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Select Committee on Communications and Digital Inquiry into the Future of Journalism

Joint submission from:

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Background to evidence: This evidence is submitted by a group of journalism scholars from the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds, UK. The School is one of the leading research centres[1] for the study of the media in Europe and has particular strengths in the study of journalism, digital media, political communication and the media industries. The evidence comprises of findings from several separate research projects and consolidates our expertise and experience into a joint submission in response to questions 1,3,4,5,8,9, and 10. It should be noted that this evidence is based on research and understanding amassed before the coronavirus crisis. At the time of writing, thousands of jobs in print journalism alone are thought to be under threat, and the implications for the wider industry are unknown. Whilst our evidence cannot begin to address the measures that should be considered in order to respond to this latest crisis of journalism, initial signs suggest that the impact of the loss in revenue due to advertising and print sales will push an industry that was already teetering on the edge of crisis over the edge. Given that the crisis magnifies the need for journalism that provides citizens with access to accurate and reliable information, and that holds power to account, the need for government support and intervention informed by expertise has never been so necessary.

Question 1: How should journalism be defined and what is its value to society? What is the difference between 'citizen journalism' and other forms of journalism?

1. It is likely that there will be a consensus in the submissions received by the inquiry about the normative functions of journalism in a liberal democracy and the values that it should provide. Firmstone's[2] research into local journalism provides a voice for a less commonly heard perspective that advocates that the role of local journalism is particularly significant because it is considered vital to the functioning of local communities and the engagement of citizens in local democracies. From the perspective of local journalists in our research, it should inform local citizens about local issues, represent the opinions and voice of citizens, hold governing bodies and organisations to account on behalf of citizens (the watchdog role), and proactively campaign on matters of public interest (Firmstone and Coleman, 2014).

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[1] The results of the most recent Research Excellence Framework review (2014) placed us in the top ten of all UK departments in our subject area and ranked us third when taking into account the size of submissions (a measure called 'research power').

[2] Firmstone's evidence relates specifically to the provision of local news and is based on research was conducted in the UK's third largest city, Leeds. Over 30 interviews with elected politicians, Council strategists, Council communications specialists, mainstream journalists, and citizen journalists investigated the perceptions of journalists and communications specialists of the threats and opportunities faced by news providers.

Importantly, these functions may well differ from the journalism that guarantees commercial success and requires us to consider local journalism in the public interest as a public good, even if not funded in this way. In addition, this research is a reminder of the value of journalism not just to citizens but also to organisations and institutions that need to communicate with the public. For example, stakeholders such as local authorities remain reliant on local news organisations as trusted channels of communication with local citizens despite the proliferation of direct means of communication such as social media (Firmstone, 2018a).

2. Caution is required in assessing responses to the question 'What is the difference between "citizen journalism" and other forms of journalism'. As with many other key concepts in the study of journalism, the types of practices and people encompassed by such a term change over time in tandem with the emergence of new technologies, the rise of new platforms, new journalistic formats, and citizen journalism is applied in many often contradictory ways by scholars. Its definition has important consequences for the ways in which we conceptualise its relationship with established journalism. Firmstone's evidence relates specifically to citizen journalism in the local context as when citizens contribute to the news media as (usually) collectively organised producers of information and opinion independent of mainstream news media through hyperlocal news sites and civic orientated blogs. Local citizen journalism is not yet seen as fulfilling, replacing, or competing with any of the democratic roles of news that are in decline in the mainstream media (Firmstone, 2018a; Firmstone and Coleman, 2015b). Citizen journalists and hyperlocal news providers are perceived to add a valuable set of new voices to the news ecology, but the perceived democratic value of these voices is limited by their reach, motivations, professional values, and sustainability. The Leeds case study shows that citizen journalism tends to be hyperlocal (serving very small communities), serve niche audiences, have aims and values that differ from professional journalists, and face far greater threats to their sustainability than the press. Whilst this can offer many benefits, such citizen journalism is not a replacement for professional journalism conducted in the public interest and is not valued in the same way as established local news organisations by stakeholders.

Question 3: How can public policy improve media literacy, particularly among those who have a low level of digital literacy?

3. There is some debate about the degree to which public policy can improve media literacy. What can government do to make better citizens? Based on Anderson's research into journalism (Anderson, 2012; Anderson, 2018), one argument is that journalism schools should assume a primary role in training ordinary people to become active, intelligent consumers of the news media. As Anderson contends (2018), much of media and communication education, far from being 'low value' or 'Mickey Mouse' degrees, actually is engaged in this very process most of the time. The government should incentivize the provision of this information, particularly in areas the most disconnected from the centres of power in London and which have a corresponding distrust of the media they normally receive.

Question 4: How have digital technologies changed the production of journalism? Do journalists have access to the training necessary to adapt to the digital world?

4. Ian Bucknell's research looks at how digital technologies are changing the ways in which journalists work and how that should be reflected in the teaching offered by journalism programmes in universities (Bucknell, 2020). He conducted in-depth,

semi-structured interviews with digital editors from a cross-section of UK media organisations including Sky News, the Financial Times, Vice.com (UK), BBC Yorkshire, JPI Media (formerly Johnston Press) and Bauer Media. Their responses were coded then analysed to reveal common practices, experiences and priorities. The study was supported by a bursary from the Association for Journalism Education and the results will be presented at the European Communication Research and Education Association conference in 2020.

5. The impact of digital technologies on the work of journalists has been quantified by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. For instance, in their survey of around 700 UK journalists, 98% said that social media had changed the way they work (Thurman et al, 2016). In some cases, this has led to print, TV and radio journalists adding new approaches to the ways they have traditionally gone about their jobs. But it has also led to the rise of new roles focused on creating stories for websites, mobile applications and social networks. Gradually, production focus is moving away from legacy media to digital platforms: 'Social media teams are increasingly viewed as (1) the first stage in the customer acquisition funnel and (2) a means of creating a culture that puts audience impact and digital optimisation first. Their role has grown from simply ensuring content is optimised for specific platforms to originating content tailored for those destinations' (Kueng, 2017, p.26).

6. This has implications not only for news organisations, but those who shape the minds of future newsmakers: 'A shared sense of urgency in the industry and the academy is essential to ensure that today's and tomorrow's journalists have the skills to create journalism that is both meaningful and economically successful' (Finberg and Klinger, 2014, p.2). Jonathan Baker, the former Director of the BBC College of Journalism, agrees. In his provocative essay 'Get digital or die', he calls on university teachers to furnish journalism students with skills relevant to the digital world, or risk their programmes becoming obsolete (Baker, 2016).

7. This inspired Bucknell to examine the digital practices of news organisations in the UK with a view to identifying the key skills and approaches that should be taught in higher education. The main findings of his research were: 1) Digital technologies have led to the establishment of new journalistic practices that are common to local, regional and national news providers and across TV, radio and online production. The most frequently cited activities were digital short video production, social listening (reading and responding to readers/viewers comments), repurposing legacy media for social media, creating public information 'explainers', interpreting audience analytics and social storytelling; 2) the digital editors made it very clear how highly they value the fundamentals of journalism with some suggesting that new digital practices can be taught on the job, whereas the essentials cannot. The core skills identified were having a 'news sense' (knowing a good story when you see one), writing, filming and interviewing; 3) the ability to cope with constant change was also highlighted by interviewees, with ITV News explaining: 'it's great and exciting in that we have to keep developing and moving to try and stay ahead of the curve but sometimes it's hard to keep up.'

8. University journalism programmes provide an excellent learning environment for future reporters because they not only teach the practices and skills identified in points 1 and 2, they also teach students to become independent, adaptable learners. This furnishes them with the mental agility to be open and responsive to innovations such as those driven by digital technologies, enabling graduates to cope with the challenge of continual change identified in point 3. It is, therefore, a positive sign that the proportion of new entrants into journalism who have a degree in the subject, increased from half to two thirds in the UK over the period of a decade (Thurman et al, 2016).

9. But to ensure that opportunities in journalism are open to everyone, we must make sure that people from all backgrounds have access to university courses in the subject. The issue of journalism not reflecting the UK population is raised in question seven and the same can be said of universities, with a shortage of ethnic minority and low-income students particularly acute at leading institutions. Any interventions that help to get disadvantaged people onto journalism degree programmes would also help to address the lack of inclusivity in the profession. Degree apprenticeships exist in other sectors and could be one way forward for journalism, allowing trainees to have an income whilst they learn. Would it also be possible for news organisations, or the state, to provide bursaries that help people from non-traditional backgrounds overcome some of the financial barriers to going to university?

10. A closer relationship between industry and academia could also lead to career development opportunities for working journalists. The need and appetite for on-going learning is clearly there, as stated in the call for evidence: two-thirds of journalists in the UK feel that they personally need more training. Such co-operation has not historically existed between those who practice and those who study and teach journalism. The formation of a body that brings both groups together would create opportunities for training, research and innovation, providing a platform for answering many of the questions about the future of journalism.

Question 5: What qualifications do professional journalists need? How could public policy better support non-degree routes into journalism?

11. Along with the rise of citizen journalism, discussed above, an accompanying debate has raged about the exact qualifications and expertise that journalists need in order to serve the public well. In his early work, Anderson has explored this question (Anderson, 2008; Schudson and Anderson, 2009; Anderson, 2013), as well as in his later work on data journalism (Anderson, 2018). In essence, Anderson has argued that journalists claim to possess a certain level of expertise is the result of an occupational struggle over what he has called 'the jurisdiction of journalism'; that is, the regular reporting of important current events in a manner that is accessible to the public. Different groups claim to have the expertise to provide this service, and amongst themselves the struggle to enact this expertise in the marketplace.

12. One of the tools and tokens (though not the only one) that journalists claim to possess in order to realize their expertise is a degree in journalism through an institution of higher education (Anderson, 2008). In the United Kingdom, unlike the United States, there has long been something of a hostility to this idea that journalists need to be university educated in order to do their jobs well, perhaps owing to the more working-class origins of newspaper work in the UK. At the same time, the degree route has increasingly become the path forward for most new journalists.

13. Based on our research, we think this is the wrong debate. The single most important form of expertise journalists have in the 21st century is a combination of subject matter expertise (knowledge of financial markets, or epidemiology to write about the Covid-19 crisis, for instance) combined with an ability to write accessibly and well. The government ought to be encouraging journalism and media schools not only to train journalists, but to provide media education to citizens with significant levels of subject matter expertise (how to write well, what journalism is, how the media works, and so on) so they can weigh in with their knowledge and enhance the public sphere. They should also provide media literacy education in the same fashion (see below)

Question 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?

14. Some types of journalism are trusted more than others and levels of trust in journalism are not equally in decline. In particular, in our audience research survey, when asked to consider how they perceived local and national news would differ if covering the same story, local news was expected to be more trustworthy, more relevant, more informative, and more accurate than national news by a significant margin (Coleman et al, 2016). Trust in journalism can therefore be improved by policies and intervention designed to rescue, reinvigorate and ensure a sustainable future for local and regional journalism. Specific recommendations with regard to the future of local news were made in Firmstone's submission to the Cairncross review in 2018 (Firmstone, 2018b). These included that local news should be identified as a special case, that intervention targeted at local news is essential due to its status as a public good, and that the sustainability of high-quality news provided by local newspapers should be considered alongside the sustainability of the entire democratically functioning local news media ecology (e.g. considering TV, radio, and online journalism). Increasing diversity and plurality of ownership of local media is key to improving this situation. Under current circumstances, reductions in resources resulting from mergers are resulting in local news that is less local (more generic) and news 'black holes' because a majority of areas in the UK are no longer served by a local daily newspaper.

15. Additional evidence on the importance of the interdependent relationship between levels of trust and journalism produced according to strong ethical values has been submitted by Firmstone as part of a separate submission to the inquiry led by Dr John Steel (Steel et al., 2020). Using findings from the AHRC funded project, 'Defining Press Freedom', Steel and colleagues argue that public trust in the UK could be increased if a) the public are educated about the value of journalism from a young age and made familiar with the ethical frameworks journalists work to (e.g. via media literacy policies) so that they can hold journalism to account in similar ways that journalism itself purports to hold those in power to account; b) the UK develops a more grounded and publicly focussed set of ethical benchmarks than currently exist.

Question 9: How can innovation and collaboration help news providers of all types to maintain sustainable business models and adapt what they produce to audience demand? What lessons can be learnt from successful innovations, including in other countries?

16. Zeng participated in a cross-national comparative research project from 2016 to 2018, where she worked together with PI Cherian George of Hong Kong Baptist University to look at the innovations and public service journalism ethics as exemplified in several leading news organisations in Asia. They interviewed top editors from 12 reputable news organizations in China, Taiwan, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, in the course of 2016–2018. The interview data was then complemented with public records of the said new organizations. Findings from the project suggest that an organizational culture with an ethos of public interest journalism plays an important role in maintaining journalistic professionalism while actively responding to financial pressure and engaging the audience (George, Zeng & Mazumdar, 2019).

17. Of the 12 different news organisations studied, three are of particular relevance to evidence the role of innovation and collaboration in sustaining public interest journalism - *the Reporter* in Taiwan, *Tempo* in Indonesia, and *the Paper* in PRC

China. The findings suggest:1) International or regional collaboration significantly helps news organisations to share and save on resources and to generate huge impact across borders, which further enhances the news organisations' reputation, hence cementing a large and sustainable readership; this is of particular reference for less resourceful news organisations; 2) organisational culture with strong emphasis on public service and independent journalism plays a significant role. Such an ethos of journalism (normative strengths of news organisations including values of public service, public accountability, and democratization) maintained and reminded through the network of journalists and the collective identity of public service journalism, helps to fend off the commercial and political erosions on editorial autonomy, to ensure the resilience of the news organisations studied; 3) Technological innovations to appeal to younger generations is another experience drawn from the success of these news organisations.

18. The following are the key takeaways from the three cases respectively: In Taiwan, the non-profit online media startup *the Reporter* envisions itself as part of a 'journalism revolution', experimenting with an independent model in response to the longstanding criticism against Taiwan's over-commercialized and politically polarized news media landscape. It is funded by a public foundation, which manages all donations transparently. *The Reporter* stands by a strict 'Three No' policy: the donors do not own *The Reporter*; they do not intervene in editorial decisions; they cannot withdraw their donations. In addition, The Reporter does not accept donations from any political party or politician. For large donations (more than one million NTD, or around 27,000GBP), a Review Committee made up of three media ethics scholars and experts will examine the donation and make the final decision. Apart from its strict funding policy, *the Reporter* does not show the number of clicks or the readership of each story on their website, in an apparent effort to fight against 'clickbait journalism'. To survive in the new media ecology and to better engage the young generation, the startup project attaches significant emphasis to its innovative digital storytelling on multiple platforms. One example is launching an interactive 'news game': inviting readers/players to experience the daily life of an emergency room, with the scenario based on rich data collected via reporters' research and interviews, to engage the young generation. It also hosts workshops on news reporting, photography, or other events on a regular basis to best engage readers (Zeng, 2018a). *The Reporter* has stood out in the highly competitive Chinese language media market in Greater China, largely thanks to its vigorous international collaboration in quality investigative journalism. Partnered with Indonesia's *Tempo* on a story about far seas fishery and slavery at sea, it has won three SOPA awards. It also actively participates in international collaborative reporting networks including GIJN (Global Investigative Journalism Network) and the Global Environmental Reporting Collective.

19. Indonesia's *Tempo*, with a proud tradition of professional journalism and investigative reporting, has been the market leader for the last 47 years in Indonesia (Zeng & George, 2019). It has been an active advocate for collaborative journalism (Dhyatmika, 2017). Apart from being an active participant in GIJN (Global Investigative Journalism Network), ICIJ (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists), and OCCRP (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project), it has led the launch of IndonesiaLeaks, which provides easy access for anonymous sources and whistleblowers to connect to journalists.

20. *The Paper* (Pengpai) is China's first digital-only news outlet, launched in 2014. Although it is heavily subsidized by the government, as any other news outlets in China, its innovative efforts in keeping a most profitable market share in China's hypercompetitive yet strictly party-controlled media industry is worth noting. Wooing the middle-class young urban generation, the Paper first brands itself as to be 'dedicated to nostalgia for the 1980s', the golden era for liberalism in China; the

branding, reinforced by its rigorous current affairs reporting and its slick-looking web and mobile app interfaces, easily appeals to the growing well-educated middle class who grew up in the 'nostalgic and liberal 1980s' (Zeng, 2018b).

Question 10: 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?

21. The expectation to collaborate with academic researchers is not integrated into the strategic requirements of journalistic organisations to the same extent as it is in universities, yet collaboration offers a clear set of benefits for both parties and the future of journalism (Parry and Firmstone, 2018). There is a surprising lack of dialogue between scholars and news organisations, based on a historic perception of a clash of values and motivations. However, projects that grow out of shared aims to tackle current challenges in journalism, such as declining audience trust or verification of online sources, can lead to fruitful collaborations. Academics bring fresh insights through theoretically and critically driven research, through transnational comparative projects that offer a global understanding, by drawing on knowledge from other geographical contexts, and from their experiences of working with a diverse range of practitioners across different media organisations over many years. Media reform campaigns, investigative journalism networks, and initiatives in participatory media education such as First Draft News[3] are just some examples of collaborations which address pressing issues of media trust, truth and news literacy. Policies could be developed to motivate news organisations, particularly those that are the most vulnerable to the current crisis, who are most often situated outside London in the regions, and are least likely to have internal research divisions, to form (and potentially fund) mutually beneficial collaborations with local universities. In addition, government policy should urgently address the lack of support for research devoted to addressing the problems of journalism from RCUK agencies including the AHRC and ESRC.

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[3] "First Draft's is a not for profit tackling information disorder. First Draft's mission is to empower societies with accurate information in critical moments. We work to ensure the integrity of the world's information ecosystem, developing and delivering pioneering techniques, tools and training for how information is discovered, shared and presented to the public" https://firstdraftnews.org

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