

Impress—written evidence (FOJ0081)

About IMPRESS

1. IMPRESS is a self-regulatory body for news publishers in the United Kingdom. It is the only regulator in the UK to be approved by the Press Recognition Panel as meeting the requirements of independence and effectiveness set out in the 2013 Royal Charter on Self-Regulation of the Press.
2. IMPRESS's growing membership is largely drawn from the independent news sector. This sector has grown exponentially in recent years by taking advantage of the lower costs of digital production and by plugging gaps in the market left by the scaling back of news coverage by legacy print brands. The sector is characterised by its diversity of ownership, varied business models and strong engagement with the communities that it reports on and for. As of 23 March 2020, IMPRESS regulated 81 publishers that publish under 143 news brands. These include international, national, local, and hyperlocal news publications; specialist publications and investigative journalism sites, all of which have voluntarily subscribed to regulatory oversight by IMPRESS.

The majority of the publishers regulated by IMPRESS are digital 'natives' that typically publish news through a home website and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Youtube. Many also publish in print.

3. IMPRESS membership is open to any organisation that publishes news related material in print or online in the UK under a system of editorial control. When a publisher joins IMPRESS, they contract to become a participant in the IMPRESS Regulatory Scheme (the Scheme). The Scheme requires publishers to follow the editorial standards and guidelines set out in the IMPRESS Standards Code (the Code). The Code was developed following an extensive programme of research, public polling and stakeholder consultation. It is owned and controlled by IMPRESS.

The Code was developed in 2017 and is the most contemporary Code for written press in the UK and is one of a handful of press codes from around the world to address issues relating to digital journalism. It sets higher standards in the areas of discrimination, transparency, what is meant by the public interest and the prominence of corrections. It is also a consumer-friendly Code that applies an 'ordinary reasonable reader' test for assessing the accuracy of content and requires publishers to ensure that readers are able to clearly distinguish between fact and opinion.

4. Members of the public benefit from IMPRESS awarding a 'Trust in Journalism' mark to publishers that meet our standards for membership. This mark signals to the public that the publisher adheres to the Code and is accountable for the quality of its content and news gathering activities through a transparent and independent system of consumer redress and regulatory oversight.
5. IMPRESS is committed to higher standards of journalism and more responsible reporting supported by clear labelling, enforcement and redress. We believe that the future of journalism as a public interest endeavour rests on the quality of its product. Our submission focuses on the role that regulation plays in raising standards and building engagement and trust with the public.

Summary of our submission

6. Trust is low because of poor regulation.

Trust in written press and online journalism is low in the UK compared to other countries and other professions. This is in stark contrast to broadcast journalism which is generally well trusted by the UK public. The main difference is that broadcast journalism is well regulated and written press journalism is not.

7. Subsidies are not currently linked to better regulation.

Failure to implement reform recommended by the Leveson Inquiry has undermined attempts to improve the regulation of the press. As journalism evolves in the digital world, a large and growing number of online news websites, along with many print newspapers, are not regulated. There are no incentives to be well regulated. The receipt of state subsidy is not dependent on high standards of public interest journalism or on publishers being well regulated.

8. Press consumers deserve better regulation.

A fractured, patchy and inadequate system of regulation of written press does not provide adequate protection for consumers. Moreover, it undermines the integrity of journalism as a whole by creating a journalism product of varying quality which the public cannot rely on and does not generally trust. Better regulation can help consumers to engage with journalism and to navigate their way around trusted sources of news in the digital world. Public surveys consistently show that the public want better regulation.

Trust is low because of poor regulation of the press

9. Written press journalists continue to languish at the bottom of the league table of trusted professions in the UK. An IPSOS Mori survey in 2019 (see references) reported that only 26% of the British public tend to trust journalists to tell the truth. Journalists are significantly less trusted than television news readers who recorded a score of 62% by comparison. Broadcast journalists are well regulated by Ofcom but written press journalists are not. The written press in the UK is also one of the least trusted in Europe. The latest European Broadcasting Union (EBU) survey reported in April 2020 that the UK lies at the very bottom in a league table of citizen's trust in its written press, out of the 33 EU countries. The UK compares unfavourably with countries that top the Press Freedom index, which all have strong systems of regulation such as Norway, Finland, Denmark, Sweden and The Netherlands [Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index 2020]. The UK press is distinguished only by its low trust and the lack of regulation; therefore, these characteristics must be correlated.

10. The UK operates a voluntary system of press regulation. 83 publishers and 144 news brands are regulated by IMPRESS under an officially approved scheme of press regulation. 84 publishers and around 2500 news brands subscribe to IPSO under an industry complaints handling scheme whose rules and terms are set by the industry. We estimate that a further 500 publishers and more than 1000 news brands, including many new entrants to the market, are not members of either IMPRESS or IPSO.

Subsidies are not currently linked to better regulation

11. Failure to implement the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry has resulted in a fractured, patchy and inadequate system of press regulation with many publishers not belonging to a self-regulatory body.
12. There are currently no market incentives to encourage newspapers and websites to join or to remain a member of a self-regulatory body and to adhere to high standards of journalism. This undermines the power and authority of self-regulatory bodies and fails to prevent hundreds of publishers from opting out of regulation altogether. Without such incentives there is a risk that pressure to return a profit or promote a specific agenda or cause will drive down the quality of journalism. Unless this changes, the share of the unregulated market is set to grow, resulting in a lowering of standards and a further decline in public trust.
13. The state invests heavily in the press industry through a system of tax relief, advertising and grants which are estimated to be worth more than £700 million a year. Publishers receive VAT relief of 20% on print sales and digital subscription sales which were estimated to be worth £594 million in 2008 (Nielsen and Linnebank, 2011). The statutory duty on local councils to place notices in local newspapers on planning, licensing and traffic orders is estimated to be worth around £40-50 million a year. The BBC licence fee funded Local Democracy Reporter Scheme provides grants of around £8 million a year to local newspaper groups.

During the current COVID-19 crisis the Government has agreed to fund a public health campaign through local media worth an estimated £45 million. A key recommendation of the Cairncross Review (2019) into the sustainability of high-quality journalism also recommended more subsidy through state funding of public-interest news.

14. The state does not require a quality return for the subsidy it provides. Publishers do not need to be well regulated or to be regulated at all to benefit. Moreover, the subsidies tend to benefit established print legacy news organisations at the expense of new and emerging digital entrants to the market. If the standards of journalism are to be improved in the digital age, and if public trust in journalism is to be increased, then state subsidies and funding need to be linked to higher standards and better regulation regardless of whether the news organisation is a legacy print brand or a new digital organisation.

Press consumers deserve better regulation

15. A fractured, patchy and inadequate system of regulation of written press does not provide adequate protection for consumers. Moreover, it undermines the integrity of journalism as a whole by creating a journalism product of varying quality which the public cannot rely on and does not generally trust.
16. Digital technology has levelled the news industry and has removed the financial barriers of entry for those who want to publish news related material online. This in turn has flooded the news market with new sources of information, indifferent to national borders and established norms and conventions.
17. While digital technology has enabled new players to enter the news market, it has created problems for audiences, who are unsure what content they can trust. It is becoming more difficult for journalism to distinguish itself online from other types of digital content. Edited content falls outside the scope of the Government's

proposed Online Harms legislation. This leaves the public exposed to misinformation, disinformation and other harmful content from poorly regulated news websites. Better regulation can help consumers to navigate their way around trusted sources of news in the digital world and to engage better with publishers through kitemarking, clear editorial standards and access to affordable and speedy systems of redress. Public surveys consistently show that the public want better regulation.

Our Recommendations

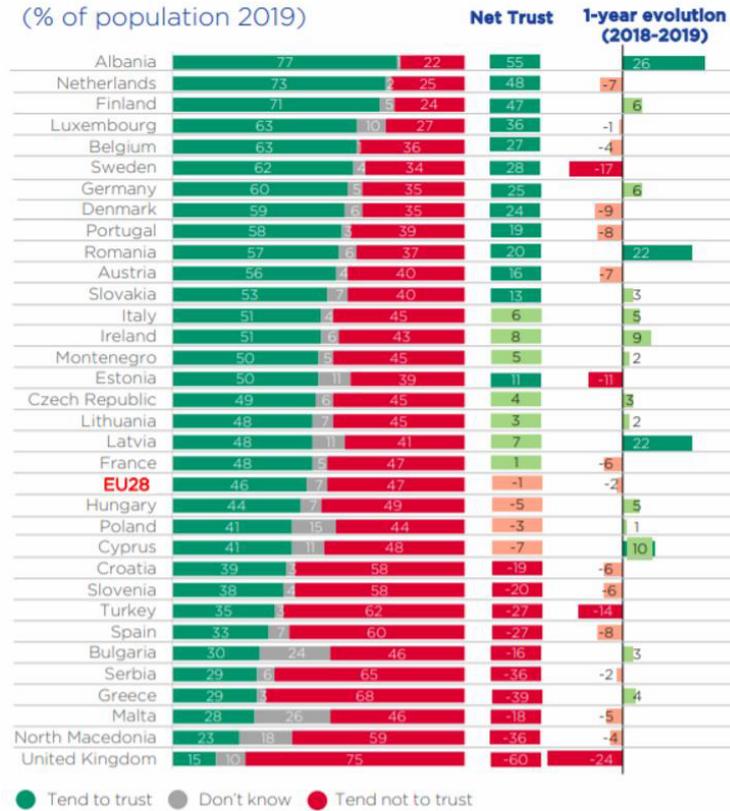
- 1. We recommend that comprehensive research is undertaken to map out the size and reach of the unregulated print and online news market and the extent to which consumers are exposed to poor quality, unregulated journalism.**
- 2. We recommend a review of state subsidy and funding of journalism to ensure that it is accessible on fair and equitable terms to all well-regulated publishers that produce high quality journalism, regardless of size, turnover, or whether they publish in print or online.**
- 3. We recommend that future state funding of public-interest journalism should be linked to membership of an independent self-regulatory body.**
- 4. We recommend a review of other measures and incentives which may be used to incentivise publishers to become more publicly accountable by joining an independent self-regulatory body.**

References

- Cairncross Review: a sustainable future for journalism (February 2019). [Link.](#)
- European Broadcasting Union (EBU) based on Standard Eurobarometer 92: 'Trust in the written press'. Published 2020. [See graphic below]. [Link.](#)
- IPSOS Mori Veracity Index 2019: Trust in professions survey (November 2019). [See graph below]. [Link.](#)
- Nielsen and Linnebank, 2011; referenced in *Media Power and Plurality: From Hyperlocal to High-Level Policy*, S. Barnett, J. Townend (eds.) (2013). [Link.](#)
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index 2020. [Link.](#)
- Royal Charter on Self-Regulation of the Press (2013). [Link.](#)
- Government's proposed Online Harms legislation (February 2020). [Link.](#)

TRUST IN THE WRITTEN PRESS

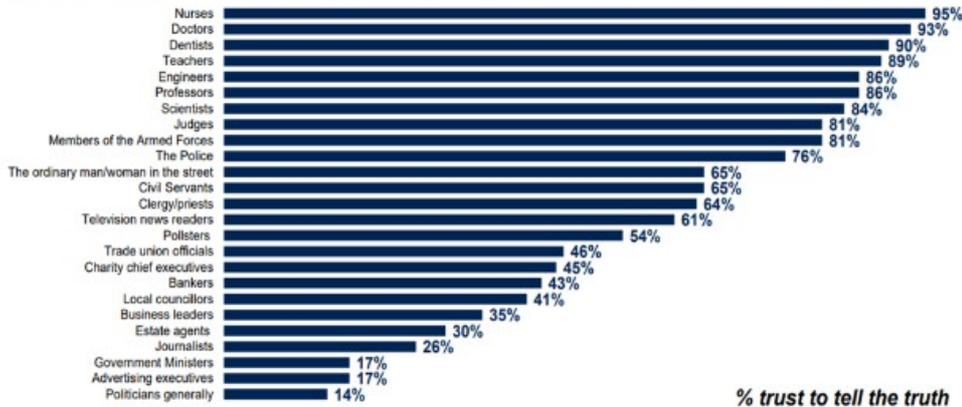
(% of population 2019)



Source: EBU based on Standard Eurobarometer 92.
EBU Media Intelligence Service - Trust in Media 2020

Veracity Index 2019 – all professions

"Now I will read you a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me if you generally trust them to tell the truth, or not?"



Base: 1,020 British adults aged 15+, interviewed face-to-face 18 - 27 October 2019

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