

Written evidence submitted by IMPRESS (COR0139)

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 20 May 2020, IMPRESS regulated 84 publishers that publish under 142 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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 can clearly distinguish between fact and opinion.
6. 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.

7. 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.
8. This submission will primarily focus on steps that could be taken to mitigate the spread of mis/disinformation during the Covid-19 period; and the adequacy of the Government's Online Harms proposals and other regulatory systems to address issues arising from the pandemic, as well as issues previously identified.

Summary

- The media plays a vital role in providing trusted high-quality journalism to counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 at the same time as undermining trust by publishing low-quality journalism that contributes to the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.
- Public trust in journalism is low in the UK and the public are unsure what information they can trust and how to distinguish high quality journalism from low quality journalism which too often misleads and misinforms.
- The public want better regulation of the press and online news websites. The failure to fully implement the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry or to come up with an alternative means of solving the problems identified by Leveson has left the public with a fractured, patchy, and inadequate system of regulation which undermines trust, which is of particular concern during a public health crisis.
- The proposed new Online Harms legislation only captures the user generated comments section of news websites within its scope. This leaves the public exposed to misinformation and disinformation published by unregulated online news websites.

The spread of Disinformation and Misinformation and the crisis of trust

The media plays a vital role in providing trusted high-quality journalism to counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 at the same time as undermining trust by publishing low-quality journalism that contributes to the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

9. Numerous stakeholders have already provided evidence to this Committee that shows the UK public are faced with a deluge of COVID-19 misinformation and conspiracy theories. Many have laid blame for this deluge at the feet of social media companies. IMPRESS would like to emphasise the dual role played by the media in both countering and promoting the spread of misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19.

10. In her oral evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, Baroness Williams of Trafford noted that the spread of disinformation and misinformation is not helped by some in mainstream media legitimising conspiracy theories. We are aware that the Home Affairs Committee has received examples of alleged inaccurate or misleading press coverage to this effect. Statutory regulator, OFCOM, has also had to issue warnings to broadcasters on this very issue.
11. We would like to emphasise the vital role that high-quality journalism has played in countering misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 and the pandemic. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism reported that during the crisis (in March and April 2020), there was an initial spike in news consumption and a majority of respondents felt that the news had helped them to understand the crisis and had explained what they should do to reduce the spread of the virus. However, many were still worried about false or misleading information about coronavirus being published by news organisations.

Public trust in UK journalism is low and the public are unsure what information they can trust and how to distinguish high quality journalism from low quality journalism which too often misleads and misinforms.

The public want better regulation of the press and online news websites.

12. The COVID-19 pandemic coincides with a trust crisis in the written press and online news. 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 [Ipsos MORI Veracity Index, 2019] reported that only 26% of the British public tend to trust journalists to tell the truth compared to trust levels of 95% for nurses, 93% for doctors and 84% for scientists. Journalists are significantly less trusted than television news readers who recorded a score of 62% by comparison. The written press in the UK is also the least trusted in Europe. The latest European Broadcasting Union (EBU) survey reported in April 2020 that the UK lies at the bottom of a league table of citizen's trust in its written press, out of the 33 EU countries [EBU, 2020]. 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].
13. The public are not sure what information to trust and how to distinguish high quality from low quality journalism. Furthermore, public surveys consistently show that the public want better regulation [YouGov, 2013, 2017, Ipsos MORI, 2010]. 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. In her oral evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, Government Minister Caroline Dinenage said that platforms need to build transparency and accountability into their product to

get people to trust them. The same call to action could equally be directed at newspapers and news websites.

The failure to fully implement the recommendations of the Leveson Inquiry or to come up with an alternative means of solving the problems identified by Leveson has left the public with a fractured, patchy, and inadequate system of regulation which undermines trust.

14. IMPRESS has not received any complaints about the accuracy of reporting of regulated publishers on COVID-19, the global pandemic or the government's response. We have issued guidance and offered standards advice and training, to ensure that regulated publishers continue to comply with the IMPRESS Standards Code. Our Regulatory Scheme gives us powers to urgently investigate concerns about published content and news gathering activities concerning COVID-19 coverage. However, our regulatory remit is limited to publishers who have chosen to be members of IMPRESS which includes 15% of news publishing organisations that are active in the UK and less than 5% of news brands, which reach a combined audience of 12 million each month.
15. We consider that accurate reporting on COVID-19 in the UK is undermined by a fractured, patchy, and inadequate system of regulation of digital news websites. A large part of the digital content market is not captured by any form of independent, publicly accountable regulation. 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 the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) under an industry complaints handling scheme whose rules and terms are set by the industry. We estimate that a further 500 publishers (70%) and more than 1000 news brands (27%), including many new entrants to the market, are not members of either IMPRESS or IPSO.
16. The fractured, patchy and inadequate system of regulation is largely due to unresolved issues arising from the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press [Leveson B, 2012] and the growth of digital news websites. Unlike broadcast journalism, there is no statutory requirement or commercial incentive for news publishers to adhere to high standards and to be regulated by an independent body that protects the public. Such incentives have proved to be unpopular amongst large sections of the press.
17. The Government has announced plans to repeal Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act, 2013, which provides a mechanism to incentivise news publishers into better regulation. We are concerned however, particularly during the current COVID-19 crisis, that there are no plans to modify, review or replace Section 40 with an alternative package of less divisive incentives. Market incentives are needed 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. A lack of incentives undermines the power and authority of self-

regulatory bodies and fails to prevent hundreds of publishers from opting out of regulation altogether. It also rewards poor journalism and works against the public interest by tacitly encouraging short cuts designed to maximise profit or promote a specific agenda or cause. Unless this changes, the share of the unregulated market is set to grow, resulting in a lowering of standards, a wider spread of misinformation and a further decline in public trust.

18. In our experience, inaccurate and discriminatory news coverage is perpetuated in a market which is free to sensationalise, distort and provoke without recourse to high standards, effective enforcement of those standards and accessible systems of redress for members of the public. It is difficult to imagine how the quality of reporting on matters of public interest such as COVID-19 and the pandemic will improve without better regulation.

Mitigating the spread of Disinformation and Misinformation and the Online Harms proposals

The proposed new Online Harms legislation only captures the user generated comments section of news websites within its scope. This leaves the public exposed to misinformation and disinformation published by unregulated online news websites.

19. We are concerned that the Government's response to the problem of misinformation and disinformation places too much reliance on a patchwork of emerging trusted information initiatives still in their infancy and on the outsourcing of regulatory and technological solutions to the private companies that it paradoxically blames for the spread.
20. The proposed new Online Harms legislation aims to make the UK the safest place in the world to be on the internet. However, the legislation only captures the user generated comments sections of news websites. Editorial content is not within the scope of services covered by the legislation. This leaves hundreds of news websites who choose not to join a self-regulatory body, to be free to publish inaccurate or misleading content outside any system of oversight.

References

- 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.](#)
- IMPRESS Standards Code. [Link.](#)
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index 2020. [Link.](#)

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- Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 'The UK COVID-19 news and information project'. [Link](#).

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