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**House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee
Inquiry into the Future of Journalism**

How free syndication of articles in *The Conversation* allows them to spread widely, gains traction for their authors, and is a means of supporting the local press

Everything The Conversation publishes is made available under a Creative Commons licence (specifically, Attribution-NoDerivatives).¹ This means it can be republished for free as long as The Conversation and the story's author are clearly indicated, and the text is not changed (edits are possible with the consent of the author). While translation is technically not allowed under this licence, in practice we are relaxed about this as it enables the stories to reach a wider audience. In recent years, our stories have been republished in 97 countries and 29 languages.

As a publisher, I would obviously prefer stories were read on our site. It allows us to develop a relationship with our readers, where we can encourage them to read other stories, subscribe to our newsletters and potentially support us financially. However, as a charity, we exist to take the knowledge, research and expertise to the widest possible audience, and embracing republication has been one of the factors behind The Conversation's success. In our early days, when we were little known in the UK, sometimes 80% of our reads each month came from other publications. More recently our on site readership has grown more rapidly so that we're now at a much healthier 60:40 in our favour.

Even as we've grown, republication remains important, not just for increasing the total audience we reach, but the specific audiences they help us reach. In the UK, our stories regularly appear in the Daily Mail, The Times, The Independent, The Guardian, The Sun and The Week Junior (a news magazine for children) amongst many more. This means their readers are hearing from academics writing in their own words - something which sometimes surprises the authors when they see their names in print!

This is clearly a huge benefit to academics and institutions, raising their profile and that of their work. Many of our contributors go on to be contacted or commissioned directly by other media, as we effectively offer a constantly updated database of experts. We encourage policymakers to make use of this database too.

But this is also a huge benefit to the public. We know our readership is a broad cross section of the public - but there will always be those who would never seek out a news site written by academics (or would be actively turned away by the idea). By allowing our stories to go to where the audience is, rather than requiring them to come to us, we are delivering most effectively on our charitable purpose.

This approach to republication is of course also a benefit to the wider news ecosystem. Many news publishers have reduced the number of specialist reporters, particularly in sections such as science. Publishers can use our content to 'top-up' their own, ensuring they're still able to cover these topics. For local press where resources are even more constrained, our stories not only enable them to fill their pages with content that helps keeps their readers engaged, but if they choose, stories written by academics working nearby. This has the potential to help build understanding, local pride and break down

¹ <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>

some of the barriers that sometimes exist between universities and the communities in which they are based.

The challenge of translating academic work into the mainstream media and the value of academics having their own by-line. How some can be reluctant because they have previously seen their work sensationalised (and why such sensationalising occurs – and relatedly the search for academic certainty where there is none, such as the point about the media wanting to know whether Imperial or Oxford model was more accurate). It's not about turning academics into journalists – or vice versa – but them complementing and bringing out the best in each other.

Throughout their careers, academics are trained to write in specific ways, particularly around research. Even leaving aside any technical terms, the language used in papers and journals is often pretty inaccessible to the lay reader. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, as these forums are for specific audiences and need to convey information in a clear, consistent way. However, this often leads to a gap between the public understanding of a topic, and the academic research being carried out into it.

Similarly, journalists are trained to think about stories in certain ways. Whether it's the classic AP model of the 'inverted pyramid' (which allows subeditors to cut from the bottom of a story without losing important details), or a local reporter's 'nose for a story', there's a desire to find the hook for a story, to avoid burying the lede. This, combined with the declining numbers of specialist science and health reports, means that stories drawn from academic research can be overwritten, conclusions sensationalised and caveats ignored. This misreporting is then sometimes attributed to the academic (to get their moment in the spotlight), damaging their reputation amongst their peers. I should say this problem is not limited to journalists - academics often make similar complaints about their own universities' hard working press offices.

This is neither the fault of academics nor journalists - just a reflection of their own specialised communication skills. But it can breed mistrust between the two, a reluctance to work together. If there is a secret sauce to The Conversation, it is the trusting partnership we build between our academic authors and journalist editors when working on a story.

There are clearly great journalists who go to great lengths to uncover and report on academic research fairly, just as there is an increasing number of high profile academics who are enormously skilled public communicators. But both groups would benefit from a greater understanding of the other and how they work (and I should highlight the fantastic work that the Science Media Centre does here). Academics are often going to be reluctant to rule definitively on a topic, especially when the evidence is still being gathered (something we found when trying to evaluate the competing Imperial and Oxford pandemic models). But equally, academics need to consider how their research might connect with (or directly impact) the public, if they expect them to take an interest in it.

The importance of having a model where multiple players contributing different areas of expertise and not relying on a single provider to be the 'one-stop shop' which tries to cover everything. While the BBC maintains a quality bar, it can have the effect of 'sucking the air out' for other innovation. It needs to play a role in creating space for other organisations. The BBC is best placed to do this as it is public but distant from Government.

Having spent many years working there, I can't pretend to be independent on the subject

of the BBC. Its clear public mission sets the bar for all journalism in the UK, and inhibits the quality degeneration seen in other markets. However, the BBC's stable presence (despite current financial pressure) means there can sometimes be limited space for others to innovate.

I'm not in favour of the BBC pulling out of markets, particularly around journalism, the most central of its public purposes. In cases of market failure, better to have the BBC present but inhibiting innovation, than nothing at all (as with the result of the closure of BBC hyperlocal news a decade ago).

Much of the innovation in the news sector in recent years has come from specialists: The Conversation for specialist reporting on research, Full Fact for fact checking, The Bureau for Investigative Journalism for, well, investigative journalism. There are also a number of new local focused outlets, doing important reporting like the Bristol Cable, The Ferret and Sheffield Live.

These innovators individually only provide a slice of a "full service" news outlet. I don't think it's inconceivable to imagine a new public service outlet that brought together content from many specialists - features, science and health from The Conversation, investigations from The Bureau, local content from The Cable.

The BBC has an obligation to commission up to 50% of its output from independent producers, to encourage the greatest creativity. News is currently excluded from this marketplace for understandable reasons - their editors would be not unreasonably reluctant to put out reporting that they hadn't carried out themselves. However there is already some flexibility, for example through the Local Democracy Reporter Scheme. Might the BBC open its platform further to allow (and fund) high quality, impartial, rigorous reporting from other approved providers?

Alternatively, there was a proposal in the late 2000's for a new (somewhat insufficiently defined) Public Service Publisher, that would commission and publish the best digital content, free of the legacy baggage of the other PSBs. While that proposal was shelved, with its proposed remit being shared between the BBC and Channel 4, I wonder if it's time might have come again.

The benefits and limitations of charitable status for *The Conversation*.

The Conversation in the UK is a charity, and all eight of our editions around the world are non-profits in their various markets. We are enormously fortunate to have found a sustainable business model that allows us to produce great journalism, whilst also delivering benefits to those who wish to fund us (whether those are our university members, foundations and other grant awarding bodies, and our readers).

Does The Conversation have to be a charity? It's possible we could accomplish much of the same public benefit as a CIC or a B-corp. However, to a large part, our charitable status is a statement about who we are. It also means that when we ask our readers for donations (as we are currently doing),² we aren't just echo.

Through our member universities, we are the UK HE sector's gift to the public, to help increase their understanding of research and through expert perspective on the news. We hope that the sector takes great pride in us, alongside the benefits it receives from our work.

I've sometimes said that The Conversation's charitable mission is not to produce

² <https://donate.theconversation.com/uk?frequency=monthly&amount=20>

journalism. We produce journalism to deliver on our charitable mission. If and when there are other activities we can carry out that also help take research knowledge to the public, they would be an equally valid part of our work. I would expect other news organisations, should they seek charitable status, would take a similarly audience centred mission, rather than just looking to sustain their current operation.

There are some further benefits specific to us. It ensures our authors, who don't get paid to write for us, don't feel we are profiting from their work. It allows other media organisations to see us as partners rather than competitors, chasing the same limited revenue streams. And we feel our editorial independence benefits from minimised commercial considerations (we carry no advertising and have no paywall) - although clearly many other news organisations are able to manage this balance effectively.

There are also limitations that come with charitable status. When new opportunities present themselves, we must always ask ourselves whether they are consistent with our charitable purpose. We have less flexibility when it comes to raising money for new investment. Our resources are all directed towards our core mission, which means all of our non-editorial operations are handled by a tiny team. And we are not able to match salaries at other news outlets and so risk losing talent (although fortunately most of our staff are motivated by mission rather than money).

Our particular model has also placed some limits on our ability to grow - having signed up virtually the entire UK HE sector as members, we must diversify if we want to grow further. Our reliance on this sector is also going to be a vulnerability for us for the coming year as the effect of Covid-19 on student numbers is felt in university finances.

The importance of the media 'showing their working' – linking to original research and articles.

News consumers increasingly shop around - reading stories suggested by friends and algorithms. And a huge proportion of our traffic, as with many news organisations, comes through search. This means a story may sometimes be the only point of contact between a publisher and a reader.

As a digital news publisher, we've always been able to include many links in our stories - to related topics on our site, to other pieces the author has written, to stories elsewhere in the media, but most importantly to the research that underpins the story. Every author who publishes with us gets a profile page that can contain links to their department or research group. Where research has been published in an open access journal (as encouraged by the pan-European 'Plan S'), we can link to it directly. We don't track how many people click through to read the academic papers behind our stories. I suspect the number isn't large. But it's important that the information is available for those that want to go deeper.

This approach of citation and reference is fundamental to academic publishing - it allows the impact of a single piece of research to be tracked through all the subsequent work that builds on it.

Journalism may benefit from a similar approach. Multiple studies have raised the issue of news literacy amongst the public as a key tool in fighting against disinformation, enabling them to critically evaluate a news story. Various charities and other organisations have developed programmes to build the skills needed to critically evaluate news stories. By showing more of their working, through greater linking to the evidence (while recognising that some sources will always need to remain confidential), news organisations can simultaneously help their readers develop these skills, while also demonstrating the robustness of their own reporting.

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