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**House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee inquiry:
The future of news: impartiality, trust, and technology**

Introduction:

This submission addresses the critical questions outlined in the inquiry call for evidence, focusing on the implications of evolving trends and potential responses from key stakeholders. It is based on the findings of News Futures 2035, a foresight study on the future supply of trustworthy public-interest news, co-ordinated by the Media Innovation Studio at the University of Central Lancashire. Its supporters include the Public Interest News Foundation (PINF), Independent Community News Network (ICNN), Bloomberg, and Reach Plc., with funding from the Google News Initiative.

Bringing together over 300 stakeholders from inside, alongside and outside the news industry, the study identified a number of drivers of change anticipated to affect the future provision of public-interest news. Among them two critical factors stood out as both highly influential and challenging to predict: the encompassing domain of policies, regulations and governance that can either enable or constrict the future of public-interest news and whether the present and forthcoming industry can innovate sufficiently to ensure that public-interest news remains highly relevant to consumers, suppliers and society at large.

The study's Interim Report¹ was published in June 2023, supported by 74 high-profile stakeholders, including Dame Frances Cairncross, Ed Little (Head of Press Sustainability, Media and Creative Industries Team, DCMS), Owen Meredith (Chief Executive, News Media Association), Rizwana Hamid (Director, Centre for Media Monitoring) and Diane Kemp (Director, Sir Lenny Henry Centre For Media Diversity). The News Futures 2035 final report will be published in May 2024.

Key Trends

- **Impact of online intermediaries**

News Futures 2035 participants raised concerns about the effect of online intermediaries on media plurality and their negative effect on people's knowledge of news and ability to discern truthful information, concerns also raised in recent reports.²

¹ Nel, F. and Rymajdo, K. (2023) *The News Futures 2035 Project: Interim Report*. Preston, UK: Media Innovation Studio, University of Central Lancashire. <https://mediainnovationstudio.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/exec-summary-2-v12.pdf>.

² Ofcom. (2023). *Adults' Media Use and Attitudes report 2023*. Ofcom. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0028/255844/adults-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023.pdf, p. 2.

They also noted that the market dominance of online intermediary platforms and news publishers' reliance on them has created an imbalance of power, meaning publishers cannot properly negotiate a fair commercial relationship.

- **Generative AI**

News Futures 2035 participants came to the conclusion that unless the trajectory of the journalism businesses is changed, the future will be marked by a lack of AI literacy amongst journalists, meaning that publishers will not be alert to both the ways that AI can enable journalism and the ways in which it can hinder it and spread mis- and disinformation.

- **Evolving perceptions of impartiality**

News organisations face challenges in balancing competing demands for content aligned with particular values while maintaining impartial reporting. Robust ethical frameworks and audience engagement are crucial.

- **Factors affecting trust in news**

Declining trust in news is linked to various factors, including concerns about misinformation and a lack of connection with audiences, with trust in news especially declining post-Brexit.³ Public service media is especially at risk⁴. Transparency, accountability, and community engagement are key to rebuilding trust.

Evaluation

- **News organisations' response to challenges**

News organisations need to adapt by prioritising public-interest journalism, fostering innovation, and collaborating across the sector.

- **Government action**

Support for public-interest journalism funding and measures to address local news deserts are needed.

- **Regulatory oversight**

Effective online intermediaries and media plurality oversight require agile and evidence-based regulation, informed by diverse stakeholder perspectives.

Recommendations

1. **Recognise public-interest news as a public good:** Like other public goods, journalism plays a critical role in promoting a healthy civic space. However, as argued by UNESCO,⁵ for journalism to function as a public

³ Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C., Eddy, K., Nielsen, R. (2022). *Digital News Report 2022*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf, p. 62.

⁴ Newman, N. Fletcher, R. Eddy, K. Robertson, C. T., Nielsen, R. K. (2023). *Digital News Report 2023*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

⁵ UNESCO. (2022). *Journalism is a public good*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380618?2=null&queryId=0a30ee11-7640-48c0-b1c3-8d7e1e5dc867>

good (which we understand as characterised by non-excludability, i.e. once provided, everyone should be able to benefit from it, and non-rivalry, i.e. benefitting from the good does not reduce its availability to others), it needs to operate under conditions that enable independent, high-quality, and trustworthy news and analysis. To promote this, actors from across the media ecosystem, from policymakers and regulators to industry, academia and civil society, need to agree on a pathway to ensuring journalism's survival, both in economic terms, but also in terms of its relevance to citizens. At the heart of journalism as a public good, is public-interest news. Protecting this aspect of journalism is of utmost importance and will also take cross-sector effort and commitment.

2. **Develop a unified understanding of public-interest news:** Public-interest news needs to be recognised as distinct from terms like 'news', 'journalism' and 'media'. It has to be considered from both a producer and a consumer view, and it should be (1) accessible, (2) transparent, (3) intelligible, and (4) assessable, i.e. (1) made accessible to the broader public leaving no demographic group behind; (2) its authorship should be immediately apparent to the audience; (3) who should be able to understand it, whatever their levels of literacy; (4) and assess for themselves its benefits. Clear definitions and ethical frameworks should guide both producers and consumers of public-interest news, which should be explicitly linked to the role of freedom of expression in a functioning liberal democracy, which seeks to create the context in which all community members flourish.
3. **Evaluate public-value and measure its impact:** Public-service media need to move away from only thinking about outputs; instead, they should adopt frameworks for demonstrating and measuring their contributions to creating public value, leading to citizens' participation in a democratic society 'that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, and in which the freely-expressed will of people is exercised. People have a say in decisions and can hold decision-makers to account. Women and men have equal rights, and everyone is free from discrimination.'⁶ As such, public-interest news media should demonstrate that they are actively working to foster mutual understanding amongst all people and social harmony, which is essential to the function of thriving communities, markets and democracies.

⁶ United Nations. (2024). "Democracy". United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/democracy>

Actions

1. **Establish a News Futures Forum:** This multi-stakeholder forum, akin to the notion of 'Track 2' in Multi-track Diplomacy⁷, would facilitate informal, yet structured engagements that foster knowledge sharing, collaboration, and strategic interventions to address the critical challenges facing the supply of trustworthy public-interest news.

News Futures 2035 urges for greater collaboration among stakeholders, emphasising the need to address tensions and clarify the boundaries between media regulators Ofcom, IMPRESS, and IPSO.

It suggests the creation of a News Futures Forum to tackle cross-cutting issues, aligning with the *Cairncross Review's* recommendation for an Institute for Public Interest News.⁸

Mirroring the News Future 2035 multi-stakeholder approach, the Forum should engage entities from within and outside the public-interest news ecosystem in a structured and inclusive manner, adopting an approach akin to Track 2 or 'back-channel' diplomacy.

The anticipated outcomes of the Forum's successful execution include shaping the industry's, policymakers', technology firms', and news consumers' approaches to the supply of public-interest news, leveraging the principles of Track 2 dialogues to foster a collaborative and comprehensive strategy.

The News Futures Forum should focus on three crucial areas:

- **Collaborative Knowledge Building:** The goal is to improve the sharing and creation of knowledge by organising existing research and insights so they are easier for everyone to access. It involves refining and choosing research questions to make them more relevant and encourages working together among researchers from both the private sector and public institutions. This effort aims to improve the quality, impact, and usefulness of research for those who benefit from it. This approach is similar to how sharing knowledge and working together on research has helped in diplomatic efforts behind the scenes.
- **Policy and Regulation Enhancement:** The focus here is on making policy and regulation better by increasing the knowledge and understanding of specific areas among government officials in Westminster and Whitehall. This improvement comes from a deep and systematic understanding of the issues at hand, achieved by working closely with experienced researchers and strengthening relationships with all involved parties. This principle has been crucial for the success of indirect and informal discussions aimed at solving complex problems.

⁷ Diamond, L., McDonald, J. (1996). *Multi-Track Diplomacy: A Systems Approach to Peace*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press.

⁸ Cairncross, F. (2019). *The Cairncross Review: A sustainable future for journalism*. House of Commons, [THE CAIRNCROSS REVIEW A sustainable future for journalism \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/824247/CAIRNCROSS_REVIEW_A_sustainable_future_for_journalism.pdf), p. 11.

- **Strengthening News Literacy and Capacity:** This area aims to enhance the skills and abilities within the sectors of public-interest news, by widely promoting understanding of news among all groups - from the general public and content creators to policymakers, educational institutions, and community organizations. It also involves tackling key issues that have been pointed out in government reports and other investigations. This effort is inspired by the way informal and targeted discussions have been used to develop skills and solve key problems in diplomatic contexts.
2. **Target funding for innovation and public value:** Funding should incentivise innovation and reward organisations that demonstrably contribute to public value.

News Futures 2035 advocates that when it comes to limited public funding, there needs to be a clear distinction between news that can be described as a public good and news that can be classed as a rivalrous good. Subsidies should be provided for accessible basic information in the public-interest, and policymakers should incentivise the best providers to make it available.

Whether coming from the government, philanthropists, through levies on technology companies or the licence fee being shared amongst a greater number of players, funding cannot simply support failing commercial models. It needs to encourage innovation.

Funding should be targeted (for example, towards those who are least well represented within the media ecosystem) and transparent, with a body overseeing its distribution that ensures that there is a level playing field between independents and new entrants and established corporate publishers.

Regarding local journalism funding, communities themselves should be part of the decision-making process.

Conclusion

The future of public-interest news requires a collaborative effort from news organisations, policymakers, technology companies, and civil society. By addressing the challenges identified in this submission and implementing the recommended actions, we can ensure a healthy and sustainable news ecosystem that serves the public good.

Cited Evidence

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