with no commitment to impartiality, the BBC World Service's trusted and impartial voice is more important than ever.

3: Key challenges for the future of journalism

Market changes

14. Whilst TV and radio continues to attract large audiences, one of the biggest changes to the news media market in the past decade has been the growth of digital news. One of the impacts of this has come from the growth of social media and technology platforms which has significantly changed the news ecosystem, affecting how some news providers reach audiences and their sources of funding.

15. These large platforms attract high volumes of online traffic and advertising revenue[17] and are increasingly relied upon by many news providers to reach audiences.[18] Some platforms have also created their own news aggregator services, for example Apple News, which aggregate content from several sources and act as portals to news produced by others.

16. The role that platforms and aggregators in particular play poses several challenges for news providers. First, the aggregation of large volumes of news content from a broad range of providers can lead audiences to attribute value to the aggregator rather than the news providers and be unclear about the provenance of content. Second, aggregators have significant control over which news stories are promoted to the user and it is not always clear on what basis they promote stories or publications. Third, over the long-term, aggregation may undermine the direct relationship between news providers and their audiences.

17. The latest iteration of this challenge is in voice-enabled devices – a nascent but rapidly growing area. The BBC is working with the industry to ensure BBC News is available on these devices, but there is a risk that trusted news providers are not prominent, or trusted news content easily found, on these platforms.

18. The shift in advertising revenue from print to online, and to fewer market players, has also created significant financial challenges for the news industry. Facing a reduction in revenue many organisations have turned to new forms of funding or cut back on output. While the BBC is funded by the licence fee in the UK, it operates commercial services globally which are not immune from financial issues.

19. Globally, the result is that many trusted news providers have scaled back their operations and much of the growth in international news is now coming from state funded providers with no commitment to impartiality and who are competing primarily for influence rather than revenue.[19]

20. Local newspapers across the world have also faced significant challenges as online revenues are unable to make up for the loss of print revenues. [20] COVID-19 has had

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achieved when good people say 'enough is enough' and act to make it so."
[https://twitter.com/femigbaja/status/1181469027413221376]

17   https://www.emarketer.com/content/facebook-google-duopoly-won-t-crack-this-year &
      https://www.ft.com/content/9a9ac60a-575a-11e7-9fed-c19e2700005f

18   Reuters Digital News Report 2019 https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-
      files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf p.4

19   Lowy Institute https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/international-public-broadcasting-missed-
      opportunity-projecting-australia-s-soft-power#sec41531

20   Mediatique, Overview of recent dynamics in the UK press market
      https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/7
      78155/180621_Mediatique_-_Overview_of_recent_dynamics_in_the_UK_press_market_-

a profound impact on ad revenues and circulation for local news, accelerating financial difficulties.[21] To help alleviate financial pressures across local radio, Ofcom relaxed the requirements for local radio programming last year.[22] These factors have led to a reduction in some types of local news coverage, such as local news bulletins on radio, and coverage of council meetings from newspapers.

Changes in audience behaviour

21. Digital technologies have rapidly altered how audiences consume content, including news. Young people in particular are more likely to consume news online, especially via social media,[23] which can affect how they engage with news and news organisations.

22. Social media platforms and news aggregator apps play an increased role in people's news intake. This exposes audiences to more and different sources of news but can make critically evaluating news difficult. With many audiences prioritising quantity over depth, we are seeing more shallow engagement in news. This means that while people have easier access to multiple perspectives, they may have less context.[24] There has also been a rise of passive and "incidental" news consumption where audiences, particularly younger audiences, receive updates via notifications sent from news apps, and/or via social media. These short stories or updates can lack the depth of longer length reports.[25]

Trust in news media

23. Changes in the media landscape have coincided with increases in political and social polarisation in many countries. These factors are likely to have contributed – at least in part – to declining impartiality and trust scores across news media.[26] This comes amidst audience concerns about misinformation. 70% of UK adults say they are concerned about 'fake news' online.[27] This is an international concern, with 73% of people in research across 27 markets stating they are worried about disinformation "being used as a weapon."[28] This issue is linked to concerns over the regulation of online content, especially in relation to the obligations faced by news providers, and the role of technology platforms in disseminating news. [29]

24. Across the globe some politicians are exploiting this situation to avoid scrutiny from the mainstream media, or as justification for introducing laws that restrict media

_Report_for_DCMS.pdf p.59
21   https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/mar/20/local-newspapers-coronavirus-economic-impact
22   Ofcom Localness guidelines https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/information-for-industry/radio-broadcasters/localness
23   Ofcom: News Consumption in the UK: 2019, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/157914/uk-news-consumption-2019-report.pdf p.7; https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/news-media/news-consumption (News consumption in the UK: 2019 data tables (XLSX)
24   Source: Ofcom, Scrolling news: The changing face of online news consumption p.4-6 https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/115915/Scrolling-News.pdf
25   Revealing Reality: Observing real news behaviours, research for Ofcom 2019 https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/174074/bbc-news-review-revealing-reality-summary-report.pdf p.7
26   Reuters Digital News Project 2020, A Mile Wide, an Inch Deep: Online News and Media Use in the 2019 UK General Election, p.22 https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-02/Fletcher_News_Use_During_the_Election_FINAL.pdf (declining levels of trust)
27   Reuters Institute, Digital News Report 2019 https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf, p.22, online survey among adults who consumed any news in the past month
28   Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-02/2019_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report.pdf p.19, online survey
29   https://www.ft.com/content/ba94c2bc-6e27-11ea-9bca-bf503995cd6f

freedoms. BBC Monitoring has noted how, "rights groups have highlighted multiple cases of unjustified arrests or repressive laws that primarily aim to silence political dissent and limit freedom of speech and expression, sometimes under the banner of fighting fake news."[30]

4: How the BBC is responding

Maintaining editorial values

25. The BBC's most important response to these challenges is to maintain our editorial standards and commitment to providing trusted, impartial and accurate information. Maintaining accuracy is an essential part of this. To respond to the growth in misinformation online we have bolstered our fact checking content along with more analysis and explainer content from Reality Check, BBC Monitoring, the User Generated Content hub and BBC Trending teams. These teams have also been central in fighting the 'infodemic' caused by COVID-19 myths.[31]

26. As a result, the BBC remains the most trusted news provider in the UK. 51% of UK news consumers say they turn to the BBC for the news they trust the most – significantly higher than any other news provider.[32] Recently, adults of all ages have rated the BBC as their most trusted source of information on COVID-19, far ahead of other sources. [33]

Promoting media literacy

27. The BBC helps equip citizens, especially the young, with the skills to spot misinformation through media literacy. Recent initiatives include:

   a) BBC Young Reporter - which offers media literacy resources to secondary school children in the UK. This is also being piloted globally, focusing on areas with particular challenges with misinformation: India, Kenya, Brazil, Nigeria, Serbia and Myanmar;

   b) My World - a global news show for young audiences to help them understand the key stories on the issues that are shaping our world;

   c) The BBC's Beyond Fake News team have also produced a new website for staff, audiences and journalists to help improve media literacy.[34]

Modernising BBC News

28. Earlier this year the BBC announced a significant change programme to modernise BBC News for all audiences. The "News 2020" programme includes plans to restructure news operations to be based around stories, rather than programmes or platforms. This 'story led' model will put audiences at the heart of editorial decision making and enable News to consider the right tone and platform for different audience needs at the moment of commissioning, rather than be constrained by traditional programming divides. This will ensure that our best journalism reaches the broadest possible audience across the many different platforms. Implementation

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30   https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200l8pq
31   https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-51497800
32   The next closest trusted provider was ITV with 9%.Ipsos MORI, 1,829 UK adults 15+ who follow news, April-May 2019, https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/annualreport/2018-19.pdf p.19
33   Havas Media Covid-19: Media Behaviours Report https://havasmedia.com/covid19havasmediareports/ slide 24
34   https://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/en/collections/fake-news

of the programme has been paused temporarily due to COVID-19, but this programme highlights the way in which BBC News will adapt to meet the changing needs of audiences.

29. We continue to cover the stories that matter most to our audience. Recently, this has meant covering how digital technology is impacting citizen's lives. This is especially important for democracy, as the DCMS Disinformation and Fake News report highlighted.[35] During the 2019 General Election the BBC helped inform the public about new digital political campaign approaches.[36] The BBC also informs audiences about how developments in technology, including AI, may have implications for society in the future.

30. The gathering of news has changed as digital platforms have enabled audiences to play a more active role. Citizens now play an important role as eyewitnesses during breaking news, such as terror incidents. The BBC's User Generated Content Hub was established over a decade ago to help review and verify this information and is playing an increasingly important role as technology accelerates.

31. Internationally, the BBC uses social platforms to listen to audiences and use audience insight to help shape the news agenda. For example, BBC Arabic's Trending programme responds to the most talked about issues and events across the Arab world, using the BBC's impartial voice to explore issues that state owned media often will not.

32. Whilst engagement with audiences plays an important role in the modern news agenda and newsgathering, the BBC believes that traditional journalism skills, including fact checking and verification, are an essential part of the process to producing robust and trusted journalism that audiences can rely on.

33. To support this the BBC is also cooperating with global tech platforms and global publishers through the Trusted News Initiative which creates an early warning system to alert partners when disinformation is discovered which threatens human life or disrupts democracy during elections.[37]

34. We are also focusing on developing our digital news output. Later this year, we plan to update the BBC News app to make it more intuitive and able to provide more relevant content for different audiences, drawing on the best of the BBC from the UK and around the world. We also intend to experiment with new ways to deliver digital news content to continuously improve our services for audiences.[38] The BBC is also exploring how developments in AI technology might improve production processes for journalism in the future.

35. Of course, there are well-documented concerns about the potential misuse of AI and it is important for the industry to create the right ethical framework for these services. The BBC is a member of the global partnership on AI's media integrity steering group, which invites others to help build new technology that can detect manipulated media.[39]

Training for journalists

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[35]   DCMS, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/363/363.pdf p. 37
[36]   For example, Beyond Today Podcast: Election memes, are we being played?
       https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07tz5by
[37]   https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2020/coronavirus-trusted-news
[38]   For example, in the UK General Election the team used some automation to help news journalists deliver a results page for every constituency in the UK, something which had never been possible previously.
[39]   https://deepfakedetectionchallenge.ai/

36. The core skills needed for journalists remain timeless; curiosity, drive, analytical skills and a reluctance to take things at face value.[40] As the BBC's General Director Tony Hall has said "traditional journalistic values have never been more needed."[41] These are embedded with the BBC's editorial values, which are the starting point for any BBC journalist.

37. However, as audience behaviours change our journalists need more digital skills, including:

    a. The fact checking skills to navigate content online: journalists are taught verification skills as part of their training and the BBC Academy offers specialist face to face workshops to ensure BBC journalists remain up to date on best practice;

    b. The ability to produce digital material, using digital tools, graphics and publishing software. For example, our journalists can now film and file reports from the field in ways which were unimaginable a decade ago, but this requires training in new technology and ways of working;

    c. An understanding of social media and how to effectively use platforms to engage the audience whilst maintaining impartiality.

38. An understanding of data is also increasingly important. The growth in real-time access to data means that journalists need to be able to understand and respond to analytics that show how a story is being used and whether it works for the audience.

39. Data journalism is also growing in importance as a way of helping audiences understand complex issues more easily and revealing important stories that hold authorities to account. The Local News Partnerships initiative supports the upskilling of data journalism across the local news network.[42] The BBC runs a scheme whereby twelve reporters from local and regional partner organisations work with BBC staff to develop these skills across a three month course. Once 'graduated' these reporters can then become trainers for their own organisations. The impact of this is already evident - two news outlets have already been able to set up new data journalism units entirely staffed by alumni from this scheme.

40. The BBC also supports and trains external journalists across the world through BBC World Service. In addition to training schemes and skills-sharing through co-production initiatives with local partners,[43] BBC Media Action – the BBC's international media development charity – strengthens local journalism globally through a variety of training initiatives to improve the quality of media.[44]

Increasing diversity

41. The BBC believes it is vital to have a diverse workforce to fully represent the different communities of the UK in our news output. We are continuing efforts to increase workforce diversity and provide opportunities for journalists from different backgrounds.

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40   https://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/en/articles/art20131121145818479
41   Tony Hall: the BBC and the Future of News, published 20th March 2019
42   https://www.bbc.com/lnp/sdu
43   For example, the Aim High initiative and co-production Kenya Connects with KTN
            https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2019/aim-high-kenya
44   https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/what-we-do

42. We recognise entry to journalism is not a level playing field and offer paid entry level experience through apprenticeships and the journalism trainee scheme. The BBC also supports the Extend Scheme which offers appropriately experienced and/or qualified disabled people work experience within the BBC.

43. To improve the gender balance across media, the BBC began the highly-successful 50:50 project which challenges media to equally represent women and men in their content.[45] This started in the heart of the BBC Newsroom but now has spread to encompass over 500 teams including several thousand journalists and programme-makers across TV, radio and digital and from news, sport, factual, children's, science and music and lots of partner organisations.

44. To achieve greater geographical representation the Director-General recently announced the ambition for the BBC to move more services outside of London, with an aim to have two-thirds of staff outside London by 2027.

45. At a time when local news faces financial challenges the BBC is working with regional newspapers and local media through the Local News Partnership, including support for a network of Local Democracy Reporters embedded in newsrooms across the UK. The Director-General has announced ambitious proposals to significantly expand the scheme – with the number of journalists working on it increased and new services offered.

46. We remain committed to getting reporters to more locations across the UK to find stories that matter to different communities. Last year, the "We Are..." initiative took a new approach to audience-led, on-the-ground journalism, setting up pop-up newsrooms with regional teams in Bradford, Middlesbrough and Stoke-on-Trent.

6:   Further areas for consideration by the committee

Finding Trusted News Online

47. The market changes referred to above can make it difficult for audiences to quickly and easily find trusted news online.

48. In particular, as audiences move online, they are increasingly dependent on news aggregators – and the news articles and videos they choose to surface to users – for their news consumption. However, while their approach to news aggregation can differ significantly, most do not invest in journalism – aggregating news is solely a means to a commercial end. Unlike news organisations they do not prioritise the public interest; an informed UK citizenry; or the long-term health of the UK news industry. Some have not always shown a willingness to take responsibility for the content on their platforms and as a result have been slow to address important issues like curbing misinformation or extremist content until forced to do so. On these platforms, trusted news sources, including the UK's PSBs, the nation's newspapers and news from local newsrooms, can be easily hidden, or de-prioritised, from the view of UK citizens.

49. In the past, prominence rules ensured PSB TV services were easy to find and not hidden from view. The prominence afforded to BBC One, as the UK's most used news source (used by 58% of UK adults)[46] and the main commercial PSB channels play an important role in ensuring easy access to quality news and journalism.[47]

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[45]   https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/reports/policies/5050
[46]   Ofcom News Consumption 2019, https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0027/157914/uk-news-consumption-2019-report.pdf p.21
[47]   The BBC defines fake news as false information deliberately circulated by hoax news sites to misinform, usually for political or commercial purposes.

Ofcom recently announced plans to update these rules (the EPG code) to ensure that the main PSB channels and PSB news channels remain easy to find on the linear EPG channel guide and other updates to ensure PSB players were easy to find online and on-demand. However, there is no similar regulation regarding the prominence of trusted or quality news online.

50. Given the increasing role of big tech companies in aggregating news from across the UK's news providers, this is an area where the UK's news industry might join together to consider appropriate approaches to ensuring audiences can easily access relevant news that they can trust.

Safety of journalists

51. As documented in the Government's Online Harms White Paper there has been an increase in harassment against those in public life, including journalists, with some [48] subject to daily abuse.[49] This remains true in 2020, and the BBC still believes there is a positive need for the regulation of the internet.[50]

52. Internationally, journalists also face persecution by many regimes. For example, Iranian authorities have systematically targeted BBC Persian journalists based in the UK and their families in Iran since the service launched satellite TV in 2009.

Funding

53. The BBC exists to inform, educate, and entertain all audiences and the licence fee is levied universally to match that. As outlined, the BBC plays a vital role in delivering accurate and impartial news, tackling misinformation, training journalists and promoting media literacy. However, the funding available today for the BBC's UK public services is already 24 percent lower than if the licence fee had gone up with inflation from 2010.

54. For the BBC to continue to deliver impartial, accurate news it needs stable funding. It is also important that additional responsibilities are not given to the BBC without the corresponding resources to support them. As the Committee has previously highlighted, future licence fee settlements need to be more open and evidence based. The BBC is also concerned about the possible impact of changes to the licence fee model, such as decriminalisation, which would further undermine the resources the BBC needs to deliver its remit.

55. The BBC World Service's important role in tackling misinformation globally is partly supported by UK Government funding. Government funding of additional services under the World 2020 scheme allowed the World Service to build new audiences through 12 new language services and enhancing existing services.

56. The BBC welcomed the news in the Government's Spending Review in September that existing funding levels for the World 2020 programme would be rolled over for the full year 2020/21. Discussions with the Government about a further uplift in funding beyond 2021 are ongoing. This would allow the BBC to better serve global audiences, particularly amidst the growth in state funded providers with no commitment to impartiality.

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[48]   https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper/online-harms-white-paper
[49]   https://rts.org.uk/article/step-counter-harassment-journalists-demands-bbc-chairman
[50]   https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2018/09/01/media-chiefs-call-new-watchdog-topolice-social-media/