

Nic Newman—supplementary written evidence (FOJ0003)

Select Committee on Communications and Digital: inquiry into the future of journalism

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Before RISJ, Nic was a journalist for 20 years working across radio, tv and online. He was a founding member of BBC website in 1997 (World Editor) and head of new media product and technology for BBC News for almost a decade.

What are the most important changes in consumption and production of news?

So on the consumption side it is the move to digital. More recently the combination of mobile and social which came together as a second wave revolution. These two have – changed way consume news anytime, anyplace, sped up the production of news further, undermined trust and disrupted commercial business models.

This is because the unbundling of the newspaper package made much harder to 1) make ads work (adjacent display didn't work) 2) major us tech platforms have taken most of the money as they have more scale and are better able to target specific audiences.

The other key consumption issue is the generational split

Older people by and large are continuing to watch TV news and papers, preferring this curated experience (the editor or the anchor) – and the traditional formats they grew up with.

Younger people, particularly those who have grown up as digital natives exhibit very different behaviours, spending most time with social media, not wanting to be told what to watch or read by editor– preferring to make own choices or be influenced by recommendations from friends. In our most recent data 39% of 18-24s say social media is their main source of news and just 8% say TV.

On the production side

Digital has gone from being an 'unloved' add-on to being central to everything (and certainly to the 'future of journalism'. Both print or TV companies operate integrated newsrooms with digital often the starting point for conversations. This means ..

- 24 hour operation
- Story based approach – start with the agenda and work out best way to tell the story across print, online, social media, email newsletter, podcast etc

That means new skills. Newsrooms used to have writers and subs and editors – now you have writers, videographers, podcast producers, data-visualisation experts, audience engagement teams, Snapchat and Tik Tok producers. It is a much more complex mix.

Question 2: How have digital technologies changed the production of journalism? What are the best examples of innovation by journalists and news providers?

I am an evangelist for digital and online news which has four key advantages/attributes...

1. **Range and depth:** One of frustrations of TV and radio journalism is that you can only cover a limited range of topics each day whereas with digital you can cover more news stories that are relevant to smaller groups of people. You can also go into more depth so something like Panama papers – you can really publish all the background, the source material and let people pick through the detail.
2. **Speed:** – With print you had one deadline each day, with TV and radio maybe one an hour or every few hours– but with digital you update when you have new information. The rewards for *being first* are significant so newsrooms have had to learn to become much more timely. Correspondents at the FT or the BBC are now expected to file a quick take of analysis of what a development means within a few minutes – and then perhaps go back and write a more considered piece later. Digital has changed the pace of news.
3. **Participation:** – being able to tap into the expertise of audience is amazingly powerful. The UGC hub at BBC is able to tap into audience stories on any subject under the sun - in any country in the world - just by asking for feedback or having open social media channels. It has never been easier to find case studies - what does it feel like to have Coronavirus? Or to be nurse on the front line? Live pages - routinely includes eyewitness testimony or comments from ordinary people. This can go further with networked journalistic investigations. The Guardian enlisted ordinary people to go through expense accounts of MPs and flag up inconsistencies to Guardian journalists to investigate more. Bellingcat used open sourced crowdsource techniques to identify Russian involvement in the downing of MH17 over Ukraine. They just turned this into an amazing podcast that shows their workings in full detail.
4. **Personal relevance** – you can present complex information in much more compelling and personal ways. BBC has been doing this for years around the budget – put in a few details and it gives you instant read out about whether you will be better off or not. Around election, you can put in your post code and this will deliver updates on your local electoral battle. But relevance is also about explaining complex stories like animated guides of how Coronavirus has spread. There are so many amazing ways to tell stories these days that are better than we've ever had before. **Radar media** working with PA and local newspapers takes vast data sets around latest public information about performance of hospitals and then can deliver hundreds of narrative stories very quickly for local media. I think these are models that have a lot of potential for supporting local and hyperlocal media.

Best examples of innovations?

I think of three types of innovation 1) storytelling 2) formats and channels 3) business models and there is a lot going on ...

In Storytelling

- FT (and BBC) do fantastic job in visual storytelling;

- BuzzFeed news, Bureau Local and the Guardian have done a brilliant job with data investigations;
- BBC (Africa Eye Cameroon murders) and Belingcat open source investigations.

In formats

- Short videos with text underneath – popularised by NowThis and BuzzFeed now adopted by pretty much everyone.
- Daily news podcast formats pioneered by NYT with the Daily – used narrative storytelling techniques and sound design now being used by others including the Guardian, Aftenposten. Vox (US company) has doubled the number of podcasts to 200 in the last year.
- Email newsletters – the Spoon small start-up dedicated to giving you news in 2 and half minutes – also have pop up newsletters around corona virus, Washington Post has 70 different newsletters.
- ITV doing good job with the Rundown snappy bulletin produced by young people for young people.
- Telegraph running an impressive service in Snapchat for younger users and doing audio briefings in WhatsApp.

Business models

- Live events – as a way of driving loyalty. Helsingin Sanomat do regular events which are a bit like a journalism show.
- The Times organising cruises with talks from top journalists (probably not after Coronavirus). Dagens Nyheter in Sweden doing the same thing but via trains...
- BuzzFeed has consistently innovated with native advertising first and now with ecommerce.

What are some of the downsides of digital?

Partly the paradox of choice. There is so much content we often feel overwhelmed and there is so much *free content* we don't value it in the same way.

Partly that participation has spilled over into cynicism and abuse – something about the incentives in social media which reward the wrong kind of feedback.

Partly problem of sustainability – digital has undermined business models so there are fewer journalists, less money for innovation etc.

Pressures and influences on journalists – how are they changing?

I'm not an expert on this – I've not been a journalist for some time but in terms of what we've studied in general at the Reuters Institute

- Impact of speed – less time to think or reflect or to discuss with editors, see high profile mistakes even by Robert Peston and Laura Kuensberg – in midst election campaign.
- Commercial pressures to write certain types of stories or headlines that going to get clicks or travel in social media – tend to be more emotive stories, or where there is a clear right or wrong. It is harder to write stories where just a small step in a long running story public interest story. This is what Frances Cairncross highlighted in her review. These are stories that may not get financial rewards but are important from an accountability point of view (e.g. scrutinising housing planning meetings as Grenfell fire cladding decisions were taken and reporting the concerns of local people – there were no/few journalists to do this – which could have saved lives).

- Abuse and trolling – The backchannel is great but not when it turns to abuse.
- Political pressure and PR pressure though this has always been the case the financial weakness of many publications makes them more open to using PR and subject to political pressure in many countries.

In terms of influences I would say

Data much more of an influence – most newsrooms have metrics, they have tools like Chartbeat or in-house tools like Ophan at the Guardian or Telescope at the BBC – giving feedback on how story performing and that does influence what gets commissioned these days.

We've been through three phases with data ...

1. Having the data;
2. Starting to see what can do with the data – write this headline and performs better;
3. More strategic – often with audience teams who can plan a campaign or use it predict how stories might perform or how to address the representation of women or reaching 8-24s better etc.

Question 3: *What are the main challenges for freelance journalists? How could the industry and public policy better support them?*

I am not an expert in freelance journalism and haven't worked in that way for a long time but I do see another opportunity which is for an individual or two individuals to get together and run a local business. The barriers to entry are much lower and with the cost of distribution essentially zero, new models open up especially around local and hyper local journalism. This is also relevant to any niche where can super serve a community.

I think we'll see a lot more of this in the future and this is an area where BBC or PA for example could provide free data for these services or perhaps they could tap into a public fund – a get business advice or similar.

Question 4: *Why is the profession not more representative of the population and what could be done to improve this?*

I am not an expert on this but from our research it is the case that journalism is often seen as part of the elites representing the status quo – rather than the interests of ordinary people. This is one of the drivers behind low trust in many countries – from example in France last year – much of the Gilets Jaune anger was directed at the media for not covering their grievances.

Not just to do with the fact that journalists are from the elites, it is also that journalists don't get out of the office as much as they used to; there is always another update to do, a response to that thread on twitter. It is much harder to go and dig for a story that is different or is further away.

Newsrooms are trying to address this (Kath Viner's new manifesto which includes bringing in diverse perspectives as a key part of what the paper needs to do, John Harris reporting for the Guardian). The best publications are really pushing reporters out of the office again and giving them time to find distinctive stories

In terms of recruitment and newsroom diversity

The New York Times has radically changed the shape and make up of newsroom in the last eight years. It is now much younger, more racially diverse and even a bit more politically diverse. To do that they really had to change their HR practices and to look in different places for potential recruits. They also needed new skills so picked from start-ups videographers, audio specialists, Gen-Z specialists. Lgbtq+ etc.

Others have brought in young digital disrupters. News UK has a GENZ board made up of under 25s who work for the company and advise the newsroom on what types of stories to cover but also tone. CNN (London) brought in Yusuf Omar a master of Instagram and Snapchat stories to change the way they interacted with younger people.

Contributor diversity

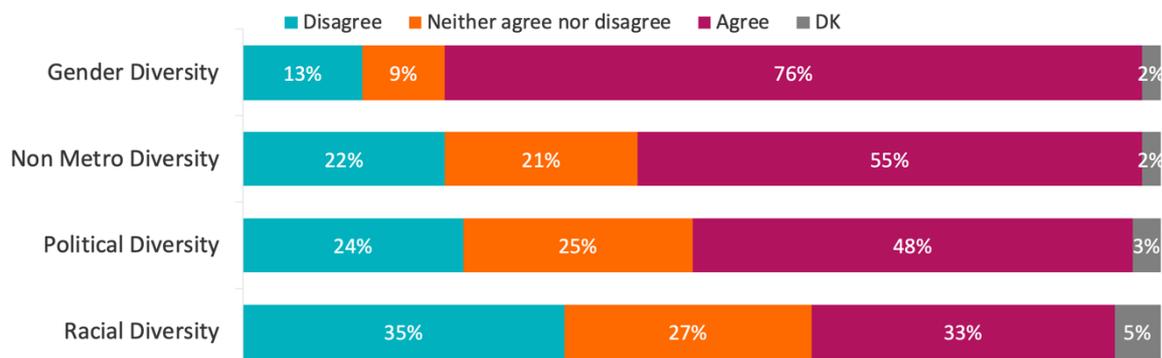
Not just about the staff, diversity is also about on screen/in paper representation of the voices that are chosen to interview.

BBC has a very successful 50/50 project bottom up to provide gender balance in terms of contributors to many of BBC's most popular programmes.

Newsrooms in Scandinavia now use software that checks pictures on the front page of a website and sends email to editors if gender balance is not right.

Most of these initiatives are focussed on gender and we did a survey at the start of the year where 76% felt doing good job with gender diversity initiatives but much less well with non-metropolitan diversity – and also racial and political diversity (less than 50%).

My company is doing a good job on



Q5. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? My company is doing a good job with ... N=227

This are the areas we need to work on including bringing people into the profession without university degrees but with the right level of commitment and curiosity.

Question 5: How can journalists appeal to the audiences least likely to engage with or trust journalism?

Firstly, our data shows *there is* a real problem engagement – our study during the election campaign showed that young people spent on average 8 mins week engaging with news and older people spent 22 mins a week - and older people consumed more TV and radio and print.

We also know that people with lower levels of education and lower socio-demographic background have lower interest in news, and are less likely to go to news websites and area more likely to use social media.

Engagement is real challenge – news is depressing, always something more engaging to do on your mobile phone.

Simple answer is that you have to make news more accessible, more engaging and more relevant – which means understanding more about what there are interested in but also the moments when they might be interested in news and the channels they are using.

How to address the engagement gap with the young

Agenda – not just domestic political agenda but wider range of subjects that feel relevant, housing, student debt, LGBTQ+ issues, the environment.

Tone – how tell those stories and who is telling those stories – related to representation – how many people like them do they see on TV or see interviewed in the papers. But also there is often too much assumed knowledge. News is written by elites with a high interest in news for other people who have high interest in news. We take too much for granted in term of language which makes it hard to pick up stories due to too much assumed knowledge.

Formats– Visual journalism works well, short videos but, compelling graphics, podcasts work well for 24-35s in particular, especially combined with information that helps them progress, which is one of the prime motivators for young millennials. Explainer formats and 'how- to' videos work really well.

Convenience – need to provide in a channel or in a way that is really going to work (so formatting the content in the right way – at the right time). You can't expect people to go to website or download apps. News providers need to work with platforms to surface news in places where people see it and consume it more passively. [that is the value of social media and search by the way]. The Google Chrome browser has default news in it now, on an Apple iPhone you can swipe left and you will find news – this is more like how TV hammocking worked.

News used to be about providing *news that you should know*. Young people are interested in that to an extent but they also want news that is **useful to know, interesting to know, fun to know**. Media companies are not really known for delivering fun and useful news.

What about trust?

In most countries we are seeing declining trust in the news. Our data shows falls in trust in the news by 10-15pps in the last five years. In the UK only 38% say they trust most news most of the time in the UK (2019 Digital News Report). Talking to respondents we find three things going on:

1. **Product of change from a high choice rather than low choice environment**
– In the past we had one or two sources, tended to trust it (didn't have reason not to). Now because of social and digital media we see multiple perspectives on the same story from other news sources -- we are more questioning of a specific news provider like the BBC than we used to be. That's not necessary a bad thing but requires new audience literacy.

2. **Behaviour of journalists and newspapers themselves** – sensationised journalism partly driven different incentives on the internet, clickbait, agendas, phone hacking, trampling over rights of people.
3. **People often blame media and journalists for other things going on in the world like Brexit** – with these incredibly polarising issues people are often less tolerant of representation in the media of views they don't like and they tend to blame the news outlet. We saw big fall trust 2016 and 2017 – and we see fall in trust levels for impartial media like the BBC from people on the far left and far right. Politicians have inflamed this by specifically blaming or undermining media or accusing them of making up stories or bias.

So trust is complicated and not clear improving quality alone will solve the problem.

What can be done about trust?

Scepticism good but when spills over into unfair cynicism about journalists and the work they do that is a problem – especially when fuelled by politicians who may have interest in not having strong independent scrutiny of what they do.

In my view that is a problem for democracy and society – and we need to strengthen support for good journalism. We do **not need** a set of competing facts about corona virus.

1. Politicians, political parties, ordinary people need to respect journalism and stop undermining it;
2. News organisations could also do with not attacking each other – I'm thinking of the anti-BBC agendas that much of the press has - often fuelled by undeclared economic interests;
3. Journalists need to focus more on the needs of audiences and respect their desire for agenda free, unbiased news;
4. Journalists need to show their workings and relevance more– show that they are doing the things that they should be doing (great example Belingcat podcast into the downing of MH19 over Ukraine) – the dedication, the workings, the commitment drives trust.

Question 6: Which emerging trends and potential future developments should the committee focus on?

I can mention three important trends:

1. Disruption of broadcast – so far, we've been exercised by the impact on print business models and commercial models – now we are starting to see significant falls in numbers watching TV news as more people consume on demand via Netflix or podcast via Spotify. I think this is really big issue because TV is such an important way of communicating public information around coronavirus or climate change. It will leave a big gap in getting to some of those harder to reach audiences.

2. Sustainable business models - and the move to subscription generally. Lots of positives here in that it gets us away from clickbait and provides path to sustainability for some quality media - on the other hand it will increasingly raise issues of information inequality – where the rich have access to higher quality information. I also think this not a good solution for consumers want to access news in a frictionless way – barriers and registration will put people off news. So, I'm really interested in different models such as donation, membership, foundation funding – as well as hybrid models which provide different ways of funding public interest journalism and common facts.

I'm also interested in ways in which access to subscriptions services can be made available to students and others that can't afford to pay.

Good examples?

- The Guardian – not just donations, subscription, print, events and training, podcasts, foundation funding - really hybrid model;
- Texas Tribune – foundation supported, also events;
- Vox media in the US model which has a lot of verticals – common infrastructure – built around not just websites but podcasts, email newsletters etc.;
- DPG and MediaHuis in Belgium and the Netherlands have done a good job in leveraging common technology and digital business models across multiple titles and pursuing a diversified income streams.

3. Artificial intelligence and algorithms

There are dangers here of course but also lots of opportunities to redefine these to work in the public interest and in the interest of journalism:

AI can help journalists deal with information overload, help moderate comments more effectively, make it quicker to write and package stories, more efficient subbing operations but also in terms of distribution and personalisation.

Media companies will need to embrace these technologies to be much better at getting the right content to the right person at the right time.

(b) What would you like the result of this inquiry to be? What is the most useful contribution the Committee could make?

I see lots of negativity around journalism coming from politicians, ordinary people and journalists too but it would be helpful to restate the importance of high quality, accurate journalism for democracy and for society.

Journalism doesn't always live up to the ideals it sets for itself, but we need a press that is robust in its scrutiny and independent of powerful interests. Much of what I read and hear and is better than it has ever been ...so it would be helpful that has an intervention that is forward thinking and balances the very real problems with a recognition that we are starting to see some options for the future.

Secondly it would be helpful to have another voice clearly saying that public interest journalism, local journalism, accountability journalism is going to need some short and long-term public funding – however that it is done.

We shouldn't leave initiatives to the whims of Facebook and Google. We should have a strategic fund - as Frances Cairncross suggested - which can co-ordinate *all* the initiatives and funding stream in a fair, open and transparent way that is in the long-term interests of the UK. We'd love the platforms to contribute to that fund but we can't and shouldn't rely on them to set the incentives or criteria.

Training, news literacy, representation are important issues but in my view these are secondary and it would be helpful if your report addressed the two fundamental issues facing journalism:

Financial sustainability (especially of public interest and local journalism) which affects everything else (low pay, job insecurity). Fixing the business models and finding hybrid solutions will help with independence, quality, long-term view etc.

Platform power – As platforms become increasingly powerful not just text but for video and audio – we need to find some way that quality news gets some kind of preference over lower quality news (for example around the Corona virus) and that providers of that news can get fairly rewarded – not on the basis that they are big publisher but that they have track record of doing a good job for the public against some agreed criteria. Again, Frances Cairncross recommended a regulator with powers to explore these kinds of issues. I am not sure Ofcom has that remit now (I think not).

March 2020