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Submission to the Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into the Future of Journalism

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Protecting the Democratic Role of Journalism in a Digital Future

This submission responds to the following questions:

- How should journalism be defined and what is its value to society? What is the difference between 'citizen journalism' and other forms of journalism?
- How have digital technologies changed the consumption of journalism?
- How can innovation and collaboration help news providers of all types to maintain sustainable business models and adapt what they produce to audience demand?

Executive Summary

- The following submission argues that the media plays a key role in democracy by holding power to account and informing citizens, enabling them to participate in democratic activities.
- As digital convergence continues to grow, we must ensure that the democratic role of the media is protected within the space of social media.
- Asking social media platforms to regulate content is often fruitless since they do not recognise themselves as media companies, and are reluctant to infringe on people's freedoms.
- Ensuring that media organisations can continue to protect democracy on social media is important, but achieving this in practical terms requires a shift in regulations.
- Ofcom already has the regulatory knowledge, so it seems natural that they be the ones to regulate news organisations on social media who are - in essence - social media public service broadcasters.
- This means the social media platforms can focus on reprioritising their 'news' content in their algorithms. This allows them to remain in their roles as curators, while news organisations who have proven public interest commitments have more exposure online.
- In order for these to be achieved on a practical level, collaboration and urgent regulatory innovation between digital platforms, regulators, and news organisations is required for a mutually-beneficial outcome.

How should journalism be defined and what is its value to society?

The definition of journalism and the value it brings to society are highly interlinked concepts; the way in which we decide to define it will determine the value it brings, and

vice versa. Starting with the value of journalism in society, its most significant contribution is the protection and preservation of democracy. The main role of journalism in this endeavour, is to be able to hold those in power, such as governments and corporations to account. This responsibility to act as a 'fourth estate' ensures that public opinion reaches government, as it should in a democracy. This is supported by Kunczik (1999, 267), who suggests that "democratic journalism bases on a philosophy that puts human dignity and human rights at the centre of all things."

Kunczik (1999) suggests that media institutions should be "used as a kind of feedback mechanism in democratic system management, which improves with better information flow"

The value journalism brings to society determines how we can define it. Because journalism seeks to protect citizens from being exploited by those in power, a definition of journalism rooted in prioritising and promoting public interest is most appropriate. A second key responsibility that journalism holds within a democracy is to deliver balanced and accurate information and knowledge to citizens so that they are able to actively participate in democracy. It is in the public's interest to be informed on a range of social, economic, political, and cultural topics to ensure that they cast their vote from a place of reasoning rather than ignorance. Christians et al. (2009, 237) echo this, suggesting that "the news media have particular responsibilities to make public the concerns of society, as embodied in a variety of voices, ranging from those of individuals and social groups to governments." The UK has a pluralistic media landscape made up of public service broadcasters, commercial broadcasters, community journalism, and citizen journalism. This diverse media ecosystem offers consumers a range of choices in terms of what kind of news they have available to them. The pluralism of news is essential for a diverse range of views to emerge.

What is clear from this discussion is the idea that journalism is there to serve the public interest; "Good information is good for us, and journalism can help provide this. This is about journalists empowering the public, not themselves" (Beckett 2018, 57). This is an ideal which has been encapsulated by public service broadcasters. Some argue that the market is more efficient at delivering public interest, not journalism. However, as Collins et al. (2001) highlight, "Markets fail, both in a general technical sense and also because trade relationships are unable to fully express and represent all the aspirations of consumers and citizens."

How have digital technologies changed the consumption of journalism?

While the media's role in society has not changed, the way in which people consume news has been completely transformed by digitisation. Users are increasingly turning to social and online media for their news. In Ofcom's 2019 news consumption report, it was found that while television was still the most popular source of news, consumption had fallen from 79% in 2018 to 75% in 2019. At the same time, the use of social media for news increased almost the same margin by which television news decreased, from 44% in 2018 to 49% in 2019.

Further to this, before digital technologies were as prevalent as they are today, people's news consumption was fairly passive; they would read the newspaper, watch television news, and listen to radio news. They would be able to form opinions on such, but their interaction with the news was nearly always one-sided unless they took the time to write to journalists. Digital technologies have made news a highly interactive process; if you have an opinion on a newspaper article today, you can now directly tweet the journalist who wrote it. Social media has allowed users to actively respond to, interact with and share news sources.

On top of their pre-existing steady decline, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the newspaper industry hard. The FT reported a sharp fall in advertising revenue has caused many papers to furlough staff and cut pay. It reports that "national newspaper sales fell over a fifth between the middle and the end of March", owing to the challenge of selling physical newspapers when less people are able to leave their homes (Di Stefano & Nilsson 2020). Analysis of ABC circulation data by Press Gazette found that UK national newspaper sales have fallen by nearly two thirds over the last 20 years, blaming digital disruption for the fall (Mayhew 2020).

Traditional media outlets had to quickly learn to adapt their business models to the digital world to avoid extinction; many run an online news site and social media accounts alongside their traditional outlet, for example, MailOnline is the digital sphere for The Daily Mail, although both outlets are run by completely different editorial teams. The MailOnline is known as a digital immigrant, since it has its roots in traditional media and then made the move online, whereas a platform like BuzzFeed is a digital native because it has been digital from its inception in 2006.

How do we protect journalism's democratic role in the digital era?

There is a gap to be filled between digital disruption and between contemporary journalism being able to continue fulfilling its essential democratic role. In the UK, TV and radio news channels are regulated by Ofcom and have to adhere to the broadcasting code, and will face fines or sanctions if they break it. These broadcasters often share the same content that appears on their main news channel on their social media channels, where it is not subject to regulations. For example, Sky News broadcasts live 24/7 on YouTube and on television. The programme broadcast on YouTube is not subject to any of the rules in the Ofcom Broadcasting Code, such as impartiality and preventing harm; technically speaking, they could run an entirely different news programme on YouTube to their regulated television news programme. This example demonstrates that when it comes to news broadcasts on digital platforms, it is currently entirely up to the broadcaster as to whether they follow their usual standards or try something new. The danger of this choice comes from the temptation of profiting from digital platform's ability to commercialise, plus the heightened competition on social media platforms. Part of the reason that traditional media is able to fulfil its democratic role is because it has access to a large reach by way of being a mainstream television channel. They do not bear this kind of power on social media, at least, it is not guaranteed in the same way that a single news channel is.

When thinking about the future of the news, we have to prepare or at least account for the possibility that total digital convergence could occur. This is especially important as we watch television and newspaper consumption decline while social media consumption rises. The early signs for both of these industries are there. For example, Dutch media startup, Blendle, is a subscription service that saves consumers from having to pay for several different paywalls. It has been described as 'Spotify for news' and already has large publications such as *The Economist* and *TIME* signed up as part of its beta version. Something as simple as this could eventually lead to the complete decline of the UK print industry. Further to this, television convergence would be even more simple, since the digital infrastructure is already in place; how long until we can watch BBC News live on Netflix? Would Ofcom still regulate news on Netflix? Would the social media platforms require the news platforms to protect democracy? These are the kinds of questions that UK policy needs to be able to protect against.

How can innovation and collaboration help news providers of all types to maintain sustainable business models and adapt what they produce to audience demand?

Because it is widely accepted that the media is an essential part of democracy, it is essential that we ensure that there is some kind of consistency since digitisation is showing no signs of slowing down. The protection of a free press within democracy is in the public's interest. Therefore, I suggest that we should work towards building a public service digital media. This would be a co-regulatory agreement between news organisations, regulators, and digital platforms. All of the news organisations whose traditional news channels are currently regulated by Ofcom, such as the BBC, Sky News, ITV, LBC etcetera., also have a large presence on social media. However, the nature of social media algorithms means that news organisations do not have any control over which pieces of content they produce get amplified by the social media platform. This shifts the democratic responsibility for ensuring that citizens are well-informed to participate in democracy directly onto the algorithms, and therefore onto the social media platforms. However, since social media platforms do not accept that they are the same kind of organisations as news, they claim they are not able to regulate it.

In order to get around this problem, my submission recommends that every broadcaster who is currently subject to Ofcom regulations on their traditional news channels becomes subject to Ofcom regulations on their social media platforms. The main basis for this being that they are all broadcasting with the goal to protect public interest. Technically, any news outlet could apply, so long as they were willing to abide by the Ofcom broadcasting code online. This would be achieved by a new team of Ofcom social media regulators. A similar structure to the current public feedback model used could be in place whereby social media users report social media content they feel is not advancing public interest values to Ofcom. This has an additional benefit of clearing the social media space for purely democratic discussions on current affairs, as opposed to these important conversations being lost amongst a sea of complaints about, for example, the wording of a Tweet or the picture a news source has used in an online article.

The final piece in the puzzle for ensuring social media is a more democratic space is ensuring that these '*public service social media*' organisations are favoured over other news organisations in algorithmic decision making because they are regulated and stand a better chance of the content being balanced and impartial. This requires the cooperation of social media platforms. Their reluctance in the past has been against regulating content themselves, since they claim not to be media companies. However, this is a solution which enables them to do exactly what they claim they do, i.e. curation. Collaboration with these platforms would be key since there would need to be some kind of design feature that made clear these news organisations were different to others; perhaps a green tick instead of a blue tick on Twitter for example. Facilitating better relationships between news organisations and digital platforms is important; after all, it is the role of media to hold power to account, which is probably something tech companies would want to avoid given their exploitative tendencies. It is these kinds of geopolitical tactics that will ensure news can continue to protect democracy in the online space. The alternative is that news organisations have to compete for consumer attention on social media platforms, which may affect the quality of output; once content is driven by the desire for attention rather than the pursuit of truth, democracy truly is lost.

One of the biggest challenges for any kind of policy is funding. The area which would need the most attention in this area would be the new team of Ofcom regulators monitoring social media news. Ofcom could receive funds to train regulators up through grants from the government, or through running partnerships with tech companies for schemes such as the Google News Initiative.

The benefit of the approach I have submitted is that it would maintain the diverse media ecosystem in the UK, made up of citizen/community journalists, commercial media companies, and public interest media companies. Importantly, this is a sustainable model since it is flexible towards any future media developments. Regardless of whether

newspapers or television journalism disappear, or get more popular, this would be an important and valuable framework to have in place in order to help social media operate more democratically. Most significantly, it ensures the transfer of the media's most important role in society, i.e. to hold those in power to account, and to ensure that citizens are well informed so that they can participate accordingly in democracy.

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