

Response to the call for evidence on sustainable high-quality journalism in the UK

Introduction

The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) is the independent regulator of most of the UK's newspaper and magazine industry. We regulate over 1,500 print titles and 1,100 online titles, comprising 95% of national daily newspapers (by circulation) and the majority of local and regional newspapers. Our experience of regulating a diverse range of publications means that we are in a unique position to provide evidence on sustainable high quality journalism in the UK.

We promote high quality journalism by enforcing editorial standards; holding publications to account; protecting the rights of individuals; and helping to maintain freedom of expression for the press. We regularly engage with senior leaders across the industry, including editors, senior managers, journalists and other professionals.

IPSO's framework is one of voluntary self-regulation underpinned by legally enforceable contractual agreements. It is not obligatory for publishers to join IPSO but those that have done so set themselves apart by choosing to be independently regulated and held accountable to an agreed set of standards, the Editors' Code of Practice.¹

To demonstrate their regulatory compliance, we require that our member publishers submit an annual statement² which shows how they approach editorial standards, complaints-handling, and training. We do not require information on business models, commercial practices or financial stability. We are, therefore not in a position to answer all questions in this consultation, but have responded where our specialist knowledge and experience will make a valuable contribution.

Question 1

The Review's objective is to establish how far and by what means we can secure a sustainable future for high-quality journalism, particularly for news. Looking ahead to 2028, how will we know if we have been successful, in relation to: a) publishers b) consumers?

When thinking about the future of high-quality journalism, we feel that it is helpful to consider the interests of publishers and consumers as two sides of the same coin. Both consumers and publishers benefit from a thriving press; where a variety of publications can survive in a

¹ <https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice/> [accessed 10 September 2018]

² <https://www.ipso.co.uk/press-standards/annual-statements/> [accessed 29 August 18]

functioning market and consumers have wide choice. For this reason we have not clearly distinguished between (a) publishers and (b) consumers in our response.

We would also like to make clear that publications featuring news are not always 'newspapers' or their online versions. Magazines and their websites also feature news, albeit presented in a different format. Many of the magazines regulated by IPSO feature detailed investigations on topical issues and current affairs, interviews, and other types of 'long-read' news as opposed to fast-moving, breaking news stories.

We believe the most important indicator of sustainable high-quality journalism is whether a publisher demonstrably holds itself accountable to an agreed set of externally verifiable standards.

The set of standards our members adhere to is the Editors' Code of Practice. It applies to both editorial material and journalistic behaviour and covers issues such as accuracy, privacy, and harassment. It is administered by us, and written, reviewed and revised by the Editors' Code of Practice Committee; a group of ten editors and five lay members including our Chairman and Chief Executive.

While the Editors' Code is the most widely used regulatory code across the UK press, it is not the only set of standards used by newspaper publishers. The Guardian and The Financial Times have chosen not to be regulated and both have arranged processes with external and independent oversight to deal with complaints against them. The Financial Times uses the FT Editorial Code (which is based on the Editors' Code) and works with an independent complaints commissioner. The Guardian uses the Guardian News Media's Editorial Code and works with an independent readers' editor and an independent review panel. A relatively small number of hyperlocal and online publications have chosen to be regulated by the Independent Monitor of the Press (IMPRESS) and use their standards code.

Looking ahead to 2028, we would hope to see a similar or greater proportion of the UK's press committed to upholding an agreed, verifiable, externally-regulated set of standards. This gives consumers confidence that the journalism they are accessing is professionally produced, edited, and curated and that should things go wrong, they are able to seek redress from an independent regulatory body. It means that publishers will be able to build and maintain the trust and confidence of consumers by choosing to be regulated and held publicly accountable.

We will continue to work to attract new publications to join our voluntary system of self-regulation, including a greater number of online-only news publications.

We believe that varied and diverse publications which deliver news for differing views, tastes, opinions and perspectives are essential for high-quality journalism to thrive, now and in the future.

The press holds an important role in society. It serves the public interest by entertaining, informing, challenging and campaigning. Newspapers have the freedom to present news in a way that offers their readers and consumers access to the information of their choice suited to their interests, beliefs and worldview.

The partisan nature of the UK press is essential. Newspapers representing different political viewpoints are an important part of scrutinising and challenging politicians and government across political divides. This is only possible through complete independence from government control.

This partisanship is perhaps most recognisable in mass-market, daily tabloid newspapers, but is also evident in “broadsheet” publications as well as smaller local and regional publications. The right of publications to be partisan is specifically enshrined in the Editors’ Code which makes explicitly clear that the press is free to editorialise and campaign provided there is a clear distinction between comment, conjecture and fact. Publications can package and present news in any way that they and their readers would like, and consumers are offered a choice in the style of news they want to read; readers of magazines and tabloid newspapers have the same rights to receive information as other citizens.

High-quality journalism should not be viewed through the prism of what is considered ‘high-brow’ or ‘low-brow’. Sometimes, discussion around quality journalism can be quite subjective and influenced by individuals’ own beliefs and perspectives, but quality takes many forms and is not limited to the ‘quality press’ or broadsheet newspapers. Tabloid newspapers and online-only publications are no less important to the diversity of the wider media landscape.

Looking ahead to 2028, we would hope and expect to see the press in the UK remain fully independent from government, as this independence ensures both variety and diversity of content and preserves the press’ freedom to campaign, advocate and gather information – essential for the industry, consumers and for wider civil society and the democratic process.

We would also expect consumers to have the freedom to access a variety of types of news so that they choose what they judge to be appropriate for them. This should be considered both in terms of the partisan position of the publication and the ‘type’ of publication, whether that be a magazine, tabloid or online-only publication.

We believe that the sustainability of high quality journalism relies on consumers’ ability to be able to identify it as distinct from unregulated and potentially harmful ‘fake news’.

Action needs to be taken to limit harmful fake news which can erode trust in the press. Consumers must be easily able to identify legitimate journalistic content.

Last year we launched the ‘IPSO mark’, a visual symbol that can be used by all our member publications to show their commitment to professional standards and an edited, regulated product. At its launch, we also ran an advertising campaign to raise awareness of both the mark and IPSO’s work more generally.

We have been pleased to see many initiatives launched to better educate and inform the public about ‘fake news’ and potential harms involved in use of social media. We note some of the work being done outside of the industry, including for example, the Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills, run by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Literacy and the National Literacy Trust, who have recently worked to gather evidence on the impact of fake news on children and young people.

Looking ahead to 2028, it would be a sign of success that all citizens have appropriate levels of media literacy to make informed decisions about what sorts of news they would like to access. They should be able to identify and avoid harmful fake news, and know how to identify curated and edited content displaying high-quality journalism. We would also expect consumers to have awareness of the methods available to seek redress from the regulated press when journalists do get things wrong.

We believe that independent regulation has a key role to play in this, by holding publishers accountable to an external set of standards and helping consumers to easily identify edited, curated, professionally produced products.

Question 2

Do you consider that the future of high-quality journalism in the UK is at risk – at national, regional and/or local levels?

a) What are the main sources of evidence that support your view?

b) What are the main sources of evidence which support an alternative perspective?

Evidence from IPSO's complaint handling supports the view that the future of high quality journalism is at risk on all levels, as a result of the challenging market in which the press operates.

We would first like to point out some of the excellent work being done across the newspaper and magazine industry in the UK. Our work involves investigating when things may have gone wrong, but that does not stop us from recognising that we regulate a press which also continually presents high-quality journalism and exposes public-interest stories, entertains, informs and campaigns.

Whilst there are many reasons to be positive about the quality of the UK press, we suggest that there are risks to the future of high-quality journalism. We believe that industry-wide financial and commercial challenges may be contributing to avoidable errors, with a great deal of pressure on staff and less senior oversight than previously. The additional pressure of wanting to publish as quickly as possible to beat the competition may also be a contributory factor.

IPSO cannot say that the underlying cause of any given error is related to pressures on staff, but we have seen examples of avoidable errors where this may have been a factor.

Examples of avoidable mistakes

Whilst the public's use of social media can be helpful for journalists' newsgathering, in the aftermath of a serious incident there are risks involved when journalists are evidencing their stories by using breaking news emerging on social media.

On one occasion, one of our members used their social media channel to publicise an emerging act of terrorism that was apparently unfolding in the Oxford Circus area of central London (having seen members of the public tweeting about it in real time). When it became clear that there had been a false alarm, the publication's inaccurate social media 'news' was immediately removed.

On another occasion, IPSO's Complaints Committee upheld a complaint made not long after the bombing of Manchester Arena. A newspaper had published photographs of some of the people whose were 'missing' following the attack, based on information from social media. One of the images was the face of a 13-year-old girl who had in fact been the victim of a social media hoax. Internet trolls had pretended that she was somehow caught up in the attack, and re-publication of this false information caused the individual and her family a great deal of distress. The newspaper said that it was a matter of significant regret that the article's publication had caused distress to the girl and her family, and IPSO ordered the newspaper to publish a full adjudication with a front page reference in order to address the inaccuracy.

Use of social media can help journalists detect emerging stories and approach potential interviewees. It is not a hugely labour-intensive method for journalists to identify breaking news stories, but its use without extra checks for accuracy poses the risk of mistakes being made.

We have seen a small number of cases where normal pre-publication checks have been not been carried out by publishers, resulting in inaccurate content being published.

In one complaint, an article on a criminal court case had been written in advance with a 'guilty' verdict. This had accidentally been published online prior to the case's completion and was entirely inaccurate as the defendant had in fact been cleared of the crime. We believe that these sorts of mistakes become increasingly more likely as publications attempt to compete in a challenging market with fewer staff, under greater pressure.

In a similar vein, we upheld a complaint under Clause 12 (Discrimination), following a complaint from a disabled man who was convicted of a crime. The local newspaper had reported on the trial and made several references to the man's disability, which was of no consequence to the story being reported. The publication explained that a trainee journalist had been unaware that the terms of Clause 12 applied in this situation and had published an account of a criminal case on serious charges without appropriate oversight.

Fewer roles for specialist journalists

IPSO is concerned that when publishers lose staff with particular experience and expertise, they risk a reduction in their capacity to expose important public interest stories. A reduction in roles for specialist journalists might hinder the press' ability to unearth the more complex public interest stories which might require a certain level of specialist expertise.

Of course, it is not possible to measure the public interest stories that have not been uncovered, so it difficult to substantiate these concerns. Nonetheless, fewer roles for specialists does raise potential problems in both publishers' ability to shine a critical light on complex issues and report them accurately.

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) have expressed concern about the decline in specialist journalists in some areas, and have been vocal in their advocacy for specialist journalists. In 2013, the NUJ launched a campaign 'Keep Health Reporting Healthy' using the example of specialist health correspondent Shaun Lintern, whose journalism exposed the Mid-Staffs NHS scandal. More experienced and senior journalists with expertise in specific areas might require higher salaries so it is understandable that a challenging market and financial pressures might translate into publications employing fewer specialists.

Further evidence of the risks to high-quality journalism is the closure of some of our member organisations.

More evidence to support the view that the future of high-quality journalism is at risk comes from looking at the makeup of our membership. Unfortunately we have seen a number of our member publications close down in response to the challenging market. Press Gazette estimates that 40 titles closed in 2017.

We have also seen some of our member publications be merged or bought by larger publishers. Mergers and takeovers can be (but not always) illustrative of the challenging market in which the press is operating in and appear to take place as a result of financial strain.

Evidence from our complaints handling process leads us to believe that financial pressures related to the challenging market for the press are being translated into increased pressures on journalists in the newsroom. This impacts on the quality of journalism as mistakes can potentially be made as a result of this pressure.

A reduction in roles for specialist journalists with particular expertise might also present future risks for high-quality journalism, making complex public-interest stories more challenging to uncover.

Closures of a small number of our member publications demonstrate further financial challenges for the press. This has left some geographical areas less well-served by a local paper or magazine containing high-quality journalism. Continuation of this trend will present risks for the future of quality journalism.

Having pointed out some risks, we must also say that there is evidence of newspapers and magazines holding their ground despite a lack of resources and a challenging market.

We see our member publications investing in measures to uphold standards and promote high-quality journalism. Newspapers and magazines have been able to hold their ground to a great extent despite pressure on resources.

Evidence of quality public interest journalism

In the last few years the UK press has unearthed, written and published a significant number of stories which are very much in the public interest. The winners and the nominees for the British Journalism Awards and The Press Awards offer numerous examples of news stories which and showcase some of the best journalism from both broadcasting and the press.

The press is taking its commitment to standards increasingly seriously

There has been an increase in uptake of IPSO training across the industry, with a number of publishers requesting specific and in-depth training on certain topics and Editors' Code areas. Evidence from IPSO's annual statements show how publishers approach editorial standards, complaints-handling processes, training processes and their record on compliance, including details of what they have done in relation to complaints upheld by IPSO's Complaints Committee.

A comparison of our member publishers' annual statements since IPSO's inception illustrate how publishers' in-house policies have developed to facilitate better compliance with the Editors' Code and high standards.

Forthcoming Sheffield University research on complaints handling, commissioned by IPSO in order to better understand how the press have been handling complaints made against them (pre-IPSO and under IPSO) shows that the way our member publishers deal with complaints is becoming more transparent and professional. We see the development of formal policies and knowledgeable experienced staff working within regulatory compliance at IPSO-regulated publications. This research is due to be published later this year.

The regulatory environment is more rigorous

IPSO has greater powers than its predecessors and requires more prominent corrections and adjudications than before. IPSO has required 20 front page corrections.

IPSO also offers arbitration for those that might have taken a paper to court, but can't afford to.³

While the compliance requirements of being an IPSO member require resource within publishers, the result is that publications have proper processes for getting things right and responsive systems for dealing with complaints when they may have got it wrong.

The main source of evidence to suggest that high-quality journalism is not at risk is the high volume of quality public interest stories that we see daily across the UK press. Another source of evidence is the increasing importance and professionalism that our regulated publications are demonstrating in their commitment to standards.

Whilst positive, this evidence does not tell us much about the potential for future risks in these areas.

Question 6

High-quality journalism plays a critical role in our democratic system, in particular through holding power to account, and its independence must be safeguarded. In light of this, what do you consider to be the most effective and efficient policy levers to deliver a sustainable future for high quality journalism?

- a) *Where, if at all, should any intervention be targeted and why (for example, at the local level, or at specific types of journalism)?*
- b) *What do you think are or should be the respective responsibilities of industry, individuals and government, in addressing the issues we have identified?*
- c) *If there is a case for subsidising high-quality journalism, where should any funding support come from? i) What form should it take? ii) How or where should it be targeted?*

We agree that high-quality journalism plays a critical role in our democracy and that its independence should be safeguarded so that it can continue to serve the public interest by informing, challenging and scrutinising.

³ <https://www.ipso.co.uk/arbitration/> [accessed 13 September 2018].

a) Where could interventions be targeted?

Government and its arms-length bodies could promote sustainability of the press by addressing inequalities in the digital advertising market; supporting a solid legal framework that protects the intellectual property of journalistic content; and tackling the spread of harmful online 'fake news'.

Digital advertising market

Government should look to target issues around market dominance, market abuse, and monopolisation of online advertising by major tech platforms such as Facebook and Google. IPSO supports calls from industry for the Competition and Market Authority to investigate the value chain in digital advertising and for there to be intervention in this area if appropriate.

IPSO understands that a fundamental problem resulting in news' move towards digital is that monopoly in the online advertising market disadvantages the press, who need the digital advertising revenue as well as revenue from print sales. We recognise that the relationship between large tech platforms and the press is not entirely exploitative or damaging; for example, Google is hugely influential at driving online traffic to sources of online news. Publishers can then earn (some) digital advertising revenue from each click. However, increased digitalisation has certainly not benefited all areas of industry, particularly when it comes to local publications.

IPSO shares the concern of industry bodies such as the Professional Publishers' Association that there is a deeply unfair relationship between large tech platforms and the publishers who create the content which is monetised, particularly as profits are not shared further down the chain of content creation.

Changes to the ways in which large tech platforms work can have significant repercussions for publishers – both positive and negative – but these are outside of their control and often lack transparency. In August 2018, the Chairman of IPSO-regulated publisher Archant, Simon Bax, argued that changes to Facebook's algorithms have reduced the priority given to news appearing in users' newsfeeds, and this has resulted in less 'click-through', and less digital advertising revenue for the creators of the content.

Intellectual property and copyright

Online, professionally-produced journalistic content can be pirated, plagiarised and monetised with relative ease. By supporting a solid legal framework that protects intellectual property, including strong copyright protections, government will be creating a more level playing field for news publishers to compete online.

Government will be aware of issues relating to copyright which are currently being discussed in the European Union. The NUJ have joined with the International and European Federations of Journalists in EU member states to campaign for MEPs to "challenge the anti-copyright forces" of major tech platforms. The campaign stresses that copyright and authors' rights are not a type of censorship, and that if journalists need to rely on patronage and sponsorship for survival there will be negative consequences for their independence and ability to make a living from their work.

We were pleased to learn that members of the Cairncross Review are meeting with European representatives of industry and key stakeholders, including from the European Publishers' Council and representatives of the Digital Economy in the European Commission, to

understand more about European attempts to address long-term sustainability of high-quality journalism.

Fake News

IPSO believes that the Government has a responsibility to tackle harmful fake news, as do the platforms that facilitate its dissemination. We recognise the ongoing work of the Digital Charter in highlighting the opportunities and challenges arising from digital technologies. Fake news is harmful to the sustainability of high-quality journalism as it purposefully misinforms those who access it and prevents informed participation in democracy; and as it can appear indistinguishable from high-quality journalism, it leads to mistrust in the regulated press.

In 2017, IPSO submitted written evidence to the DCMS Commons Select Committee as part of their inquiry into fake news.⁴ We value the important work of the Committee in addressing this issue, which we see as deeply harmful both for democratic processes and from the perspective of trust in the media and the free press. We will not repeat our submission here, except to say that we look forward to the completion of the Committee's report, and are generally in support of the recommendations made in the interim report.

b) Responsibilities of industry, individuals and government

It is the responsibility of the newspaper and magazine industry and the individuals who work in it to address the commercial challenges posed by a changing media landscape and increasing digitalisation.

The UK press is not unique in that it needs to continue to adapt to an increasingly digital world. It is evident that the industry is attempting to address the concerns around digital journalism and profitability and the industry is adapting and exploring new ways to innovate.

The industry body techUK claims that many tech companies are already working hard to address the misuse of platforms to spread disinformation, as well as working with traditional news media organisations to help them transform their business models for the digital age. IPSO is not in a position to say whether these efforts are adequate and proportionate, or whether it would be the most effective course of action for government to compel tech companies to do more than they do already to address 'fake news'.

Government has responsibility to facilitate difficult conversations and to consider solutions. IPSO fully supports the work of Cairncross Review in addressing difficult questions for which there are no simple answers or straightforward solutions. Government and the civil service are also in a good position to work with academics and commission research so that policy decisions can be made with the most up-to-date, reliable and valid statistical information.

c) Subsidising high-quality journalism

We do not believe that any direct subsidies should be given from government to the industry, as this risks its freedom and independence and we oppose state regulation of the press in any form.

However, funding could come from alternative sources such as independent charities and via schemes and projects like the BBC Local Democracy Reporting Service, which represents a

⁴ <https://www.ipso.co.uk/media/1484/response-to-call-for-written-submissions-on-fake-news.pdf> [accessed 10 September 2018]

positive step to promote sustainable high-quality journalism, especially in relation to the importance of producing local news.

Any funding via such schemes should be targeted at the areas which are least well-served, so that no regions of the UK are devoid of a functioning independent local press, capable of holding the powerful to account.

Any interventions to deliver a sustainable future for high quality journalism should address inequalities in the digital advertising market, protect intellectual property of journalistic content, and tackle the spread of 'fake news'.

The newspaper industry needs to continue to adapt to an increasingly digital world and should be responsible for addressing commercial challenges, while government should carry out activities to address the imbalance within the value chain that disadvantages producers of journalistic content and that mitigates the harms of fake news.

IPSO believes government must not directly subsidise journalism in any form. However, funding could come from alternative sources such as independent charities and via schemes to promote high quality journalism, especially in relation to producing local news.

Conclusion

We thank the Cairncross Review for the opportunity to submit this evidence on sustainable high-quality journalism in the UK.

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