

Submission to the call for evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital: The future of Journalism

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1. This evidence is drawn from an ongoing Research Council UK funded research project examining press codes of ethics, journalism regulation and stakeholder¹ perspectives on the role of journalism across Europe and the UK.² The submission is particularly concerned with addressing questions 1, 3, 8 and 10 but our response also speaks to some other areas of interest to the inquiry. The evidence and tentative recommendations are drawn from emergent findings from our research. Utilising a multidisciplinary approach³ and a range of qualitative approaches to examine different journalistic cultures and practices across Europe and the UK, we suggest that our preliminary findings and preliminary conclusions offer an empirically based contribution to the future shape of journalism and its fundamental role in society.

Context of Evidence

2. The title of our research project ‘Defining Freedom of the Press’, signals that the role of the press and journalism more broadly is undergoing significant flux and disruption. Moreover, it is indicative of the highly contested nature of the debate about the scope of press and journalistic freedom. At the heart of this issue for us is the role of ethics, and specifically how journalism ethics might better connect with and serve the public. Our starting point is that, historically, debates about the role and function of the press, its ethical parameters and modes of governance and regulation, have taken place amongst relatively elite groups in our society, with relatively little meaningful public input. Moreover, this seemingly never-ending debate (Bingham, 2009) is entrenched and highly polarised in ‘public’ discourse as shown by recent controversies.⁴ The clamour for reform of the press made by media reform groups such as ‘[Hacked Off](#)’ and the [Media Reform Coalition](#) is largely met by the claim that press freedom is under threat if ‘tighter’ or statutory regulation of journalism is imposed on the industry (Luckhurst, 2012). As such our project examines the core foundations of journalism and how this is interpreted by a range of actors. In doing so we hope to map out its scope and limits in contemporary liberal democracies and end the deadlocked nature of these entrenched and largely elite focussed set of debates. The research develops a comparative approach, examining the ethical frameworks and regulatory parameters of the top European nations in the [Reporters Without Borders](#) (RSF) World Press Freedom [Index](#) as well as interviews with journalists, regulatory bodies and NGOs within six of these countries. As such our evidence is drawn from insight and analysis of data

¹ Stakeholders in our research include non-journalist participants – broadly representatives of citizen groups who have an interest in the role of journalism and its impacts on and value to society. Our research looked to draw on perspectives of those who have historically been subject to poor treatment by sections of the press so that their perspectives feed into empirically grounded outputs relevant to the role and function of journalism today.

² The Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project ‘Defining Freedom of the Press’ (project reference: AH/R00644X/1).

³ The research team is made up scholars from a number of disciplines including media and journalism studies linguistics, history, law and applied philosophy.

⁴ The number of high-profile cases of press intrusion are too numerous to mention. However, the recent tragic suicide of television presenter Caroline Flack and the ongoing dispute between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle and sections of the popular press highlight the ongoing significance of this topic.

generated from areas of the world that are considered to have a well-functioning, free and socially beneficial journalistic environment.

Q1: How should journalism be defined and what is its value to society? What is the difference between citizen journalism and other forms of journalism?

3. Broadly, journalism's foundational claims – its core values – have long been contested, yet a striking feature of this contestation is journalism's in-built resilience (Steel, 2018), with notions of *servicing the public* and *holding power to account* dominating in both academic texts on journalism (Conboy, 2004) as well as in journalists' own reflections on their practice and audience (Firmstone & Coleman, 2014; Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). Drawing on preliminary data from our project we can point to journalism as having value in relation to the sustenance of liberal democracy and its contribution to sustaining a vibrant civil sphere.

4. From our data, journalism tends to be defined in terms of respondents' views that journalism services public awareness of matters of social import and is, or should be ethically sourced, accurate, verifiable and not cause undue harm. Definitions of journalism are therefore historically tied up with journalism's democratic and cultural value to society. Importantly, the democratic value is also reflected in relation to the *trust* the public have in the institutions of journalism in fulfilling its democratic obligations. This includes trust in the institutions that monitor and regulate the industry in these countries. As this NGO respondent from Finland notes:

5. "... as Finns I would say we are believers in the traditional institutions, we trust the police, we trust the press and I think the press has pretty high standards for itself as well.... Even though [the press council] doesn't have any legal jurisdiction, I think it still holds a really strong position in Finland."

6. Our findings suggest that public trust is something that journalists value highly and they feel they have to work hard to earn and retain this trust. Though annual surveys of trust in many countries consistently show journalists amongst the least trusted of the professions, there is still the sense that when mistakes are made there should be a clear process of rectifying the mistakes and providing redress. As this Danish journalist noted in responding to a question on declining trust in the press:

7. "Yes, it's something we hear and it's not something that fits with our own self-image as journalists is that we have a strong ethic and we hunt after the truth on behalf of the public, all these classic ideals. So, it's not fun to get that annual survey thrown in one's face, that our trustworthiness is not higher than that. But, that's because sometimes there are mistakes that are made, [It is important that] if one has made a mistake, that one corrects it as quickly as possible and brings attention to it, doesn't try to hide it or go around it, or apologise for it in some way."

8. Having a clear and transparent process of redress is therefore important for journalists and the public. On the basis of our interviews, journalism which is not part of the regulatory system – as the case with citizen journalism - is generally considered to be less trustworthy and inauthentic. When distinguishing between professional journalism and other forms of journalism, our respondents signal the role that the press council/regulator plays in ensuring quality and maintaining trust. They also signal the specialist training they have received and the ethical culture of the news organisation they work for. All of these are significant in setting and maintaining high standards within traditional media organisations. It is the institution of the press – through education, mentoring, organisational cultures, policies and identities - as well as its adherence to ethical benchmarking that acts to *credentialise* 'authentic' ethical journalism. Journalism is therefore defined in terms of both its normative responsibilities to society – the responsibilities that journalists ought to fulfil - as well as how effectively it self-regulates.

9. Our data suggests that there seems to be a demarcation between professional journalism, which generally subscribes to a set of ethical benchmarks and standards and citizen journalism, which our journalist respondents by and large suggest does not. This is not to say that citizen journalism does not or cannot meet high ethical standards. Rather, we suggest that the development of a more inclusive set of ethical benchmarking which is derived from a wider set of experiences and requirements from

stakeholders from beyond traditional journalism, could be developed for all journalists, citizen or otherwise. As the credibility of UK journalism has been significantly undermined in recent years (Cairncross, 2019) such an approach might provide a more meaningful validation for journalists' work and begin to foster greater levels trust in all forms of journalism amongst the public. It would also enable citizen journalists to operate according to established benchmarks and be signalled as such. The establishment of such a benchmarking process is one of the main contributions of our research as we look to broaden public understanding of the practical and ethical dimensions of journalism. Indeed, we suggest that the establishment of a more grounded and publicly focussed set of ethical benchmarks along with greater public awareness of the processes of journalism could address declining levels of trust in traditional journalism in the future, as well as engendering and helping to maintain high standards in citizen journalism as it evolves.

Q3: How can public policy improve media literacy, particularly among those who have a low level of digital literacy?

10. One of the most striking findings to emerge from our research is in relation to the extent to which countries who are amongst the highest ranked in the RSF World Press Freedom Index tend to have higher levels of media literacy in their population, as this respondent from Finland notes:

11. "...one thing is that we are taught to be critical towards the press from a very early age. I remember when I was maybe ten that we started to have the lessons in school, how do you see this news and do you think it's right and what is the perspective, and is it trustworthy, so I think that as a structure of the whole society it supports the press to be more responsible."

12. We suggest therefore that greater levels of media literacy, and especially literacy in the practices and ethics of journalism, is key to broadening public understanding and enhancing trust in journalism as well as developing greater levels of accountability and trust in the press itself. As this UK regulator suggests when discussing the news production process:

13. "I'd love to see what would happen if you could somehow take the public behind the scenes and just help them to understand all of those conflicting factors that go into those decisions, and the fact that they're made under great pressure, and the fact that they're just by nature imperfect decisions."

14. Our data seems to support the idea that journalists strive to produce high quality journalism that adheres to a strong ethical framework which can also be assessed by an informed public. As the following extract from a Norwegian journalist suggests:

15. "I think it's very important for reporters today to have a framework like this, that we can all agree on, and that we can tell people that, why should you trust the journalists, why should you trust what you read in the established media. Well, it's because these are the rules that apply to us. [...] I would rather say that not having these rules would get in the way of my work and my ability to be trusted as a reporter."

16. The future of sustainable journalism, we suggest, should be based upon the idea that audiences *recognise* and value accurate and trustworthy journalism. This necessitates the public being educated not only about the value of journalism from a young age, but being taught how to hold journalism to account in similar ways that journalism itself purports to hold those in power to account. This involves the public becoming familiar with the ethical frameworks journalists work to and even having a role in their development and maintenance. Codes of ethics are sometimes thought of as lists of dos and don'ts for practitioners. However, our research has shown that they can play a number of roles. In particular, they can be public-facing, making standards and expectations explicit for users. We suggest that press codes of ethics should always be designed with this public-facing function in mind. Besides empowering the public to use codes of ethics to evaluate the work of journalists and news organisations, this could also provide a touchstone document for a media literacy education programme thereby *empowering* citizens to hold journalism to account for its weaknesses and failures as well as recognise and reward its strengths and victories.

17. One of the key factors in policing these high standards in other countries from our sample is the role that public *shaming* has on the brand of the news organisation and the individual journalist if they have a judgement against them from the press council. Journalists from Finland highlighted the significance of a loss of public credibility as an aid to policing their activities.

18. "... it's kind of a shame punishment that for those who are serious in the journalism business and want to compete with quality and so on, they take it seriously and explicitly don't want to get reprimanded by the publishers and having to admit that, yes, we did wrong or we were wrong and so on...."

19. Another way in which our research provides insight into this question is in relation to the inward facing nature of journalism ethics and their development. For the most part, journalism ethics codes are developed via negotiations from within the journalism industry. Public input into their development is minimal. Though there are lay-members on both IPSO and IMPRESS's ethics boards, we feel that there should be greater public input into the ethical codes of practice of journalism. Thereby journalists' ethics codes would be both serving the public as well as being drawn from, or established by, greater public involvement in their development and maintenance. Furthermore, such codes do not need to be fixed and can be regularly updated or amended via public consultation and input.

8) Why has trust in journalism declined? How could it be improved? How can journalists better understand and convey the concerns and priorities of people who do not live in London or other metropolitan hubs?

20. Declining levels of trust in journalism is a phenomenon that is happening in most Western democratic contexts including the countries in our project. Our respondents' answers to a question about the relationship between the public and journalists shows that they perceive trust to be declining everywhere other than Finland, though this is beginning to change there as well. Problems of trust in journalism are to some extent due to global phenomena as well as domestic circumstances. From our sample, there is a sense that trust in journalism is declining for two reasons: firstly because of the public's response to a global narrative concerning fake news/misinformation/disinformation and its access via social media, secondly because of the role played by some so-called 'populist politicians' in undermining the credibility of some mainstream media organisations.

21. For example, from our research there seems to be a perception everywhere that the public is confused between what journalism is and what it is not. The majority of our respondents mentioned the US President and his attacks on traditionally trusted news organisations as having ramifications for trust, as this Finnish regional journalist indicates:

22. "I think there are people who really appreciate journalism and they have understanding of self-regulation and our principles, but then there is a huge amount of people who have no idea of this. They have no idea how journalism differs from other content, or they have no idea what it means that we have freedom of press. How social media has changed this, I think it has confused people even more because there is content everywhere, everyone is a media and there is lots of mistrust for social media and also there's lots of journalism in social media, so it's all a big mess and there are lots of public mistrust to journalism like the President of the United States with the fake news, he criticises media so it creates mistrust generally."

23. The problems of so-called 'fake news' emphasise why professional journalism is so important and why clear ethical standards are important as this national reporter from Denmark notes:

24. "Yes, well there's been a higher demand that we go in and that we tell what is fact and what isn't fact, because everyone today has a platform to spread news, everyone can make a website that is fake news and make it look like it's coming from a trustworthy media, so that journalists' trustworthiness has become even more important and our role to cut into the smoke and say, what is correct and what's incorrect."

25. For the UK context, problems with trust in journalism are also linked to recent political turmoil concerning the performance of the press during the Brexit referendum, the criticism of the recent

General Election coverage, particularly of the BBC and the overall decline in trust of the establishment/experts since the 2008 financial crisis. The fact that the Leveson Inquiry Part 2 has been axed despite unethical behaviour of the tabloids and mid-market newspapers continuing, arguably does little to enhance the status of journalism at this time. Furthermore, the current and ongoing health crisis concerning Covid-19 further emphasises the importance of high-quality journalism and its ability to appropriately scrutinise power and advocate on behalf of the public. In terms of sustainability, it is clear that trust in journalism needs to be increased if the public is to be expected to pay for journalism or for any further public subsidies to be justified.

26. It is important to note that declining levels of trust seems to be less of a problem in local news because of the symbiotic and mutually dependent relationship between journalists, their readers and other actors in the community. Local journalists are more accountable to their readers so are less liable to act unethically or in ways that would damage trust. For example, in Switzerland and Norway the decline of trust seems to be less of a problem because of their respective geographies:

27. “But here I am not sure, because you know everybody, everybody knows everybody, so I think they don’t think that I’m a representative of fake news, because they know that I make my job fine, you know what I mean?”

28. “And people have to believe in what we’re writing, they have to trust us, and especially for a local paper, because I might be writing about my neighbour tomorrow, or writing about my neighbour’s workplace. [...] We’re a local newspaper and the people in this town have to trust us, so we try to be correct in all our ways.”

29. As indicated in our responses to questions 1 and 3 above, maintaining high ethical standards is expected of journalists, as upholding ethical journalism enables them to create and maintain trust. A strong ethical culture underpinned by a meaningful code of ethics and effective system of redress ensures quality and trust. For many of our journalists the whole point of a code of ethics is to gain the trust of readers in order to maintain their brand, as this Danish journalist suggests:

30. “We uphold the guidelines because partly there is a fine if we don’t do it, and partly because we want to protect our trustworthiness, it’s something really important that I have mentioned several times, that when we’ve made a mistake, we don’t hide it. We fix it and we apologise for the mistake and make all of our readers aware of it.”

31. In responding to the question of how journalists can better understand and convey the concerns and priorities of people who do not live in London or other metropolitan hubs, we would return to the value of local journalism and suggest that a strong local and regional journalism sector is vital in building up trust in the profession more broadly. Local journalism is not only generally more trusted than its national counterpart, the public also perceives it to be more relevant, more informative and more accurate (Coleman *et al* 2016; YouGov, 2018). Furthermore, stakeholders such as local authorities and community groups are reliant on local news organisations as trusted channels of communication with local citizens (Firmstone, 2018).

Q10 Are there any other ways in which public policy could better support journalists and news organisations, now and in the future? Are there examples from other countries from which the Government could learn?

32. As indicated in our response to questions 1, 3 and 8, we feel that greater levels of trust in journalism such as those that exist in a number of Scandinavian countries, is dependent in part on high levels of media literacy amongst the population. Moreover, journalists in these countries seemed to care about *doing* ethical journalism. Greater levels of knowledge about how journalism is done and how it works, allows the public to hold those who conduct journalism to account on their terms. Moreover, public policy geared towards developing greater ethical media literacy could go some way towards building up levels of trust amongst the UK population if it is coupled with mechanisms which bring into sharp relief the failures and deficiencies that exist in contemporary journalism. This may enhance the business viability of news organisations, particularly for local news organisations as they seek to connect with their audiences in new ways.

33. Finally, another way in which public policy could help diversify the news ecology and cater for a wider range of voices, nationally, regionally and locally, is through public subsidies for news media organisations as in the case of Norway (Norwegian Commission on Media Diversity, 2017) and as was pointed out by Cairncross (2019). We suggest that public subsidies for local journalism in particular would significantly enhance diversity and pluralism across the sector as well as deepen levels of trust in journalism more generally. Such policy could also be linked to forms of positive discrimination to encourage greater ethnic and cultural diversity within news organisations at national and local levels where local journalism is in terminal decline. This, in tandem with our tentative findings and recommendations above around media literacy, and stakeholder approaches to journalism ethics, would potentially nurture a greater plurality of news choices and voices which are more publicly grounded and reflect the highest ethical standards which are evident to all.

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