

## **Professor Robert Beveridge FRSA—written evidence (FOJ0014)**

### **House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee**

#### **Inquiry: The Future of Journalism.**

#### **1. *How are digital technologies changing the production and consumption of journalism?***

The arrival of digital technologies has destroyed the business model of newspapers. In the past, radio and then television provided news but their content existed alongside newspapers, both local and national.

Advertising on commercial radio and television ITV co-existed with that placed in the press.

However, targeted advertising for jobs, for cars and houses and classified in general found much better possibilities on the internet etc.

Faced with this challenge, the response of newspaper owners was to continue taking dividends out of their companies and to institute cost-cutting which damaged the product and viability of their businesses.

In this, they could be fairly compared to Bruce Ismay on the Titanic as they sailed towards the iceberg.

Meanwhile patterns of media consumption also changed with basic news – often poorly informed analysis – becoming available free of charge to the user: free excepting the prevalence of data capture, privacy infringements etc, not to mention the transfer of spend from buying a newspaper to paying for broadband: from the press to the technology companies.

In addition, the development of the ability to connect internationally with those of like mind facilitated the rise of the neo nazi and alt right movements together with the distribution of their mendacious propaganda.

The lack of regulation of such as Facebook and Twitter under the mantra of freedom of speech has allowed these technology companies to distribute content for which they disclaim responsibility. HC

The House of Commons DCMS Select Committee has investigated this and its recommendations need to be implemented in full HC1791 February 2019 Disinformation and 'Fake News'; Final Report.

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomeds/1791/1791.pdf>

In particular, in the context of this inquiry, recommendations 1, 3, 4, 5, 9, 15, 33 need to be implemented.

*The Cairncross Review: A Sustainable Future for Journalism, February 2019*

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/779882/021919\\_DCMS\\_Cairncross\\_Review\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779882/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf)

provided conclusions and recommendations which also need to be implemented with the exception of recommendation 5. For reasons which are provided in the government's response.

As for recommendation 8, the Government should not put further pressure on the BBC to financially support the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) Reviewing and Expanding it should not involve more expenditure by the BBC.

There has already been enough top slicing of the licence fee and this should stop with immediate effect.

However recommendation 9 has been rejected by the Government but without the provision of a rationale: just a rejection.

Recommendation 9 has much to commend it and is better than the funding implications of recommendation 8 unless, of course, the government wishes the LDRS to be funded in the same way as recommendation 9, ie without recourse to the BBC's income.

It is in recommendation 9 that innovation and collaboration can best help news organisations to maintain sustainable business models together with the introduction of a tax on the tech giants and internet providers that can provide funding to help public interest journalism for all.

It is inevitable that print journalism will die at some stage over the next thirty years but quality journalism in the public interest can and must be maintained online and on radio and tv.

## **2. *How can journalists be supported to adapt to those changes?***

Journalists have little difficulty in adapting to these changes:

Please remember that journalists have become proficient in creating and distributing content in and across a variety of platforms from print to the wireless to television to online and then twitter etc.

Better funding for University courses in journalism could help. Of particular help would be the provision, by HMG, of grants for student or trainee journalists and this could be targeted at ensuring improvements in diversity.

However, the major issues to be addressed are the business model of journalism together with the regulatory environment to ensure quality.

Regulation does not mean deregulation nor the poor regulation by IPSO. Effective and trusted regulation is the route to sustainability and success.

## **3. *How can the profession become more trusted by the general public?***

It is a truism to state that journalists, in common with estate agents and politicians, are to be found at the bottom of league tables for trust and integrity, at least as far as the public view is concerned.

'Just two per cent of Brits put 'great deal' of trust in journalists to tell the truth, new research finds'

<https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/just-two-per-cent-of-brits-put-great-deal-of-trust-in-journalists-to-tell-truth-new-research-finds/>

**BUT something of note occurs when this same profession is measured by reference to the institution or company for which they work and, equally important, the credibility and legitimacy of the regulation which oversees them.**

**So journalists are not trusted but by and large, those same workers, when employed by the BBC, are the recipients of much greater levels of trust and respect.**

This should lead your inquiry towards considering quite why this might be and to consider solutions and recommendations which take full account of this successful model for journalism in the public interest.

#### **4. Why has trust in journalists declined? How could it be improved?**

*You claim that 'Public trust in journalists has fallen and is particularly low outside of London and other metropolitan hubs. This may be connected to the profession not being representative of the population it is serving. Only 11 per cent of journalists are from working class backgrounds and only six per cent are not white.'*

Increasing diversity in the profession, especially broadcasting, could go some way towards addressing this issue. Indeed the BBC has adopted policies which are already doing this as one would expect from the national broadcaster which is subjected to so much more scrutiny than other companies.

However, trust will not be attained and sustained by these measures alone. At a time of fracture and fragmentation, especially over issues such as Brexit and Scottish Independence, all media content is subjected to closer textual readings and analyses and in this context, the origins of the reporter matter much less than their fidelity to accuracy and the truth.

It is in telling the truth, in communicating facts and not as President Trump and his administration would have had it 'alternative facts' that journalism can achieve the quality for trust and credibility.

Alongside this should be a commitment to calling out lies at their point of delivery. There has been a reluctance to do this- on the grounds of impartiality – at least for broadcasters (excepting Fox news which is largely propaganda per se).

All journalists need to remember and abide by the code that facts are sacred.

#### **5. How can journalists better understand and convey the concerns and priorities of people who do not live in London or other metropolitan hubs?**

The recent investment in BBC Scotland and the moves by Channel 4 to establish hubs and relocate their headquarters are examples of how to proceed.

During the Scottish independence referendum, there was a tendency, especially near to polling day, to parachute in reporters from London who only had a basic understanding, if that, of the nuances of the debates in the country and nation of Scotland.

This was unacceptable and must not be repeated. It is incumbent upon all broadcasters to invest in the nations and regions. In the press too, there is a lack of funding of reporters who understand and can tune into the specifics of local and regional culture, never mind the nations of the UK per se.

Ofcom has allowed ITV to reduce investment in and provision of regional news and current affairs etc. This is a clear example of regulatory capture and Ofcom should instead place more weight in its primary duty under the Communications Act 2003 which is to secure the citizen Interest although it often seems to me as though this clause is not given due weight

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