



# ENGAGING THE PUBLIC IN REGULATING FOR ETHICAL JOURNALISM

## PART TWO: FOCUS GROUPS

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By Julie Firmstone, John Steel, Harry Hodges-Long, Paromita Saha



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

## Engaging the Public in Regulating for Ethical Journalism Part Two: Focus Groups

Julie Firmstone, University of Leeds, [j.a.firmstone@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:j.a.firmstone@leeds.ac.uk)

John Steel, University of Derby, [j.steel@derby.ac.uk](mailto:j.steel@derby.ac.uk)

Harry Hodges-Long

Paromita Saha

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# Executive Summary

This report details the second part of a pilot project aimed at examining the public's perception and understanding of journalism and its regulation in the UK. The 'Engaging the public in regulating for ethical journalism' study seeks to understand how journalism might better meet public expectations and the role of regulators in this dynamic.

## Introduction

The initial phase of the project, completed in 2022, involved a national survey to explore public understanding and expectations regarding journalism and its regulation. This second phase delves deeper into key themes identified in the survey analysis through focus groups to identify six themes that contribute to a lack of trust among audiences in the wider news media environment and in the regulation of journalism. The report makes recommendations based on suggestions made by participants for ways that the concerns of audiences could be addressed to improve trust in press regulation and, by extension, trust in news and journalism.

## Methodology

Eight online focus groups were conducted with 44 participants, selected based on their responses to the survey, covering diverse demographics including age, gender, and ethnicity. The discussions aimed to capture a range of perspectives on journalism and its regulation.

## Key Findings

1. Public Scepticism and Distrust:
  - There is significant scepticism about the motives behind news production, particularly when stories are perceived as biased or sensationalist.
  - Historical transgressions by the British tabloid press have led to significant distrust among some news audiences.
  - Trust issues stem from both intuition and past experiences, with stronger notions of distrust linked to known instances of wrongdoing.
2. Visibility and Understanding of Regulation:
  - A major finding is the low visibility and understanding of regulatory bodies and processes among the public.

- Many participants were unaware that news regulation is not mandatory and were surprised and perplexed to learn about the fragmented regulatory environment.
3. Expectations for Regulatory Uniformity and Independence:
    - Participants expressed a desire for a single, uniform regulatory body to enforce consistent standards.
    - There is also a strong expectation that regulation should be independent of both industry and government to avoid biases.
  4. Trust and Regulation:
    - Trust in news is closely linked to the visibility and perceived effectiveness of regulation.
    - There is a disconnect between audience expectations of regulation and their experiences with specific news publications. For example, *The Sun*, despite being a member of IPSO, had a poor reputation, whereas *The Guardian* was trusted more despite not being a member of any regulatory body.
  5. Involving the Public in Regulation:
    - Participants suggested involving ordinary people in regulatory decision-making, akin to a jury service model, to ensure diverse and representative oversight.
    - There was recognition of the need for expertise in regulation, with suggestions to include retired journalists and legal professionals alongside public representatives.
  6. Challenges in Online News Regulation:
    - Regulating online news was seen as particularly challenging due to the vast and dynamic nature of digital content.
    - The focus groups highlighted the need for regulation to protect privacy and combat misinformation without impinging on free expression and opinion.

## Conclusions and Reflections

The study concludes that the key to enhancing trust in journalism through regulation is for regulators to strive towards greater visibility, transparency, efficacy, and public engagement. For the public, meaningful, effective and trusted regulation should be independent and uniform, with clear communication to audiences about its role, processes, and outcomes. Building trust also involves news publishers consistently adhering to high journalistic standards and demonstrating accountability. Ultimately, the findings underscore the necessity for a more informed and involved public in journalism ethics and the regulation of news.

## Introduction

### The research

This report presents key findings from the second part of a pilot project - *Engaging the public in regulating for ethical journalism* – which examines how journalism might better connect with and serve the public and what role regulators can play in this relationship. In Part One of the project, we developed a survey instrument to explore the following overarching Research Questions: 1) how do the public understand the role and function of journalism in society? 2) what do the public understand about how the news media is regulated? 3) what do the public understand about regulatory codes and the normative principles underlying them? 4) how do the public think regulators might help journalists do a better job and facilitate trust in the news? The initial findings from the nationally representative survey were reported on in 2022 ([Gibson et al., 2022](#)).

This report analyses the findings from Part Two of the project which digs deeper into these four overarching questions and the responses of the survey via a series of focus groups drawn from a sample of participants who contributed to Part One.

Overall, our analysis of these focus groups identified six themes that contribute to a lack of trust among audiences in the wider news media environment and in the regulation of journalism:

1. Scepticism about the motives and intentions behind the production of news that is perceived to be biased or sensationalist.
2. Irreversible distrust based on experiences of historical transgressions and knowledge of a culture of wrongdoing in the British tabloid press.
3. Mistrust tends to relate to intuitions and suspicions about the wider media environment and is grounded in scepticism whereas the stronger notion of distrust tends to be drawn from prior knowledge or experience.
4. The lack of visibility of regulators, their guidelines, actions, and opportunities for complaints.
5. The expectation that there needs to be greater uniformity in the regulatory environment to prevent inequalities.
6. The expectation that regulation should be independent of industry and government influence to mitigate potential bias.

## Structure of the report

Following an overview of the background to the study, the methodological approach and demographic composition of the focus groups, the report presents and discusses the findings in relation to these six themes in the following four sections:

**Section 1** explores audience expectations of news and journalism

**Section 2** examines audience support for, and understanding of, how regulation works as well as how visible it is among audiences

**Section 3** engages with participants' ideas about improving trust in journalism through trusted regulation

**Section 4** concludes the report with reflections and recommendations for the sector

## Background to the study

Ethically produced journalism that the public can trust is essential to democracy. Concerns about the performance of the UK news media have contributed to a deterioration of public trust in journalism, with trust in journalism in the UK lower than in other European countries (Newman *et al.* 2023). Problems relating to continued press malpractice over a decade on from the Leveson inquiry<sup>1</sup>; changes in local news ecologies which have left many citizens and communities without a source of local news; and a pervasive lack of public confidence in news publishers to produce information that represents their interests and enables them to be resilient against mal-information, have contributed to an erosion of trust that is further damaging to democracy. Despite the central function of journalism to serve the public interest, debates about ethics and standards in journalism have taken place amongst elite groups in society, with little consultation with the public.

One of the key functions of organisations that regulate journalism is to ensure the maintenance of standards amongst their member publications and to set the boundaries of legitimate and ethical journalism. However, regulators also have an indirect role to serve the public. Maintaining high journalistic standards ultimately benefits the public by ensuring that they have truthful, accurate and reliable information at their disposal. A [previous study](#) by the authors suggested that it is imperative that greater levels of public engagement with the way in which journalism is regulated is imperative for repairing trust in journalism.

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<sup>1</sup> The Leveson Inquiry was a judicial public inquiry into the culture, practices, and ethics of the British press following the phone hacking scandal. Lord Leveson's report was published in 2012 [The Leveson Report](#)

## Method

Eight online focus groups with a total of forty-four participants were recruited from a self-selecting group who completed the survey. The intention was to recruit all participants for the groups in 2022, however, following a number of ‘no-shows’ and internet connection dropouts, additional focus groups were arranged in 2023 once additional funding had been secured to administer these. Though self-selecting, we organised the focus groups according to age, gender, ethnicity and, importantly, how participants responded to certain questions on the survey (see Table 1).

Five groups were recruited based on participants' responses to survey questions about either their level of knowledge of regulation, the importance they attach to understanding press regulation, the importance they attach to the public being engaged in regulation, or their level of trust in the news media. A further three groups were recruited to gather the views of women (FG 5), audiences from ethnic minority backgrounds (FG 1), and a group of participants of mixed gender, age and ethnicity (FG6). Participants were compensated for their time with vouchers for a well-known online brand. All participants have been given a pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

The focus group research took place during June-July 2022 (FG1-5) and June-July 2023 (FG6-8) at a time when news cycles were dominated by issues such as the war in Ukraine, ‘Party-gate’, the disappearance of Nicola Bulley and the Channel migrant crisis. Following Robertson (2023: 388) who noted that when conducting public facing research into news “researchers must pay attention to the influences of context on news definitions”, we suggest that these stories provided an important background to participants’ views at the time. The significance of these stories is evident in some of the participants’ responses highlighted in the discussion below. The questions used to guide the discussions were designed to explore themes that emerged from the survey analysis. The focus groups were recorded, professionally transcribed and analysed thematically (Braun, V. & Clarke, V. 2006; Byrne, 2021).



**Table 1 Focus group recruitment criteria**

Focus Group Number	Number of participants	Attributes/abbreviation of group name in brackets	Pseudonyms/group name/gender/age
2022			
FG1	3	Ethnic Minority background (EM), 1 female, 2 male, mixed survey responses	Raj EM/M/60 Sunny EM/M/80 Sandra/EM/F/22
FG2	7	Mixed age & gender (3 female, 4 male), limited knowledge of regulation (LK) and low importance attached to the need for them to understand regulation	Jenny LK/F/60 Karen LK/F/73 Sylvia LK/F/25 James LK/M/63 Andy LK/M/54 Mike LK/M/79 Roger LK/M/38
FG3	5	Male, 40+, attach high value to public knowledge of regulation (HK)	Gerald HK/M/43 David HK/M/73 Mike HK/M/76 Bruce HK/M/76 Fred HK/M/74
FG4	2	Male, 60+, in favour of public engagement in regulation (PE)	Jim PE/M/64 Harold PE/M/68
FG5	5	Female, aged 20-45, mixed survey responses (F)	Susan F/32 Jane F/31 Anya F/42 Liz F/34 Erin F/24
2023			
FG6	6	Mixed gender & ethnicity, aged 30+ (1 female, 5 male), mixed survey responses (Mx)	Keith Mx/M/34 Cath Mx/F/43 Arjun Mx/M/48 Dao Mx/M/39 Murad Mx/M/47 Charles Mx/M/49
FG7	7	Low or no trust in the news media. Mixed age and gender (4 female, 3 male) (LT)	Jamie LT/M/75 Jason LT/M/68 Rob LT/M/18 Jenny LT/F/39 Valentina LT/F/48 Isla LT/F/58 Naomi LT/F/39
FG8	9	Low or no trust in the news media. Aged 40+ and mixed gender (3 female, 6 male) (LT2)	Roy LT2/M/56 Alex LT2/M/54 Dean LT2/M/63 Dom LT2/M/46 Paul LT2/M/47 James LT2/M/54 Brenda LT2/F/58 Beth LT2/F/64 Daisy LT2/F/41
Total participants 44			

## Section I: Audience expectations of news and journalism

### I.1 To inform, report the truth, hold power to account

The responses below indicate that traditional notions concerning the role of journalism were reflected in the groups. These sentiments reflect the classical normative elements of journalism which align with the results of the survey (Eldridge & Steel, 2016; Gibson, *et al*, 2022) with the consensus that the most important roles are providing information to the public, being truthful and holding power to account.

#### ***The primary role of journalism is to inform***

In response to the question ‘what is the purpose of journalism and what is its role in society?’ there was a consensus that the primary role of journalism is to inform and that journalists have a responsibility to do this by reporting the truth and avoiding bias. There was an expectation that journalism is there to report and reflect events that occur around the world in a way that allows audiences to obtain information and choose how to interpret that information for themselves.

“The journalism role in my view is to keep the public informed about the world around us in an unbiased way.” (Group 7 Valentina LT/F/48)

“That’s the journalist’s job, find the information, present it in a reasonable format that has all sides to the story present in a way that it can be read and understood.” (Group 6 Keith Mx/M/34)

“To give a balanced perspective so someone can absorb some information and make a choice or be educated by it.” (Group 3 Gerald HK/M/43)

The importance of balance was often described in terms of giving audiences access to a diversity of information and viewpoints in order that they can make up their own mind, as is illustrated by this exchange from Group 8:

“Okay, so yes obviously what the guys have said previously [to inform and educate] but also to give us views of things that we have no idea of or to get the two or three sides of obviously the multifaceted heads of all these many stories. So, to try and get a bit more idea about what's actually going on.” (Group 8 Dom LT2/M/46)

Paul agreed: “I guess for me it's making sure you hear from a cross-section of society that you're not necessarily part of yourself so you can see and compare different viewpoints before making your own.” (Group 8 Paul LT2/M/47)

### ***Journalism should report facts and the truth***

Participants widely indicated that journalism's role was to report the facts and the truth. There was an expectation that information should be presented truthfully without a political slant or bias that could substantially affect the interpretation of information.

"I know this is going to sound trite, isn't it, but I mean it is the truth, it is reality and truth, that what one wants in journalism, you know. And just reporting the facts and not putting a spin on it."  
(Group 4 Harold PE/M/68)

"I was going to say well the purpose is to report on news stories of national interest as truthfully as possible without any bias at all whether it's political or otherwise." (Group 3 Mike HK/M/76)

### ***Journalism should keep all accountable***

Many participants expected that journalism should act as a watchdog for the public, "*to keep the authorities in check*" (Group 7 Valentina LT/F/48), by holding the authorities to account such as the establishment (e.g., government), businesses and other large organisations.

"I think it's there to challenge the establishment when they are not telling the truth, governments, corporate businesses." (Group 7 Jamie LT/M/75)

"I think the fundamental part of journalism is to keep all accountable and to inform the public and give a clear varied opinion." (Group 5 Erin F/24)

There was also a consensus that journalism should identify 'important issues', the things that people need to know or would not otherwise know about. What kind of issues this relates to was not commonly elaborated on, with a handful of participants saying that journalism should provide information that interests the public, and as mentioned above, should portray a range of voices and viewpoints. For example, "*Journalism for me is always about reporting information that'd be of interest to the public*" (Group 6 Keith Mx/M/34). It was only after participants were shown a list of possible roles for journalism in society drawn from the survey questions that included a category of "speak up for minorities" that they tended to suggest the value of ensuring that the views of minorities are represented in news.

"You know people need to see their voices are being listened to too, so have more diverse journalism in general." (Group 5 Liz F/34)

“As for the other points [referring to a list of possible roles shown to participants from in the results of the survey], they didn’t really come to mind, but they can be used for that purpose, and I think it is quite important that it’s used to help those in the minorities speak up.” (Group 6 Dao Mx/M/39)

## 1.2 Expectations versus the reality of audience experiences

Although our question encouraged our participants to focus specifically on thinking about what the purpose of journalism ought to be in society, many participants qualified their descriptions of the contributions they want and expect journalism to make with observations revealing their disappointment with how journalism fulfils these expectations. We now explore how the ideal expectations of audiences are moderated by their experiences.

### ***A lack of accuracy***

We found that the most common gap between expectations and experience that feeds distrust relates to practices that are perceived to undermine the accuracy of reporting. Concerns about accuracy were raised by participants in all groups and, despite being asked about their opinion of news and journalism in general, most comments related to national newspapers. The examples and explanations participants cited illustrate that these perceptions have led to distrust, particularly of the tabloid press. As we see later, though participants had mixed opinions about the impartiality of the BBC, television news was seen as more accurate and more trustworthy.

“Because a lot of it was, well they said gutter press but, a lot of press reporting in my lifetime has not been that accurate.” (Group 4 Jim PE/M/64)

Participants were disapproving of practices that they perceived as illustrating the willingness of some newspapers to disregard accuracy in favour of being the first publication to report on breaking news or to use inaccurate clickbait headlines to draw readers in. Many were also concerned about the consequences of newspapers presenting opinion as fact, including biased coverage.

“You have newspapers that would never publish something that’s not double checked and has a source that can confirm that, whereas others can just print kind of stuff that you know.” (Group 5 Anya F/42)

“Then you've also got to think of which is more important the accuracy of the story or getting the breaking story, the new story quickest. I mean I would have thought the accuracy was far more important, so I don't care how long it takes you know, when the information breaks as long as it's true and accurate.” (Group 8 Brenda LT2/F/58)

“I think it is a bit difficult for journalists to do that [go straight to the point and avoid going off track] because what happens is they are under pressure from their editors who continue selling their papers. To sell their papers, people must read the papers, to read the papers, they must be interested in what the journalists say. So, this is why sometimes they just go off the beaten track and say things that they shouldn't say” (Group 1, Sunny EM/M/80)

“Yes, like I think that the tabloids it is as you say it's click bait. It's like shocking headlines and then you read the story and you're like, wow this was like, there's actually no information here. Who knows what is the fact or information?” (Group 5 Anya F/42)

### ***Blurring fact and opinion***

There was an acceptance that newspapers in the UK have a tradition of taking a position and providing their opinion on certain issues alongside more informative reporting, but there was also an expectation that the lines between the two should not be blurred. Participants had a good understanding of the conventions they expect newspapers to follow in order to maintain an explicit separation between fact and opinion, and expressed concern that these boundaries were often crossed.

“You know you can get a headline in the Daily Mail or the Daily Mirror and it, it's rather opinion as opposed to fact, it's not reporting on something and saying x, y and z happened in the country today and this and this and this happened and inviting the reader to make up their own mind. They've already done that almost for themselves and for the reader and then put it in a headline as if it's fact.” (Group 4 Harold PE/M/68)

“If the editor expresses their opinion in their editorial that's fine, it may be completely wrong but it's an editorial it's not news. The problem is when the opinion is put across the front page in large type and the opinion is people read it as being a fact when it's actually an opinion. That's the difference between a news story and an editorial. Editorial is opinion, the news story, the front page should be fact and information.” (Group 6 Cath Mx/F/43)

“it's hard for me to see whether something's factual or based on opinion” (Group 1 Sandra/EM/F/22)

## 1.3 Political and corporate interests as a negative influence on standards

Having identified inaccuracy and bias as their main source of concern, participants were often critical of the press because they perceived the reasons for these problems as entirely driven by the self-interest of newspapers to make a profit or garner political influence. The following discussion illustrates the first of six themes that we conclude contribute to mis and distrust in contemporary regulation and the wider media environment:

Theme 1- Scepticism about the motives and intentions behind the production of news that is perceived to be biased or sensationalist

### ***Profit as a driver of inaccuracy***

Participants commonly described newspapers as having lost sight of aspirations to inform, referring to the tendency of papers to sensationalise stories and their propensity to bend or exaggerate the truth which audiences see as fuelled by economic motivations to sell newspapers.

“I think we get a lot of sensationalism in journalism for the reason cited earlier, you know, to sell copy, whatever copy that is. And I think some of the words used are not quite the truth, because I think I heard someone say before, they maybe be not lying but they may be using words that exaggerate the truth shall we say.” (Group 2 James LK/M/63)

“They're looking to sell as many papers as they can. So, in some instances depending on the brand of the paper and even the main papers and the tabloids they will sensationalise stuff sometimes to sell the papers.” (Group 7 Jamie LT/M/75)

### ***Political and corporate interests as a driver of bias***

Many participants expressed concerns that political and corporate ownership interests shape the reporting of news by some news media, particularly newspapers, with some additional concerns that news is used to influence rather than to inform. Participants gave examples of bias, suggesting that some news media are heavily influenced by their support for certain political parties.

“So, I think journalists, as much as they want to sort of report stories, the papers themselves or the media that publish the stories, further their interests in terms of their own political stance.” (Group 2 Roger LK/M/38)

“But yes, when it comes to politics, I think there already is a lot of interference anyway, and I think that, you know, newspaper editors are very aware that they have to, sort of, follow a particular line; they can’t go over a certain thing because they are owned by people who have money and they have political views and they are slanted in one direction or the other, so there are natural limitations to what a reporter can do” (Group 1 Raj EM/M/60)

“The example of Sky and the Sun, Rupert Murdoch, and all these things you look at, it’s not just Rupert Murdoch, there are other people behind the scenes trying to pull the strings on how to inform people.” [...] “It’s to do as I said, affiliation. Who you are affiliated with, that’s my thought.” (Group 6 Arjun Mx/M/48)

The following quote is illustrative of the common perceptions that the BBC is less subject to biases of ownership, although, as we see later, some participants also think the BBC is biased.

“Basically, what I wanted to say is, as the BBC is funded by taxpayers and is regulated, I guess they’re more trustworthy than a newspaper which is owned by a big owner. [...] I would have thought hopefully the BBC funded by the licence payers, like us all would be probably more unbiased than the rest.” (Group 6 Charles Mx/M/49)

These discussions also reveal that audiences attribute responsibility to editors and, ultimately, proprietors, for pushing journalists to produce content that may go against the journalistic norms and values of accuracy and truthfulness. Individual journalists are seen as constrained by the demands of their news organisation:

“The individual journalist may want to use accurate, correct reporting of the stories but you might find that on the inner pages out of sight. You’ve got headlines and the big splashy stuff will be controlled and directed by whoever’s actually running the organisation, which is unfortunate but that’s the way it operates.” (Group 6 Keith Mx/M/34)

In sum, participants frequently explained the compromising of accuracy as an inevitable casualty of the pressure newspapers are under to make a profit, for journalists to please editors and for editors to pursue the profit orientation and political motives of proprietors.

## 1.4 Differing expectations of newspapers versus television: television news as a space of trust

We were interested in whether audiences think that the news produced by different platforms fulfils different roles, so we asked groups: In terms of their roles, what do you think is the difference between news broadcasters such as BBC/Sky/Channel 4 and ITV and the newspaper

press? Television was commonly perceived to be more balanced and unbiased than newspapers. For example:

*“I think the TV broadcasters need to be more current and of the minute. And I think that more, the amount of people that watch the news of varying ages, I think they probably need to make sure they are as neutral as they possibly can be.”* (Group 2 Jenny LK/F/60)

*“I mean this is purely intuitive if you like, I have got no basis for it, but I think you would tend to find that the broadcast journalists would be pretty balanced and pretty unbiased.”* (Group 3 Bruce HK/M/76)

Discussions revealed two main sources of higher levels of confidence in television news compared to newspapers: 1) awareness of the requirement for TV news to be balanced and impartial; 2) perceptions of trust created by the visual and live format of TV news.

### ***Dimensions of confidence in TV news #1: Balance and impartiality***

Participants tended to refer to the BBC as a benchmark, citing it as a counterbalance to the perceived bias and inaccuracy of the press. There was a shared awareness that the BBC has a duty to be balanced and impartial because it is funded by the public through the licence fee.

*“Yes, but the BBC has to be always telling the fact not fiction because the BBC is controlled and paid for by the public, so they have to be impartial”* (Group 1 Sunny EM/M/80)

Though impartiality was commonly referred to as a valuable ideal, it was often described as flawed in practice. Opinion was divided between those who thought the BBC discharges this duty well and those who were critical of how the BBC performs impartiality.

*“[...] because well BBC at least should be doing is just informing us and being impartial.”* (Group 5 Anya F/42)

*“What I'd say from my perspective is the likes of the BBC actually only pay lip service to giving the impression of equity and different opinions. The difference for me is the newspapers don't even pretend to do that, they literally have a very clear political bias left or right. At least I know when I pick up a newspaper whether it's very clearly left or right wing.”* (Group 8 Paul LT2/M/47)

Some concerns about the BBC related to quite subtle forms of bias, with omission of viewpoints highlighted as an important way that impartiality can be compromised. The following exchange in



this mixed ethnicity group of mainly men (Group 6) illustrates this alongside the view that some criticisms of TV news as biased are unfair, given the requirement for journalism to hold the party in government to account.

“They [the BBC] do tend to sort of favour I think one party in terms of the other because when something, for example the Tories do their policies and stuff, they always tend to only say something positive about it, [...] there’s more NHS funding and there’s more payments to come for households, and stuff like that but they never seem to look on the other aspect of it, what the public think, what things are going wrong rather than what the Tories are actually trying to do. You know, a one-sided picture overall.” (Group 6 Murad Mx/M/47)

“Channel 4 and the BBC where their principle aims to hold the current government to account, as a result they get, when Labour were in charge they declared being totally biased towards the Tories, and when the Tories are in power they’re now being told that they’re a socialist group because they constantly hold the current government to account. [...] Well, the thing is, I don’t see it as being bias if the part of the *raison d’être* of the organisation in the first place is to hold whoever is currently in power, in government, to account. Most of their stories will be holding that group to account when they make mistakes rather than praising to the heavens when they get things right. That’ll be treated as being biased rather than doing what they’re supposed to be doing.” (Group 6 Keith Mx/M/34)

In a different group, participants discussed how accusations of bias often come from political parties who are themselves exhibiting bias in defending their actions:

“I’ve read certain parties political who call the BBC right wing biased and others will say it’s left wing, so how can, it just strikes me as odd that somebody could look at something [...] they can look at the same thing and accuse the BBC of being either right wing biased or left wing” (Group 4 Harold PE/M/68)

“Well, the thing is it’s the story of the day is it not, when somebody in the Labour party does something wrong, and they get caught out, they’re saying it’s a bias and the same thing with Conservative, Liberals. [...] They’re trying to spread the debris of their, their problems around in a big general manner to prove that they are not totally in the wrong.” (Group 4 Jim PE/M/64)

### ***Dimensions of trust in TV news #2: visual and live format characteristics***

Some participants described television as engendering more significant levels of trust due to the perception that the format of images and videos provides greater veracity, with professional standards more visible and apparent in TV reporting compared to print and online news. Visual aids and the immediacy of television act as verification devices for audiences. Audiences described how

it is more difficult for television to be misleading when using visual content compared to newspapers which often rely on a single picture or written expression in isolation.

“One thing I would say in regards to sort of media broadcasting compared to print is the actual visual aids which can impact on the subject being covered. If you watch TV news then you are getting lots of images or a video whereas with the print you are just getting frames [referring to one static image that might be misleading]. So if you are reading the article you are looking at the picture.” (Group 3 Gerald HK/M/43)

“And when they have got a video or something that they want to put on there, they are verifying it. So when they do actually get it, that is, you know, so I have a bit of trust in that.” (Group 3 Gerald HK/M/43)

Additionally, it was widely discussed that television news, as a medium, makes the professional values underpinning the journalistic process far more transparent and visible, due to the level of intimacy between the viewer and the presenter, as the presenter is on air live. One participant explained how the visibility of presenters reporting and making statements with their own voices creates trust because audiences feel a direct connection with the journalist/presenter. Further, corrections made directly to the public on air when inaccuracies or mistakes are made in reporting also contribute to the visibility of trustworthy professional standards in television news.

“Yes, I trust the news on TV more than newspapers. About the TV because they’re live in front of so many people, they have standards and professionalism to uphold, whereas newspapers are more written behind the scenes and they have more time to actually recollect what’s going on.” (Group 1 Sandra/EM/F/22)

“Well, the only reason I brought it up was that in broadcast you actually hear him saying the thing rather than somebody else doing it. He has made a statement himself.” (Group 3 David HK/M/73)

“TV news and print news is that it’s a lot harder or a lot easier for the printed news to not be able to correct people because like you say corrections and retractions are printed back page in tiny writing whereas if it’s on the TV it’s a lot more visual in your face if someone’s apologizing for something, you get that straight away.” (Group 5 Jane F/31)

## 1.5 Concerns and consequences

It is important to note that not all participants were critical of the bias and opinion that they perceived in newspaper journalism. The statements of many participants reflected what we might see as a high degree of media literacy based on their observations and recognition of how the media system in the UK is structured. There was little resistance in their acceptance that the press is 'allowed' to be opinionated whereas television news is required to be impartial.

"I think you would tend to find that the broadcast journalists would be pretty balanced and pretty unbiased. Whereas the newsprint wouldn't be. And that's not a criticism, it's the nature of newsprint, it is about opinion as much as it about news." (Group 3 Bruce HK/M/76)

There were, however, many participants who noted concerns about the consequences of poor standards due to the perceived power of journalism and its potential effect on public opinion and individuals.

### ***Consequences for public opinion***

As we now explore, these concerns relate to three consequences for public opinion: 1) that the blurring of fact with opinion will mislead the public; 2) that misinformation will lead to polarisation; 3) and the risk that opinion in news allows audiences to reside in echo chambers. Several groups discussed how practices that blur fact and opinion may lead some audiences to be misinformed because they mistake opinion as fact. For example, on the dangers of getting inaccurate information from newspapers, this participant said:

"You know, obviously with the more vulnerable people of society some of them will believe anything and it can really affect people. So, I think it's a very important point." (Group 8 Brenda LT2/F/58)

Other participants were concerned that an increasing lack of transparency and clarity around the presence of opinion in journalism is making it difficult for audiences to distinguish between opinion and fact:

"So, they're just going to take the journalist's word and that's very scary. Journalism now: bias, opinionated, lack of facts, impartiality, and bad influence on people's thinking" (Group 5 Erin F/24)

A few groups discussed how bias, and in some cases misinformation, in news can divide public opinion and lead to polarisation. For example:

“Journalism should be there to promote independent, free thinking and most certainly objective thinking rather than you know just dividing us further, putting us to extreme sides and never work in the centre” (Group 5 Anya F/42)

“In America when it was coming up to re-election time- election time a couple of years ago. And I remember all the press there. I was looking to- fascinated by the different views, and there was so many lies being spread about by different news organisations” (Group 1 Raj EM/M/60)

There was an awareness that audiences self-select news that they agree with and a perception that when combined with biased news or misinformation, this selective exposure leads to dangerous echo chambers:

“You pick up the paper you want to read. You read the paper or the online articles, the news, the BBC, whatever, you read what you agree with. I am not going to read a paper that I completely disagree with what they say, I want to read the papers that follow my own views. So there is a personal choice there for what media you consume.” (Group 2 Roger LK/M/38)

“It’s very hard to find a news source now which is absolutely impartial, it’s usually one news source and they have a clear bias now, so people sort of read the same news or listen to the news again and again, they’re going to have this echo chamber effect and they’re not going to listen to other views other than that. So, I feel that’s how it now makes people feel like there’s only one opinion, it’s very biased.” (Group 5 Erin F/24)

### ***Consequences for individuals***

Furthermore, there were concerns about a lack of accuracy in reporting having more serious consequences beyond influencing public opinion. Here participants regularly referred to examples of historical behaviour of some sections of the press that they perceived to have had substantial negative impacts on individuals’ lives.

“Whereas so many things have happened, I think Murad mentioned where journalists have gone beyond, far and beyond, where they have reported things that are completely misinformed not information, misinformation and inaccuracy where they have turned people lives into proper hell.” (Group 6, Arjun Mx/M/48)

“I don’t think the press in my experience throughout my lifetime, has ever treated anybody as an individual and just vilified people. They don’t, they don’t draw a line in the sand where they don’t cross, do they?” (Group 4 Jim PE/M/64)

## Theme 2: Irreversible distrust based on experiences of historical transgressions and knowledge of a culture of wrongdoing in the British tabloid press

The two quotes above illustrate the long-term, and potentially irreversible, impact of media scandals and ongoing meta-discourses relating to standards in journalism on audience perceptions. Participants across all groups expressed feelings of distrust towards journalism and journalists particularly. There was a perception of journalists and the press as being deceptive and lacking transparency which had led to a deeply ingrained scepticism about the intentions of the media due to attacks on celebrities, phone hacking, and *The Sun's* unethical reporting of the 1989 Hillsborough stadium disaster. It is notable that in six out of the eight groups participants referred to the phone hacking scandal and, at least two groups explicitly mentioned Hillsborough. Several groups mentioned the poor treatment of Princess Diana and others referred to past instances of intrusion more opaquely, most often in relation to celebrities. For many, these shared frames of reference exemplify the 'bad behaviour' of the press and contribute to scepticism about the credibility of journalists and journalism more widely.

"You would think though wouldn't you with all the scandals and things that they have had over the years that they would learn from this?" (Group 2 Jenny LK/F/60)

"For example, when they sent round the ridiculous thing about Hillsborough which was completely, in my opinion, one of the worst things I've ever witnessed the trust wasn't, you needed a regulator. Nobody in Liverpool including myself from Southport would not buy *The Sun* and even to this day not that I liked *The Sun* anyway I wouldn't buy it because I don't trust them. I'm sure they may have moved on, but perceptions last a long time, we're talking over 30 years ago I suppose the other one would be the *News of the World* so..." (Group 7 Jamie LT/M/75)

"Journalists I think there's a stigma unfortunately that's attached to them now for me, I can't imagine any way for that stigma to be dropped" (Group 5 Susan F/32)

At the time of both sets of groups, several recent cases of press intrusion into individuals' privacy were fresh in the minds of participants and fed into the perception that the tabloid press has not learnt lessons from the phone hacking scandal. In the 2022 groups, press allegations about Prince Charles receiving money from a relative of Osama Bin Laden<sup>2</sup> were referred to by two participants to highlight the way that celebrities and high-profile figures are often the subject of unethical reporting for the purpose of producing sensationalist stories:

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<sup>2</sup> [BBC News \(2022\)](#)

“I would agree. I would think because people are in high profile positions then they are more vulnerable to something like that.” (Group 2 James LK/M/63)

“I agree. And there does seem to be a trend at the moment where there has to be somebody that the press want to sort of pick on all the time. I mean, I don’t know why really. I mean they just. I don’t know.” (Group 2 Jenny LK/F/60)

In 2023, participants gave examples related to perceptions of the invasion of privacy and speculation related to reporting about a missing woman who was later found to have drowned (Nicola Bulley)<sup>3</sup> and IPSO’s ruling that found celebrity Jeremy Clarkson to have breached the Editor’s Code in an article he wrote about Megan Markle<sup>4</sup>.

“Only a small point kind of agree with what Dean said really just that news media particularly like 24 hour rolling news just seems to revel in tragedy don’t they? Thinking of the Nicola Bulley story and I know that was a lot led with social media stuff like but it’s kind of like tragedy in saturation like I say through the pandemic and everything so yes, just that really.” (Group 8 Roy LT2/M/56)

### ***Social media as an additional source of concern***

Despite the flaws that are widely taken for granted as existing in the news produced by the press, audiences see social media as far worse in relation to the provision of trustworthy information. Here it is important to note that participants did not discuss social media as part of ‘the news media’ or as ‘journalism’. Instead, social media is imagined as a cacophony of unregulated, individual voices, whose motivations are unclear, and are perceived as different to those of professional journalists and established news outlets. Audiences therefore demarcate their expectations according to media platform, demonstrating that knowledge of the difference between social media and legacy sources of news is part of their media literacy.

Participants discussed a deep lack of trust in social media as an avenue for obtaining reliable information and expressed concerns that social media is an unregulated space where people are unable to determine whether a source is truthful, resulting in members of the public being misled. Importantly, despite being seen as separate entities, social media and the news media are perceived to be interrelated, with the practices of social media having consequences for the broader

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<sup>3</sup> [\*Guardian\* \(2023\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [\*Press Gazette\* \(2023\)](#)

information ecology within which journalism sits and contributing to the difficulties audiences face in finding unbiased and accurate information.

“I think it’s difficult because social media is not professionals, it’s more like ordinary people, so like comments and stuff should be regulated before it gets posted on someone’s story or something like that and someone’s pictures.” (Group 1 Sandra/EM/F/22)

“Yes, I mean especially with things like social media as well. I mean you can put anything on there and once it’s out there it’s out there and that’s it you know?” (Group 8 Brenda LT2/F/58)

As we see in Section 2.1, most of the discussion about social media related to the widespread view that it is almost impossible to regulate. Audiences are concerned that, as an unregulated space, people cannot determine whether a source on social media is truthful, resulting in members of the public being misled.

“You if you’re on social media and you have your opinion of course, feel free to share it but it’s completely different when that blows into something much bigger and becomes an unregulated channel for news that people go to and read and believe that it’s official in some way. [gives the example of President Trump telling people to drink bleach to prevent Covid]. They’re not going to see that and filter the content that they’re being fed, they expect someone else to filter that before it’s fed to them, and that’s why it’s dangerous.” (Group 5 Anya F/42)

**Theme 3: Mistrust tends to relate to intuitions and suspicions about the wider media environment and is grounded in scepticism whereas the stronger notion of distrust tends to be drawn from prior knowledge or experience**

Exploring participants’ concerns and the examples they gave to illustrate these revealed a third theme that helps us to understand how audiences judge the trustworthiness of journalism and news publishers. The nuances of how participants discussed the above determinants of trust and referred to concrete examples point to the importance of distinguishing between trust, mistrust and distrust or, as others have argued (Bunting *et al*, 2021), the importance of conceptualising trust as a family that includes all three. As per Citrin and Stoker’s definition of the three concepts, “mistrust reflects doubt or scepticism about the trustworthiness of the other, while distrust reflects a settled belief that the other is untrustworthy” (2018, p. 50). It was apparent from the discussions, that what differentiates mistrust from distrust in journalism is a subtle distinction. Mistrust among participants was based on a general sense of unease and wariness founded in intuition in relation to journalism and the news media overall. In contrast, the stronger notion of distrust was based on prior knowledge or experience. Although such experiences were most often articulated in relation to the behaviour of specific outlets, they often became evidence to underpin misgivings about journalism or journalists more broadly.

## Section 2: Regulation: expectations, understanding, prominence and visibility

Having established participants' perceptions about the range of roles they expect journalism to fulfil and explored their concerns about the performance of the news media, we shifted the focus to regulation by asking groups: *Do you think that all online and print news in the UK should be regulated?*

While we found a strong consensus that all online and print news should be regulated to some extent, responses also highlighted that audiences had very little awareness or understanding of the existing regulatory arrangements for online and print news. As we explore in depth later, beyond the widespread (inaccurate) assumption that all news is (and must be) already regulated, audiences are largely unaware of any details about existing regulatory arrangements – they do not know the names of the bodies that are responsible for regulating the news media and they have little understanding of the terms and conditions of press regulation (this matches with the findings of our survey -Gibson *et al.*, 2022). Participants were surprised and incredulous to find that regulation is not mandatory, that there is not one single regulator for all, and that publications are permitted to practice in-house regulation. As we demonstrate in section 2.2, this widespread lack of awareness and the near invisibility of press regulators is integral to audience perceptions of the (in) effectiveness and (lack of) credibility of existing regulation, with the majority of participants unclear as to how and whether news organisations are being held to account by anyone.

Before we explore these perceptions, we first look at the discussions around the limits of audience support for regulation to illustrate three important findings: 1) that audiences take it for granted that the news media are regulated; 2) that audiences attach conditions to the need for regulation; 3) that audiences see the domain of online news as far more challenging to regulate.

### 2.1. Widespread support for regulation of and regulation assumed to be an existing requirement

Participants indicated an overwhelming agreement that online and print news should be regulated to some extent and revealed a common misconception that all news publishers are already subject to some form of regulation. Indeed, the overwhelming response to the question of whether all online and print news in the UK should be regulated was – yes, but it already is, isn't it? For example:

“I think I kind of thought it was you know we had all the News of the World and the phone hacking and obviously I imagine that new regulations were brought in then to monitor what's being said in newspapers and stuff like that so yes that's that really.” (Group 8 Roy LT2/M/56)



“To be honest I thought it already was. I have to be honest I thought that all news was regulated to a certain extent.” (Group 2 Jenny LK/F/60)

“Just on the general principle of regulation, yes we need regulation at all levels. We have societal values, anybody who aspires to be part of our society has to adhere, as far as possible, to those rules.” (Group 3 Fred HK/M/74)

Having expressed support for the principle of regulation, discussions quickly turned to the parameters of regulation in relation to what kind of content should and should not be regulated, the lack of visibility and ineffectiveness of current regulations, and the difficulties of regulating online news.

### ***The parameters of regulation – what kind of content should be regulated?***

There was a common consensus that regulation was justified for some purposes but not for others - to protect privacy, to counter misinformation and fake news online, but not to prevent bias or opinion. For example, due to their widespread awareness of instances of invasions of privacy such as phone hacking, many groups talked about the need for regulation to protect people’s privacy and particularly to ward against the mistreatment of individuals who are not wealthy enough to seek redress through legal means (for example, ‘ordinary’ members of the public).

“As for papers itself I don't think they need 100% regulation, but they certainly need some more because I suppose people like Prince Harry for example when they go to court and they've got the money to challenge the papers the normal punters who haven't got the money don't have as much power to challenge the papers if they've been misrepresented or whatever.” (Group 7 Jamie LT/M/75)

A number of groups saw regulation which might limit bias as unacceptable, and, despite some participants raising concerns about bias, it was not commonly mentioned as a problem that required regulation. Indeed, attempts to regulate against bias were perceived as compromising audiences’ freedom of choice and access to opinion in a way that would place an unacceptable limit on freedom of speech. Audiences had a good understanding of the agendas of different news outlets, and as long as bias and agendas are transparent, they tend to think that it is up to them to interpret the news in that context. As mentioned earlier, there was a widespread level of tolerance for what is understood as an imperfect media system in the UK: audiences are accepting of a plurality of opinion but want bias to be transparent in order to empower them to make an informed judgement about the story.

“I don’t think it [regulation] would work. Because at the end of the day you, as an individual you choose what newspaper you want to read because you follow that leading yourself and you choose

which television news you want to see. So, it's your own leaning, if you start interfering with, with the way that's done I imagine there will be huge outcry about human rights and I won't be told this, I won't be told that." (Group 1 Jim PE/M/64)

"I just wanted to add a new specifically asked about the papers and the mainstays but like everything else these days there's a plethora of options so like I watch GB News quite a bit, Talk TV a dip in and out of whether people like the people on there or not but at least, everybody has an agenda and it's regardless of whether we're left, right, in the middle and the thing nowadays like every other platform there's so many choices." (Group 8 Dom LT2/M/46)

"You're then getting into the realms of like suppression of freedom of the press and freedom of speech if you are saying you can't print that because of these reasons, you think well that goes against freedom of speech you have just because you're printing something that's against your or opposes your opinion, doesn't necessarily mean it's not a good news piece" (Group 5 Jane F/31)

Regulation of content *before* publication was not supported and some groups raised concerns about who has the power to make decisions about the parameters of regulation and what kind of content regulation would be applied to. For example, commenting on whether regulation should occur prior to publication:

"Well, then it would be 1984 where the man can push a button to stop a newspaper going out or push a button to stop a television programme going out. We don't need that." (Group 4 Jim PE/M/64)

"We live in this ridiculous world now in many ways where without saying too much about anything but where do we draw the line because somebody or people who were going to say what is and isn't have got agendas [...] so that's really more of a statement I just don't know where the line is drawn and who has the final say about anything." (Group 8 Dom LT2/M/46)

### ***The difficulty of regulating online news***

Because most participants thought that all newspapers are already regulated, the inclusion of online news in our question led many to focus their responses on the problems of online news, describing it as in more severe need of regulation in comparison to the legacy press, whilst acknowledging the far greater regulatory challenge presented by digital content. Many of the discussions related to the need to regulate online news to protect against mis and disinformation. For example:

"Most definitely. I mean, I think that everyone deserves to get all the facts. They deserve that. But at this moment in time, anyone can basically go on there [the internet], give their views, say a mass of lies and there will be people who believe them. So, I'm not- I would like some sort of regulation

and also done independently. Something which is totally independent, where you can go if you feel there's something wrong or there's something, you know, which is misleading. And people should be held for- held up to account for giving false information.” (Group 1 Raj EM/M/60)

“It'll be 10 times harder to regulate news online. Much harder. Because as they say click bait, I've seen so many websites and you just read it and you think well it doesn't make sense, I can't imagine how they would regulate it, it should, but I can't imagine who it would be.” (Group 5 Susan F/32)

Recognition of the difficulty of regulating online content led one participant to point out that the widespread lack of confidence in online news increases the value of news produced by regulated offline news media. For example, in relation to fake news surrounding the US general election in 2020:

“I remember reading that Twitter and Google were having to add flags onto stories that weren't fact checked. Especially on Twitter, it was a story, it was like this is fake news and it was Donald Trump still had presidency. So, I think it's difficult to regulate it, impossible I think to regulate it. So, all this on the regulation needs to be through the media outlets that are putting out into the world.” (Group2 Roger LK/M/38)

Inevitably, due to the overlapping boundaries of social media and online news, some participants conflated the concept of regulating online news (by which we mean news produced by a news organisation) and information posted online by individuals. For example, referring to not being sure about whether news should be regulated, this participant said *“To say one thing, I'm not totally sure about that but the only thing and it may not be totally relevant is if people can say anything online without being challenged and being racist or all the other things that social media is known for then possibly that needs regulating more than some of the others.”* (Group 7 Jamie LT/M/75) Others pointed to the impossibility of regulating individuals on social media:

“How would you, I've often thought about this, how do you regulate social media because it's like an amorphous body that exists there in the ether and how do you, you can't can you?” (Group 4 Harold PE/M/68)

“If you are putting a personal opinion, how can they regulate that? If you are claiming that something is factual, there was definitely a special Covid, some sort of banner, to say this is not, this may not be factual. So there is definitely something getting around social media but how can they regulate someone's opinion on something?” (Group 2 Sylvia LK/F/25)

## 2.2. Responses to the current regulatory situation

After asking participants to discuss the need for regulation of online and print news, we showed groups a table listing the current status of regulation in the UK (see Table 1 in the appendix). This showed all major national newspapers, several major local newspapers, independent publications and a few popular non-UK online publications such as the *Huffington Post*, categorised by the type of regulation they subscribe to. Four possible categories of regulatory arrangements were shown: membership of the press regulator IPSO, membership of the press regulator Impress, not being a member of a press regulator and regulating themselves, no regulation. Providing participants with this visual reference introduced the current status quo of voluntary self-regulation in the UK and provoked a rich set of responses coalescing around surprise and consternation.

Participants were shocked to discover that regulation is voluntary and even more perplexed to find that some of the news brands they hold in the highest esteem choose to regulate themselves – these facts constituted a substantial difference between participants’ assumptions and reality.

“I think that’s quite shocking. Like Jenny said before you do think they are all subject to some sort of regulation, so some of them are not. Yes, I find that quite shocking.” (Group 2 Karen LK/F/73)

“I’m just surprised that they are allowed to publish if they are not regulated. Yes, that has really surprised me, I mean I understood about the social media and the rest of it but the broadsheets and things like that I thought they all had to be regulated so that’s come a bit out of left field for me.” (Group 8 Brenda LT2/F/58)

Participants perceived belonging to a regulator as directly linked to high standards, so assumed that those publications that self-regulate would be the publications they associated with low standards, and those that subscribe to voluntary regulation by an external body would be the publications they associated with high standards. Participants expressed surprise at the paradox of the situation where publications such as *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*, which were widely perceived as the most common culprits of coverage lacking in accuracy and credibility, belong to external regulators whereas widely trusted publications such as *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times* are self-regulated in-house. Participants’ inherent distrust and disbelief in the independence and credibility of in-house regulation was at odds with their experiences of the (high) quality of journalism offered by these publications.

“I read the Guardian, but yes like that’s the unregulated one so it’s hard to say because I would struggle to believe anything I read in the Sun or Daily Mail and stuff like that yet they’re regulated” (Group 5 Liz F/34)

“What I can’t understand, is this like The Times- Financial Times and the other two newspapers, they are supposed to regulate themselves. How can you regulate yourself? What do they-what have they put in place at- do people know where to go and complain about this? I don’t think many people know; I don’t know.” (Group 1 Sunny EM/M/80)

“I was quite surprised to see The Guardian and The Financial Times have their own subset, whereas The Sun signs up for this, if you are reading something in The Guardian or The Sun I think I am more likely to believe something in The Guardian.” (Group 2 Roger LK/M/38)

The disconnect between audience perceptions of regulation and reality highlights that simply belonging to a regulator does not cultivate trust. As the following quote illustrates, the credibility of regulation and degree of trust in a regulatory body is tied to perceptions of the publications they regulate. Talking about a publication that they don’t trust, this participant explained that they did not have faith in whichever body regulates that publication because the regulator is complicit in allowing them to publish what she considers to be ‘nonsense’. She further questioned the effectiveness of external regulation if publications that are self-regulated such as *The Guardian* are able to maintain high standards without external regulation.

“I would say who are they regulated by because they’re just allowed to publish whatever nonsense they can think of, and you know I’ve started reading the Guardian a few years ago and I’ve yet to come across an article that sounded kind of unrealistic or possibly biased a little.” (Group 5 Anya F/42)

### 2.3. Audience perceptions and expectations of regulation

We can see from the sections above that three prominent themes have emerged in our analysis of the focus group discussions so far. These are based around: 1, Scepticism towards the motives of news producers; 2, Historical mistrust of the tabloid press; 3, A lack of trust towards the wider news media. We now move on to examine three further themes that surfaced in our analysis which relate specifically to dominant issues that shape audience perceptions of regulation.

Theme 4: The lack of visibility of regulators, their guidelines, actions, and opportunities for complaints

Theme 5: The expectation that there needs to be greater uniformity in the regulatory environment, possibly by having a singular regulator to enforce the same standards within the industry.

Theme 6: The expectation that regulation should be independent of industry and government influence to mitigate potential bias.

#### Theme 4: The lack of visibility of regulators, their guidelines, actions, and opportunities for complaints

Participants in all groups discussed that there was a lack of visibility regarding regulators in terms of their prominence, the guidelines they enforce, and their actions. Across all groups, participants were not aware of the names of either of the press regulators; whilst a handful had heard of Ofcom, nobody had heard of IPSO or Impress. There was an assumption that all news media would (and should) be externally regulated by the same independent body, so to find that there are different regulators with different degrees of independence, different standards, and that publications are allowed to practise self-regulation (or none) was a surprise and led many to question the effectiveness of what was seen as a patchwork system of regulation.

“There is only one that I’ve heard of. That is the Press Commission that is some time ago. I don’t know what they are supposed to do.” (Group 1 Sunny EM/M/80)

“Are these regulators like IPSO and Impress, I’ve never heard of these before. Are they independently operative of the newspaper groups or does the newspaper group put up people on that panel to regulate them?” (Group 4 Harold PE/M/68)

“At the moment the regulators seem to be invisible as far as the general public is concerned.” (Group 3 Mike HK/M/76)

“But I didn’t know there were regulators, so they are just these guys in the sky here regulating our newspapers and we don’t know why they are there or what they change or what they do and what difference they make.” (Group 2 Roger LK/M/38)

In most groups, the discussion usually unfolded to reveal a shared recognition by participants that they knew virtually nothing about how the press is regulated. Across groups it was common that participants did not know what codes of conduct news publications are subject to and did not understand the process that is involved in being regulated. The only example of visible regulation referred to, was the retractions that can be found within a newspaper, and even these were not mentioned in all groups.

“It’s interesting though because I actually have no idea what the regulations are. To say that they’re regulated is one thing but what those regulations are, what standards they’re held to, I wouldn’t have a clue.” (Group 5 Jane F/31)

“Is there a source for this code of conduct that we can access and read like what do they mean by code of conduct?” (Group 5 Anya F/42)

“Well, at this moment in time, we don’t know enough about the regulation. We know that there are stories that are retracted and I’ve explained what I’ve seen, which is retraction all the way in the back pages, sort of a month and a half, two months, three months after the event and it’s just lost its impetus. There’s no point to it at that stage.” (Group 1 Raj EM/M/60)

“You would think that they have some code of ethics that they are supposed to work by though as well wouldn’t you? Sort of in the industry as a whole.” (Group 2 Jenny LK/F/60)

“But I didn’t know there were regulators, so they are just these guys in the sky here regulating our newspapers and we don’t know why they are there or what they change or what they do and what difference they make.” (Group 2 Roger LK/M/38)

The process of regulation was commonly misunderstood with some audiences mistakenly assuming that publications, and in some cases individual articles, are subject to an ongoing process of ‘being regulated’ as part of the news production process. For some people, being regulated meant that *all* articles are ‘regulated’ or checked in advance of publication. For example,

“As mentioned, a helpline and of course somewhere in the newspaper itself, just to show that the story has been regulated.” (Group 1 Sandra/EM/F/22)

For others, they weren’t sure what regulation means – for example, referring to how regulation has changed since the Leveson enquiry:

“Things have moved on a lot I suppose for me it's like we say the press is regulated but what does that actually mean? You know, is it like trying to prevent things before they happen or is it after the event then punishing you know, what does the regulator actually do or should the regulator do, or regulators?” (Group 7 Isla LT/F/58)

As we will come back to in our discussion of audience recommendations, there was a common sense of feeling ‘in the dark’ due to a general lack of knowledge and awareness about regulation. This low level of perceived ethical literacy matches the findings of our nationally representative survey (Gibson *et al.*, 2022). The focus groups revealed that audiences felt that their lack of knowledge was the fault of regulators and news publishers who they perceive have a duty to ensure audiences are better informed.

### Theme 5: The expectation that there needs to be greater uniformity in the regulatory environment to prevent inequalities

Many participants referenced an expectation and desire for greater uniformity concerning press regulation, contending that having different regulators and sets of rules was too complicated and created an unfair situation where publications are not operating on a level playing field. This exchange between participants in Group 7 indicates the perceived inequality of having different forms of regulation:

*“It would be better if they were all under one umbrella, to have their own ombudsman is a bit odd.”* (Group 7 Isla LT/F/58)

*“Yes it's a bit like the Wild West really, you can go out shooting guns and some can shoot guns and some can't.”* (Group 7 Jamie LT/M/75)

Participants agreed that one independent body should conduct regulation for all news publications - different regulators and rules for different news organisations promotes distrust in the principle of self-regulation and the power of regulators to work on behalf of the public.

*“No, one set of rules governing everyone to be fair.” [...] “Makes so much sense, I agree. Don't complicate things, it's just simple.”* (Group 1 Sandra/EM/F/22)

*“I think they should all be governed by one particular body.”* (Group 3 Mike HK/M/76)

*“And I think there should just be an independent body all together that covers all of it.”* (Group 1 Raj EM/M/60)

*“Because you have obviously got those that are regulated by an independent commission, that just sort of get round the self-regulatory I mean do they have similar standards?”* (Group 3 Gerald HK/M/43)

*“Yes. It's totally fruitless. And there's no point having two or three separate organisations, you have to have one organisation that actually covers everything in terms of the press, otherwise I don't think it holds any power. They might have different standards and different boards.”* (Group 1 Raj EM/M/60)



## Theme 6: The expectation that regulation should be independent of industry and government influence to mitigate potential bias

We found a shared mistrust in any type of regulation that is perceived as not being independent from a publication or from the newspaper industry. Despite participants perceiving news publications that practise in-house regulation such as *The Guardian* as credible and accurate, there was a broad consensus that in-house regulation is not trustworthy due to the suspicion that if a member of the public made a complaint to an in-house regulated newspaper, decisions would be biased in favour of the publication.

“I have always got doubts when the press and magazines regulate themselves. Because I think any complaints could be seen to be biased, you know that words come out again, in favour of themselves. Whereas if it was an independent body that was doing it, it would be more objective.” (Group 3 Mike HK/M/76)

“What I can’t understand, is this like The Times- Financial Times and the other two newspapers, they are supposed to regulate themselves. How can you regulate yourself? What do they-what have they put in place at- do people know where to go and complain about this? I don’t think many people know; I don’t know. If I find any article that is incorrect or misleading in The Financial Times, so who do I complain to?” (Group 1 Sunny EM/M/80)

Additionally, some participants asked questions about the independence of the press regulators, IPSO and Impress, with scepticism raised about the degree of independence that can be claimed by a regulator whose membership board includes journalists, people from the news industry, or others where there could be a conflict of interest such as politicians. There was also scepticism because participants perceived there to be a conflict of interest between a body that regulates the organisations on whom it depends financially such as through membership fees. Overall, there was a desire for a sole independent regulator to ensure as little bias as possible.

“If you’ve got journalists monitoring or policing themselves, you just wonder how independent that can be. Because they might have had similar complaints against them personally and so they’re going to go onto these boards and take that with them and you wonder whether their attitudes will be the same, so I wonder how independent they are, bottom line.” (Group 4 Harold PE/M/68)

## Section 3: Audience suggestions for improving trust in journalism through trusted regulation

In this third section of the report, we engage with the suggestions made by participants for ways that the concerns raised above might be addressed to improve trust in press regulation and, by extension, in news and journalism. Exploring participants' expectations of effective and trustworthy regulation, we found that their suggestions for improvements fell into three main categories: 1) increasing the visibility of regulation; 2) increasing the perceived fairness and efficacy of regulation; 3) ensuring greater uniformity and independence of regulation.

### 3.1. Trust and perceptions of efficacy are tied with visibility and accountability

Towards the end of the discussions, we asked audiences whether they would like to see greater visibility of the work of press regulators and, if yes, we asked for suggestions for how press regulators could achieve this. There was a strong consensus that there needs to be more visibility and accountability if regulators are to improve knowledge about their work and build trust among audiences. Audience suggestions for strategies to improve visibility can be grouped into four categories: a) strengthen branding; b) create more overt channels to make complaints; c) have greater publicity about the purpose and function of regulation; and d) increase publicity around decisions/actions made.

#### ***Strengthen branding***

Many participants commented on the need for greater branding by regulators and news publications concerning who does the regulation and who is regulated by it. Suggestions for regulators to improve their brand awareness were focused on ways to communicate that a newspaper is regulated through a visible logo, kitemark or a signature.

“If the regulator has like a logo.” [...] “I think it’s nice if there was a prominent position, certainly on newspapers where they- we could see where they could complain to. It doesn’t have to be at the top, it could be at the bottom wherever, as long as there’s prominence and somewhere which tells people, yes, if they think something’s wrong, they can go somewhere.” (Group 1 Sandra/EM/F/22)

“Yes. I think they should put something on so that people may know who are members and who aren’t members, so that the public is aware whether they are buying something that is regulated or isn’t regulated.” (Group 2 Karen LK/F/73)

“Then surely the regulators name should be on the publication, or the newspapers should print, you know, if you want to know how this is regulated or there should be on the web maybe a logo of the regulator. If it was TV maybe a logo of the regulator in the corner of the TV screen so you know.”  
(Group 3 Gerald HK/M/43)

Several groups mentioned the way that logos and kitemarks of regulators for other industries give them confidence in a company’s product. For example, one participant referred to the travel industry regulators:

“...obviously ABTA and ATOL they have their own logos and things that are on the websites and on the documents and things you get from them. So maybe they should have a logo that’s visible on the publications themselves so people could know that they are affiliated to that particular regulator.”  
(Group 2 James LK/M/63)

While visual cues indicating when a news publication is subject to regulation may improve public trust, the responses of some participants highlights that such cues may be interpreted incorrectly as showing that regulation has occurred *before* publication. It was common for participants to assume that ‘being regulated’ means that content has been ‘passed’ by a regulator prior to publication. This misunderstanding is further evidence of the need to design public relations campaigns to increase the ethical literacy of audiences since few understand that the current system of voluntary regulation is largely preventative, with investigations and sanctions only applying after a complaint has been made.

“I think the difficulty is that once, if they brought out something once it’s out in the world it’s out there. So, whether they, so whatever they put out needs to be regulated.” (Group 2 Sylvia LK/F/25)

“How would we know? I feel like if we know, like there’s like a signature or something just to show it’s been regulated, I feel like that would increase my trust even more.” (Group 1 Sandra/EM/F/22)

### ***Clarity in relation to how to make a complaint***

Additionally, many participants wanted regulators and news publications to promote more overt channels for audiences to make complaints as most were not aware of how to do so. Suggestions for how to improve the ease of lodging a complaint included creating a reference number for every news article to make the complaints process more convenient and adding QR codes to news articles to guide audiences to information if they are concerned about something they have read.

“It sounds bizarre that we’re all thinking why are they not more visible, how do we not know how to complain, yet they’re the thing we read every day so why is there no adverts on TV about them or like you know stuff in newspapers saying if you’ve an issue with any of our journalism please

contact this, that or the other you know, there's no clear channels outlined anywhere. Media need to be explicit in promoting further awareness of how they are regulated within their own publications." (Group 5 Liz F/34)

"They could have an index of an article. So, if you are reading an article, it's got a reference number within the paper or the website. And then if you went to a website or you entered it to a regulator to sort of state your dissatisfaction of the article, then you have got the reference number of the story." (Group 3 Gerald HK/M/43)

"I know there's one in Northern Ireland where they have a small section at the back or a small section on their page about making contact or how you contact and make complaints to the newspaper just on that bit." (Group 7 Jenny LT/F/39)

"I think maybe like you said a separate page make like a QR code or something that takes you directly to the page where you get all the information because if it's too complicated people aren't going to bother." [...] In the most straight forward it would be at the bottom of every article like, if you don't like what you've read, please contact us at X, Y and Z. Bit more difficult for print but I think it would be quite simple to put like a footer on every webpage." (Group 5 Erin F/24)

### ***Greater publicity about the purpose and function of regulation***

Audiences suggested that regulators should be responsible for public relations campaigns to raise awareness about their role and to build a relationship between regulators and the public. Participants suggested ways that regulators could engage with audiences about regulation such as by publicising how audiences can access information about the purpose and function of regulation as well as information about how regulation functions. Participants said they would welcome initiatives to increase the accountability and transparency of regulators such as strategies to make codes of conduct more visible and outreach programmes to increase audience understanding of what regulators stand for and the kind of content that could breach guidelines.

"I think if, well firstly they've got to get themselves out there and make it known to us, the reader, the public who exactly they are and what their responsibilities are and what they do. Because unless we know then, you know they might as well not be there." (Group 4 Harold PE/M/68)

"I think that's the big thing, they have got to do a big PR campaign to let everybody know that they are there and what they do. Then I think there will be some form of trust building starting." (Group 2 James LK/M/63)

### **Publicity around decisions and actions**

Audiences wanted to see more publicity around decisions made by regulators and see updates on sanctions, fines, retractions, and other actions taken against publications. They want to know that when a news publication has breached the code of conduct action has taken place. Some participants suggested they would like to know that they can access activity relating to cases that have been reviewed and that they can see evidence of flagged content via regulators' websites/social media platforms.

“Well, I think the regulator would be able to publish some of its issues that they've dealt with, so that the people- the public will come to know, yes this has been dealt with properly and actually make the regulator more acceptable to the public.” (Group 1 Sunny EM/M/80)

“Even if it was like you know you had a platform where they were like this month we have assessed and reviewed X amount of stories, this many of them were passed, this many rose flags, things like that so you can actually see that they are doing something and they are looking at stories and you could see straight from the horse's mouth this story was maybe not so.” (Group 5 Jane F/31)

## **3.2. Increasing the perceived fairness and efficacy of regulation**

Discussing suggestions for how to improve the visibility of regulators and regulation prompted audiences to mention that they were only ever aware of one type of regulatory action – the retractions published by newspapers. Interestingly, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the current system of retractions which was given by many as an example to support their perception of current regulation as ineffective. All discussions cited retractions as example of ineffective regulation because they are almost invisible, perceived to be used disingenuously by newspapers, and as a result are seen as an ineffective way to deter bad journalistic practices. There was an expectation that, to be effective, retractions should be published on the front page so that publications are more transparent about taking responsibility for their actions and seen to be providing a proportionate response. The current system was widely perceived as allowing newspapers to 'get away' with coverage that has already done damage and as a process that does not allow the people affected sufficient redress. There was an expectation that retractions should be more prominent and timely.

“The trouble is though, often you see these little apologies in newspapers, you know they could have said something awful about somebody which turns out not to be true, and what they do is on page five or something they'll stick a little apology saying oh we're really sorry, nobody sees it, it should be on the front page and somebody should be named as the person responsible for doing what they did.” (Group 4 Harold PE/M/68)

“We know that there are stories that are retracted, and I’ve explained what I’ve seen, which is retraction all the way in the back pages, sort of a month and a half, two months, three months after the event and it’s just lost its impetus. There’s no point to it at that stage.” (Group 1 Raj EM/M/60)

“If they- if someone complains, says you did something, you lied here, they will put in a retraction, sort of on page 39 of the newspaper, in a really horrible place where it doesn’t receive any prominence. The story was done with by the time the complaint gets upheld, it’s already done and dusted. So, it doesn’t get much attention and I’m not too sure that helps anyone.” (Group 1 Raj EM/M/60)

“I would want papers to be forced to put retractions on the front page rather than hiding it somewhere in the middle.” (Group 3 David HK/M/73)

Timeliness is one of the reasons why the retraction system is perceived to be ineffective, and expectations of timeliness extend to regulator rulings. For example, one participant pointed out that the lag between complaints being made to regulators and the announcement of a decision adds to the perception of regulation as lagging behind reality. Referring to the IPSO ruling that Jeremy Clarkson’s comment piece about Meghan Markle in his *Sun* column was sexist and breached the Editors’ Code,<sup>5</sup> they said:

“I was just going to add I think it's been alluded to it's the time that it takes for the regulation to come into force, that we are all used to getting news instantly now so if the regulator objects to something it's several weeks down the line before you really hear the result of that by which time it's old news and we've already made a judgement on it. Yes, take this week we've heard Jeremy Clarkson called out where really he was called out a month ago.” (Group 8, Dean LT2/M/63)

Suggestions for stronger sanctions were expressed in about half of the groups, with some audiences perceiving that the current system allows newspapers to avoid making full and fair apologies and suggesting that regulators should have greater powers to require publications to make financial reparations, or in extreme cases, to close them down:

“I mean a retraction is what happens nowadays. But what if it was something that actually harms someone financially, or they lost their job or something else. Then I think there’s also a call for a bit more than just a simple retraction. Newspapers earn a lot of money. What happens to the

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<sup>5</sup> See *Press Gazette* (2023)

ordinary Joe out there who gets hard done by a particular case and he gets labelled a paedophile or he loses his job because of that?” (Group 1 Raj EM/M/60)

“Well at the moment, they can’t close down a newspaper can they?”

“But they can issue fines against a newspaper for breaking the code of conduct. And perhaps there is variants on the amount of the fine depending on how serious what they have done is to discredit the journalism, you know, newspapers and journalism itself, against their own code.” (Group 3 Mike HK/M/76)

Through discussing possible sanctions in groups, audiences recognised the difficulties of enforcing fines, and proposed that the power and financial strength of large publications means that fines are ineffective as a deterrence or punishment. One group mentioned the Sun’s coverage of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster as an example of powerful newspapers motivated by profits acting with impunity: “Presumably when *The Sun* blasted off 30 years ago all they were interested in was being as inflammatory as possible, flogging as many copies as possible and apart from the public sanction which was your circulation is plummeted by X number of thousands in the Liverpool area what else was ever done?” (Group 7 Jason LT/M/68). Others talked more generally about fines:

“If you fine someone as big as the Sun, they’ve got money in their back pocket so what you’re saying is yes I’ll pay that but I don’t think it will stop them. It’ll probably happen again because they’ve had a few retractions but they still do it, so fine or ban or whatever it may be, I don’t think it’ll stop certain, especially certain papers from being who they are so to speak.” (Group 5 Susan F/32)

“Yes I don’t think we’ll ever get to like a perfect solution for this because there’s just so many variables because like fines they’ll just pay it.” (Group 5 Erin F/24)

These widespread perceptions about the impropriety of newspapers in their application of retractions exemplifies audience perceptions of the (un) ethical attitudes of many publications, inequalities in newspapers’ responses to complaints, and feed into distrust of journalism.

### 3.3. Expectations that the media should be regulated by a single independent regulator

As we saw earlier, audiences were confused by the seemingly illogical and ineffective organisation of current press regulation.<sup>6</sup> When participants were shown the table of how different news publications were regulated, they couldn't understand why the situation is so complicated and why regulation is so fragmented. This commonly led to unprompted suggestions that regulation should be conducted by a single regulator who is also independent so that the process is protected from bias and conflicts of interest, and so that the same guidelines are followed for all news publications (see Theme 5). Some participants used examples of the way that regulation is organised in other industries and services such as gas engineering or financial services to support their preference for a single regulator.

“I am amazed that there is two regulators. In most other forms of regulation there is only one. If I am a gas engineer, I have got to be gas regulated and I can only go to one place.” (Group 2 James LK/M/63)

“One thing I would say with regards to regulation, because I work within financial services, basically the FCA have a sort of thematic regulation, they will sort of, what's the word, interpret. So each company interprets the FCA rules and then the FCA will do a review and, you know, you are deemed to not have done that and then fined accordingly.” (Group 3 Gerald HK/M/43)

“I'm saying is that they need to actually be in charge, to initially set it all up in some way so it's only one organisation. I think at the moment it just sounds too scattered to me.” (Group 1 Raj EM/M/60)

“I don't think the paper should be involved in regulating themselves because I think it needs to be done by outside source that has bias on both sides.” (Group 5 Susan F/32)

### 3.4. Suggestions for how to ensure regulators are independent

Having commonly expressed the expectation that a press regulator should be independent of a publication and of industry (see section 2.3 and Theme 6), audiences provided some clear answers to our questions about how such independence could be established. They were asked: If a press

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<sup>6</sup> A similar finding emerged from Williams, C., Christmas, S., Firmstone, J. (2021).



regulator says it is independent who should own and control it? Who should set its rules and standards? Who should be involved in it? Who should *not* be involved in it?

There was a broad consensus that the regulatory process should be as independent as possible and that this could be achieved by ensuring that a diverse range of individuals are represented on the boards and in the decision-making process. Audiences initially discussed who should *not* be involved in the regulatory process, often citing that government members, politicians, and anyone actively working for news publications (e.g., active journalists and editors) should not be eligible.

“I think it should be like the Competition and Markets Authority where there's a separate body set up totally independent from the government so that type of thing where no politicians, no heads of newspapers, anybody connected to it. It should be totally independent.” (Group 7 Jenny LT/F/39)

“I would say not government and perhaps not other newspapers or other ones because like you said newspapers are to the right or the left and if you had a governing body and it was say a left paper was in trouble and you had left papers on the body it wouldn't be independent because they would automatically go with that side.” (Group 8 Beth LT2/F/64)

It was common for audiences to suggest that ordinary people should be involved in decision-making, with suggestions for a jury service style format. There was however also recognition of the need for expertise and experience. For example, there was consensus that the specific nature of some cases means that professional individuals with knowledge or experience of media regulation should also be involved, whether that be retired journalists or lawyers alongside members of the public who are best able to reflect the interests a particular community. Comparisons were made to ombudsman schemes that were understood as independent, free, and impartial services that act on behalf of the public without taking sides. Audience awareness about how regulation works in other sectors also informed suggestions.

“Yes, I have heard some very, very good things about the Sports Resolution Foundation consisting of lawyers, journalists, sports people. They deal with disputes and difficult issues in the sporting realm.” (Group 3 Fred HK/M/74)

“Why not people like you get on a jury, where they're people who work or live ordinary lives and they're appointed to the post, they are given a set brief, they know the conditions that they are trying to regulate and the standards they are trying to uphold.” (Group 1 Raj EM/M/60)

“You need people who can say well hang on a minute, this is what happens in the real world. And that means you have got to have journalists on it. And then you need someone with a legal background, because people are going to judge what's decided here.” (Group 3 Bruce HK/M/76)

“This is why the whole topic of regulation is really hard to answer because then you could say well the government has to regulate the papers but that itself is biased.” (Group 5 Erin F/24)

“But it certainly needs to be a cross section and not specifically down to people who are in publishing or press of whatever. It needs to be a broad spectrum who can give a broad viewpoint on what’s right and what’s wrong and what the ethics should be how great they operate the press.”  
(Group 3 Mike HK/M/76)

In sum, to be seen as truly independent, the board of a regulator and people making decisions should represent a diverse range of people in society including experts, those with experience of journalism, and lay people who can represent the public interest.

## Section 4: Conclusions and reflections

The following quote accurately sums up the audience perceptions of press regulation among our participants:

“We have a problem that we haven’t yet managed to acquire a confident, trusted, capable and effective press regulator” (Group 2 Mike LK/M/79)

One of the key observations from our focus group analysis is that trust is deeply intertwined with visibility. Whether that is through branding on news articles, understanding what the code of conduct is, the ease and convenience of making a complaint if there has been perceived wrongdoing, generating more publicity about decisions made, or demanding that there are more obvious retractions, all of which would better hold news publications to account. Therefore, stronger regulation may not be required to build trust among the public. Rather, the key to generating trust could be for regulators to strive towards greater visibility, transparency, efficacy, and independence to show that everyday people are being protected and watched over, in part, by members of the audience who will serve the interests of the general public.

Brand reputation and audience experiences of news publications also have an important part to play – the disconnect between audience expectations of what regulation should ensure and the reality of audience experiences of news produced by certain publications shows that simply belonging to a regulator does not cultivate trust. For example, *The Sun* is a member of IPSO but it had a poor reputation among all participants, whereas audience experiences of finding trusted content in *The Guardian* were seen to override any concerns that it is self-regulated in-house.

However, some older participants have spent a large part of their lives feeling distrustful of journalism and the media, which has often been motivated by scandals in the past, such as *The Sun*'s involvement in the Hillsborough disaster and the phone hacking scandal at *The News of the World*. Cultivating trust among older generations may be difficult, even with more visible and independent regulation, as some see it as an impossible task due to an irreversible loss of trust; nevertheless, pursuing greater public trust in press regulation is imperative for all generations who are immersed in the digital era and surrounded by a constant flow of mis/disinformation.

Trust is therefore determined by experience. Just as one participant raised the irreversible loss of trust in *The Sun* as a result of its Hillsborough coverage being seen to be driven by the desire to make a profit at the expense of victims and the outrage that the paper was never effectively punished nor reparations made, another pointed to the importance of journalists and news publications earning trust through consistent performance of high journalistic standards:

“Your question is about trust, well on what basis do you have something to form a bond of trust with? You have your newspaper you normally read and I suppose if that is shown to be consistently correct and uncriticised then I suppose you can then trust it but you know, trust always has to be earned rather than being there as a matter of fact.” (Group 7 Jason LT/M/68)

Amidst an absence of trust and confidence in news, in journalists, in journalism, news publishers, and in regulators, we should note that audiences will continue to make their own minds up and vote with their feet:

“I think one thing that we shouldn't all forget ourselves is that we can be regulators from the point of view that we can choose not to, I know buying the papers is a dying art but my Dad bless him he still buys his newspapers daily, and we can be regulators by just not accepting. You know, thinking for ourselves being free and actually checking whatever news stories are interesting or not interested in, but just by not visiting the sites of certain publications, not necessarily just badmouthing but we still have, we the punter still have a powerful say. It's all changed very much because of the internet of course. I don't want to sound too old, and they say that but you know what I'm saying there's a plethora of ways of getting the news nowadays, but we still have a say individually. I know this doesn't really answer your thing, but we still can make a change ourselves by just not picking up certain papers, not going to the website and just not giving them the time of day they will soon get hit hard beyond selling papers every day. So, I just think we need to not lose focus of this.” (Group 8 Dom LT2/M/46)

Finally, journalists, news organisations and regulators should not underestimate the willingness of the public to be part of initiatives to ensure that their interests are served by news and regulation. In line with the majority of respondents in our survey, participants stated that they had learned a lot from participating in the focus groups, highlighting that they had become far more interested in press regulation and willing to learn more about regulators in their own time. As such our research provides insights into how increasing the visibility of regulation through a relatively short discussion and the sharing of information can get the public more involved and interested in press regulation.

“I think until today, you know, just about all of us have said we had never heard of them so that's pretty poor and yet I have just done a Google search and it's the top one on a Google search for Impress, so it's there. Now I know about it I will pay more attention” (Group 2 James LK/M/63)

“I have to say, interestingly I've learned something here about this regulatory body and I'm going to go away and look these up now and find out what they're framework is and what they do and who's behind it .... So that's been interesting. For me anyway, yes.” (Group 4 Harold PE/M/68)

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## Appendix

Table of current regulatory arrangements used as prompt to discussion.

<p>Member of press regulator IPSO</p>	<p>National papers: <i>The Sun, The Mail, The Express, The Mirror, The Times, The Telegraph, The i, The Metro</i></p> <p>Most traditional Local/regional papers: <i>The Yorkshire Post, Manchester Evening News</i> etc.</p>
<p>Member of press regulator IMPRESS</p>	<p>Small independent local newspapers</p> <p>New online publishers e.g. <i>The Canary</i></p>
<p>Not a member of press regulator but regulate themselves</p>	<p><i>Financial Times</i></p> <p><i>The Guardian</i></p> <p><i>The Independent</i></p>
<p>No regulation</p>	<p><i>Huffington Post</i></p> <p><i>Buzzfeed</i></p> <p>Hundreds of small publications</p>

**For further information see:**

[IPSO - Independent Press Standards Organisation](#)

[Impress: The Independent Monitor of the Press](#)

[Ofcom](#)

[NUJ - National Union of Journalists Code of Conduct](#)

Free online course [‘Understanding journalism ethics’](#)