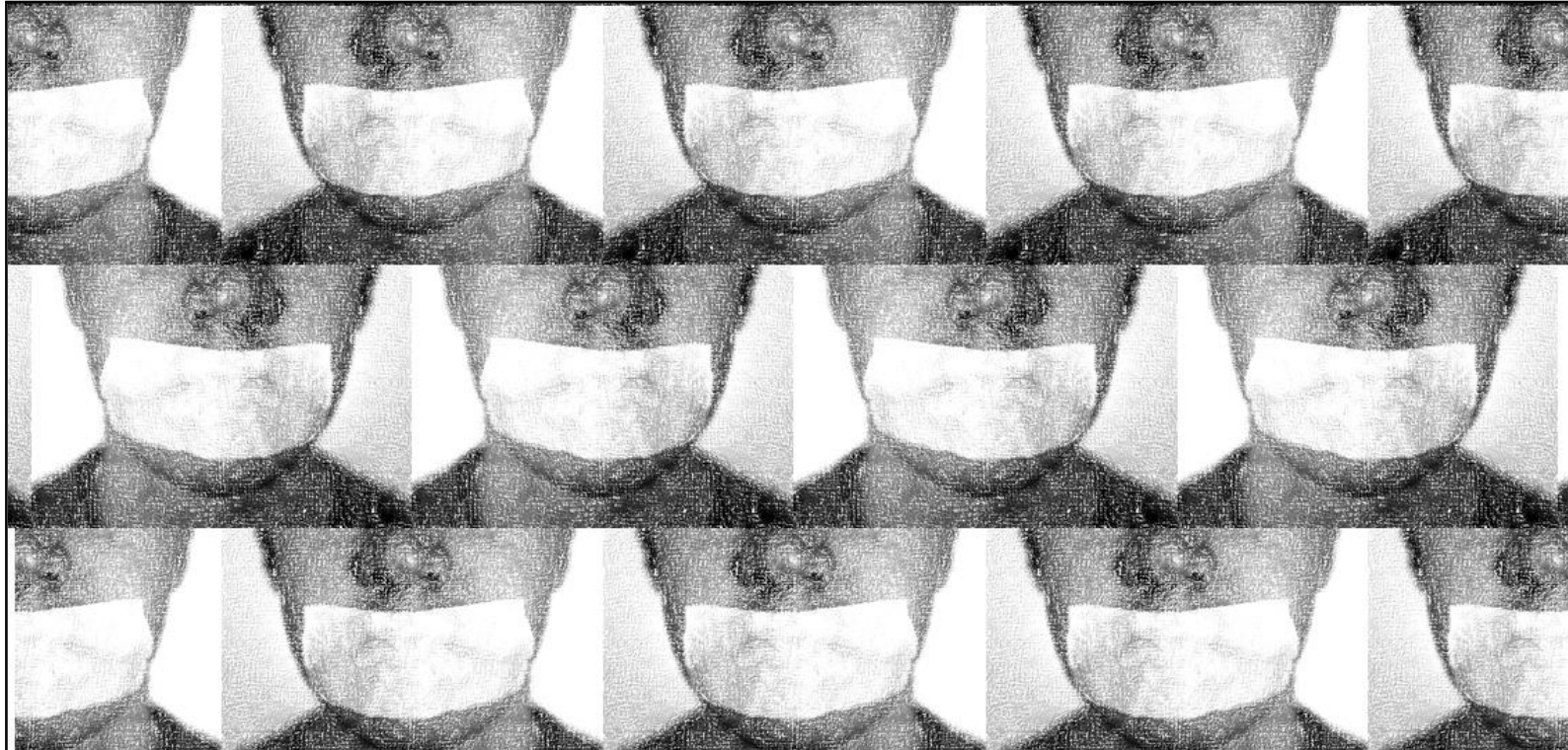


The News Media Landscape: An overview of the context of Press Freedom and Regulation in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

The News Media Landscape: An Overview of the Context of Press Freedom and Regulation in the United Kingdom examines the structure, regulation and cultural context of journalism in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The report was produced as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project *Defining Freedom of the Press: A Cross-National Examination of Press Ethics and Regulation*, which explores and compares systems of press freedom and ethics across a range of European democracies. It outlines constitutional and legal protections for freedom of expression, the regulatory framework for broadcast and online media, and the system of voluntary self-regulation governing the press. The report analyses the structure of the UK media landscape, including patterns of media ownership, market concentration, and economic pressures facing public service and commercial journalism. It also examines audience news consumption, public trust in the media, and the growth of digital and online-only news providers. Further sections explore journalism culture, professional norms, ethical debates and emerging challenges, including political polarisation, declining trust and newsroom transformation. The report provides a detailed national case study designed to inform comparative research on press regulation, ethics and media freedom within democratic systems.

United Kingdom

RSF World Press Freedom Index ranking: 23rd out of 180 (RSF, 2024)

Population: 67.61m (Statista, 2024)

Percentage in the capital: 14.4% (9.7m; World Population Review, 2024)

GDP: 3,187.6bn USD (Statista, 2024)

EU member: from January 1, 1973 (EUROPA, 2018) to 31 January, 2020 (Barnes, 2020)

Press councils: IPSO, Impress

Press freedom environment:

Freedom House classes the UK as a “free” country with a total score of 91 out of 100 (Freedom House, 2024). This score is split 38/53 for political rights and for civil liberties (Ibid.). The narrative report for 2024 states that the United Kingdom, which comprises England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, is a “stable democracy” with regular free elections (Freedom House, 2024). It describes the country’s media sector as “vibrant”, with government enforcement for political rights and civil liberties (Ibid.). That said, recent legislation which restricts the right to protest have created a more challenging environment which has had a negative impact on the UK’s ranking, alongside an increase in incidents of Islamophobia and anti-immigration (Ibid.).

The powers to limit “overly disruptive protests” were introduced in 2023, as part of the Public Order Act (POA) (Freedom House, 2024). Human rights organisations condemned the new legislation (Ibid.). The year also saw the introduction of the Illegal Migration Act, allowing the government to dismiss asylum applications from those crossing the English Channel in small boats (Ibid.). A policy to deport failed asylum seekers to Rwanda was due to be repealed by the incoming Labour government in July 2024 (Francis, 2024).

The civil liberties of the Freedom House (2024) narrative report states that press freedom in the United Kingdom is protected by law. It describes the country’s media environment as “lively and diverse” with a range of political views reflected from (Freedom House 2024). The public broadcaster is the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), publicly owned and dependent on licence fees paid by the public for a large proportion of its revenue (Ibid.). In terms of the culture for UK journalists, there is “regular harassment in the course of their work”, according to Freedom House (2024). Threats come from Northern Irish paramilitary groups, among others, while LGBT+ journalists reported mistreatment in a study published in May 2023 (Freedom House, 2024). The government launched a National Action Plan to improve journalists’ safety in 2021 and new laws provided judges with the powers to quickly dismiss SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation), which helped journalists fight off inauthentic libel claims (Ibid.). The United Kingdom’s press freedom environment reflects a low level of public trust in journalism, according to Reporters without Borders (2024). There have also been widespread job cuts, attacks on Iranian reporters exiled in the UK and lawsuits to gag reporters (such as the SLAPPs referred to above) (RSF, 2024).

Media landscape

The Reuters Digital News Report for 2024 describes a landscape of strong public and private broadcasting, and a “competitive and outspoken national press” (Newman, 2024). Despite this, financial pressures are threatening funding models for both public service and commercial media and more and more news consumers are turning to online platforms (Ibid.). There is also a centralised media marketplace, with three groups dominating print: News UK, Reach, and Daily Mail and General Trust (DMG Media) (RSF, 2024). Reporters without Borders say there is also a growing debate about foreign ownership of UK newspapers, while press freedoms were impacted when authorities used counter-terrorism laws to detain and question several journalists entering the country (Ibid.). At the time of their 2024 report, the WikiLeaks whistleblower Julian Assange was awaiting extradition to the USA on espionage charges (Ibid.) but in June 2024, he was freed and allowed to emigrate to Australia, having accepted a plea deal (Davidson, 2024).

Newspapers are “free to be partisan in their viewpoints” and “remain the crucible for the highly competitive reporting traditions that have shaped British journalism” (Sanders and Hanna, 2012: 220). They are located on a range of political allegiances

and spectrums, such as *The Guardian* (compact, quality), which is “left-liberal”, and *The Sun* (tabloid, popular), which is “highly partisan and populist”, in an environment where on the one hand there is “challenging and rigorous reporting” and on the other hand where “reporting is scurrilous and invasive and newsgathering techniques are frequently condemned as immoral or illegal” (Ibid.). The 2012 Leveson Inquiry was a consequence of the latter (Lord Justice Leveson, 2013), which “necessitated a major re-evaluation of journalistic ethics and practices” (Firmstone, 2018).

Newspapers and market

The Media Reform Coalition (2023) says there are 1,189 local newspapers in the United Kingdom, owned by just six companies. Similarly, of the 12 dailies and 11 Sunday titles, 90 per cent of the UK’s national newspaper circulation is controlled by just three companies: DMG Media, Reach and News UK (Media Reform Coalition, 2023). According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), the average combined circulation of national daily newspapers fell by 4.6 per cent between 2020 and 2022 (Media Reform Coalition, 2023), with only the national freesheet *Metro* (tabloid, popular) (35 per cent) and *Financial Times* (broadsheet, quality) (5.6 per cent) reporting gains during that period (Ibid.).¹ Since 2017, national daily newspapers have seen a 40 per cent fall in average circulation, from 675,887 to 412,821, while the market is dominated by DMG Media's *Metro* and *Daily Mail*, alongside News UK's *The Sun* (Ibid.). Each accounts for around 20 per cent of the country's total daily circulation (Ibid.).

This reflects a trend in the UK newspaper industry. Spending on newspapers fell from £9.9 billion in 2005 to below £2 billion in 2022 (Statista, 2024b). There was a 10 per cent drop in circulation for the national newspapers between 2022 and 2023, with similar declines in the regional newspaper market (Ibid.). Sales for regional papers were down 19 per cent in the second half of 2023 (Newman, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated financial pressures, with many regionals closing or merging newsrooms or reducing their staffing levels (RSF, 2024). The *Evening Standard* (tabloid, quality) in London, which dates back to 1827, announced plans to drop its daily print-run in favour of a weekly newspaper in June 2024 (Youngs, 2024). Reach, which owns 200 local newspapers as well as the *Daily Mirror* (tabloid, popular), *Daily Express* (tabloid, popular) and *Daily Star* (tabloid, popular) announced 450 redundancies in November 2023, the third time it had cut posts in 12 months (Newman, 2024). The *Daily Mail* is also planning redundancies and new working practices across print and online (Ibid.). *The Mail*, the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror* have the added financial burdens from their legal cases relating to historic phone hacking allegations, involving Prince Harry and other public figures (Ibid.).

¹ See Appendix 1 for average national newspaper circulation figures for 2022 (Media Reform Coalition)

Broadsheets and other upmarket newspapers have adopted online subscription models as preparation for the end of the print era (Newman, 2024). More than half a million people (558,000) are digital-only subscribers to *The Times* (compact, quality) and *Sunday Times* (broadsheet, quality) (Ibid.). *The Guardian* (compact, quality) has more than a million subscribers but is projecting a loss of £39 million, largely due to a fall in advertising revenue and a slowdown in membership growth (Ibid.). The *Daily Telegraph* (broadsheet, quality) has also reached a million subscribers but is at the centre of a controversy about newspapers as a means to buy political influence (Ibid.). Its proposed £600 million sale to a consortium in the United Arab Emirates was banned by the Conservative government, amid fears of undue influence through foreign ownership, and a billionaire hedge fund owner – Sir Paul Marshall – is a potential new investor (Ibid.). He already owns a large shareholding in the right-wing TV news channel GB News, which has recorded £42 million losses of its own (Ibid.).

Traditional broadcasters are not escaping financial burdens. Amid competition from streaming platforms, there are plans for 200 job cuts at the publicly-owned and commercially-funded UK Public Service Broadcaster Channel 4, and at time of writing, the BBC is expecting a smaller than usual increase in the licence fee (Newman, 2024).

Audience news consumption

Data on news consumption in the UK shows that television remains the most popular medium, but more people obtain news via word of mouth than from printed newspapers (Statista, 2024b). The internet ranks second to TV (Ibid.). However, The Knowledge Agency report for Ofcom (The Knowledge Agency, 2024) notes that ‘there has been a decrease in the overall level of interest in news’ over the past year.

The Reuters Digital News Report for 2024 combines results of a survey of users’ weekly usage across television, radio, and print, as well as online in the UK (Newman et al., 2024: 65). In the TV, print and online figures, the public broadcaster BBC scores the highest for reach (48 per cent), double the second-ranking ITV News (24 per cent) (Ibid.). Sky News reaches 16 per cent of people per week, with Channel 4 News at 9 per cent. Both commercial radio news and regional or local newspapers record 8 per cent weekly reach (Ibid.). The best performing print newspapers are the *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday* (9 per cent), the *Guardian* and its Sunday edition the *Observer* (7 per cent) and the free daily *Metro* (6 per cent) (Ibid.). The News UK papers the *Sun/Sun on Sunday* and *The Times/Sunday Times* are at 5 per cent of weekly reach, while the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph* are used by 4

per cent of people each week (Ibid.).² For online reach, the BBC also leads the way (44 per cent), but the *Guardian's* digital operations rank second (16 per cent) ahead of Sky News (14 per cent) and *MailOnline* (13 per cent). The *Telegraph's* online operations reach 6 per cent each week, with the *Sun* and *Daily Mirror* on 5 per cent and *The Times* and *Metro* reaching 4 per cent of people (Ibid.).³

The broadcast regulator Ofcom publishes annual news consumption reports. The most recent, for 2023, states that 96 per cent of adults consume news in some form, with most (70 per cent) using television for their news (Ofcom, 2023). Online sources are second, with 68 per cent of adults consuming their news this way, with just under half of people (47 per cent) consuming their news on social media (Ibid.). TikTok is growing, however, increasing its reach from 1 per cent in 2020 to 10 per cent in 2023 (Ibid.). For young adults (16 to 24 years old), online news sources are the most popular, with 83 per cent in this age bracket consuming news this way (Ofcom, 2023), followed by social media (71 per cent), with only 47 per cent using television for news (Ibid.). Ofcom's 2024 Media Nations UK 2024 report notes that news 'was the genre with the largest year-on-year viewing decline' on PSB. The report also suggests an 'increase in social media use for news and a decrease in the overall level of interest in news' maybe a factor in this decline (Ofcom, 2024).

Most of the other country scoping documents include data from the Eurobarometer Media & News Survey for 2023. As it is no longer an EU member, the United Kingdom was not included in the study.

Public service media

The BBC has always been regarded as an esteemed institution of quality and accurate journalism. It was created in 1927 by Royal Charter (Sanders and Hanna, 2012: 222). It is viewed as "editorially independent and competitive with its commercial counterparts" (Freedom House, 2024) and remains publicly funded by the licence fee, providing television, radio and digital services. The licence was free for over-75s until July 2020, but only those eligible for Pension Credit can now also claim a free TV licence (House of Commons Library, 2024). The BBC has its own code of ethics - the Editorial Guidelines - which cover various aspects of reporting and ethical conduct (BBC, 2020b). In 2017, Ofcom assumed overall regulatory responsibility for the BBC, taking over from the BBC Trust, and the following year, they asked the corporation to investigate new digital content platforms to engage younger audiences (BBC, 2019). The BBC funds a public service news agency called the Local Democracy Reporting Service, which provides 149 journalists with jobs across the UK (BBC, 2020d; for regional breakdown see: LDRS, 2020). In 2020, it

² See Appendix 2 for national newspaper circulations in June 2024 and the most recent figures for other titles (Tobitt and Majid, 2024, in *UK Press Gazette*)

³ See Appendix 3 for Ofcom's studies in 2023 and 2022, showing the breakdown of print versus digital news consumption, according to newspaper title

began developing voice-activated AI, using smart speakers provided by Amazon and Google in order to tailor news experiences (BBC, 2020a), and is now building its own artificial intelligence models and considering the sale of BBC archives to Big Tech companies (Newman, 2024).

The Reuters Digital News Report (2024) shows that the BBC still dominates online and offline media, but the challenges of attracting younger audiences remain. It has also been criticised for lacking impartiality by both sides in the Gaza conflict (Newman, 2024). The power of traditional journalism has also been called into question, following the powerful impact of an ITV drama about the wrongful fraud convictions of UK sub-postmasters (Ibid.). The drama made the public and politicians take note in a way that journalists had failed, despite reporting the scandal for years (Ibid.).

Public trust in the press and media

According to the 2024 Reuters Digital News Report, overall trust in UK news is at 36 per cent, with the UK ranking 25th out of the 47 countries in the study (Newman et al., 2024: 65). A 2022 survey shows that the public have lower trust in journalists (39 per cent) than when asked about the news media overall (49 per cent) (Gibson et al., 2022: 15). BBC News is the most trusted provider (62 per cent), followed by Channel 4 news (59 per cent), ITV News (59 per cent) and the *Financial Times* (57 per cent) (Newman et al., 2024: 65). The only other news providers to score trust approval ratings of 50 per cent or more are Sky News (53 per cent), unspecified regional or local newspapers (53 per cent), and the *Guardian* (52 per cent) (Ibid.). The *Sun* is the least trusted news provider (15 per cent), followed by TalkTV (21 per cent), the *Daily Mirror* (22 per cent) and *Daily Mail/Mail Online* (25 per cent), while GB News is trusted by 29 per cent of respondents (Ibid.). Ofcom's News Consumption in the UK report for 2023 collated users' opinions on the trustworthiness of different platforms. It found that television was the most trusted platform for news (69 per cent) (Ofcom, 2023). Newspapers scored 66 per cent ratings for trustworthiness, followed by radio (65 per cent) (Ibid.). Social media news scored a "trustworthy" rating of just 40 per cent (Ibid.). Levels of trust for news media and journalism sources to report on issues fairly varies by newspaper type. The public has higher trust in traditional local newspapers (60 per cent) and national broadsheet newspapers (57 per cent) than in national middle market (43 per cent) and tabloids (33 per cent) (Gibson, et al, 2022: 17).

In 2016, 1,306 British participants took part in the Special Eurobarometer 452 survey, titled *Media pluralism and democracy* (Eurobarometer, 2016). Here, 61 per cent of participants thought that the national media represented a "diversity of views and opinions", and 32 per cent thought that the media was "free from political or commercial pressure" (Eurobarometer, 2016: Country Factsheet: United Kingdom). Trust in media, in terms of general quality of information, was at 44 per cent (Ibid.), reliability in television was at 61 per cent, radio at 67 per cent,

and newspapers (both print and online) at 46 per cent. However, trust in social media platforms was low at 31 per cent (Ibid.). A low number of participants were aware of regulatory bodies at 28 per cent, with 46 per cent thinking that they were free from political or commercial influence (Ibid.). More recently, Impress's 2022 News Literacy Report (Gibson, et al, 2022) presents empirical research to indicate that media literacy levels need to be increased to help enhance trust in the UK news media sector. A survey over 3000 UK respondents finds that over 50% of respondents do not feel they know very much about standards, regulation or how journalism works (ibid: 20). The survey shows that people think they would trust the news more if they knew more about how it is produced (66%) and knew more about how it is regulated (70%) (Ibid: 32). Focus group data from this study provides further nuance to this perspective, with a report by Firmstone, Steel et al. (2024) suggesting that news media regulation and the ethical principles upon which journalists are supposed to adhere need to be far more visible and accountable to the public if the erosion of trust is to be addressed.

Online only/digital entrants

The Independent (broadsheet, quality) shut its print editions in 2016 and re-launched as an online only platform (Statista, 2024b). It relies on subscriptions and digital advertising, although it scored just 4 per cent weekly usage in the Reuters report's online reach figures (Newman et al., 2024, 65). The *Daily Mail's* digital arm, *Mail Online*, is one of the biggest news sites on TikTok worldwide (Statista, 2024b). Aside from these outlets, the Reuters Digital News Report (2024) lists the following as online-only brands most "used last week": MSN (5 per cent) and Yahoo! (4 per cent) (Newman et al., 2024: 65). Talk TV found itself in trouble with the regulator Ofcom and switched to online-only output in summer 2024, amid growing financial pressures (Newman, 2024).

The magazine *Delayed Gratification* offers retrospective journalism with longform news stories from the previous three months, and is subscription-funded with fees starting at £48 per year, or £30 a year for digital only (Delayed Gratification, 2024). *Delayed Gratification* has been publishing quarterly since 2011. According to its website, it takes time to "focus on the values we all expect from quality journalism – accuracy, depth, context, analysis and expert opinion" (Ibid.). Another "slow news" brand is Tortoise News, created in 2019 with 2,500 subscribers, 40 per cent of whom were under the age of 30 at launch (Newman, 2019). Annual membership fees are £130 per year (Tortoise, 2024). Its website claims: "We don't do breaking news, but what's driving the news. We don't cover every story, but reveal a few. We take the time to see the fuller picture, to make sense of the forces shaping our future, to investigate what's unseen" (Ibid.). Tortoise News was initially funded by a Kickstarter campaign, with a target of £75,000 that eventually reached £539,035 (Ibid.; see also: Kickstarter, 2018; Perryman, 2019). In Scotland, *The Ferret* is a

crowdfunded co-operative created in 2015 in Scotland, engaging in investigative journalism and regulated by Impress (Price, 2017b).

Current studies and context

Data on risks to media pluralism in the UK from the EUI Centre For Media Pluralism and Media Freedom 2022 report shows that the UK had mixed rankings with “medium risk” to market plurality (64 per cent), political independence (41 per cent), and fundamental protection (37 per cent), and “low risk” to social inclusiveness (32 per cent) (add Tambini and Madrazo). With the exception of social inclusiveness which has remained about the same, each of these risks increased since the previous report in 2018 (Craufurd Smith and Cavaliere, 2018: 5-10). Here are excerpts from the 2022 report’s conclusion. Given the relevance of regulation to the Political Independence, the reports’ conclusion for this area is replicated in full:

“In the Fundamental Protection area, the UK scored in the medium risk band (37%). The basic protections of freedom of expression, independence and effectiveness of the media authority and universal reach of traditional media, and access to the internet are all met and do not present a risk to the UK media environment. However, there is significant room for improvement in the Protection of right to information. The majority of journalists report experiencing threats of violence, death threats, bullying, sexism, and homophobia, with women experiencing a larger proportion of these attacks.” (Tambini and Madrazo, 2022; 25)

“In the Market Plurality area, the UK presents a medium score, close to the border of a high risk (64%). As described in the report, the major threats in this indicator are transparency of media ownership (67%), plurality of media providers (85%), and media viability (68%). The other two sectors, plurality in digital markets and editorial independence from commercial and ownership influence are also cause of concern, but to a lesser extent with a medium risk score of 53% and 48% respectively.” (Tambini and Madrazo, 2022; 26)

“The Political Independence area scores 41%, which is in the medium risk band. There are concerns regarding Editorial autonomy and Independence of public service media. In terms of the former, journalistic associations have not introduced regulatory safeguards to guarantee autonomy in appointing and dismissals of editors-in-chief nor are there self-regulatory measures in place that stipulate editorial independence from political interference. With regard to the latter indicator, laws governing public service media do not set out sufficient safeguards in terms of senior appointments and funding negotiations. As such, there have been cases of political interference in the appointments and dismissals. While the other three indicators are at a lower risk to the UK media environment, still they present some matters of concern. First, in terms of Political independence of the media, there is no general conflict of interest law in the UK; in addition, there are occasional cases of indirect political control over the

audiovisual media and there is scope for the development of politically owned or controlled online radio stations in the future given that current rules do not extend to online radio. For Audiovisual media, online platforms, and elections, the Broadcasting Code provides accuracy and impartial requirements for all broadcasters. However, the representation of political viewpoints in public service media is not always consistent and fair. Additionally, the UK government could increase transparency requirements for digital campaign spending. Finally, in terms of State regulation of resources and support to the media sector, the legislative framework provides fair and transparent rules on spectrum allocation, but there is room for improvement in terms of the Page 26 subsidies that the government provides to media outlets that operate at the national level.” (Tambini and Madrazo, 2022; 26)

“Social Inclusiveness scores at low risk, at 32%, making it the lowest risk to media pluralism in the UK. The areas that raise a moderate level of concern are Gender equality in the media and Protection against disinformation and hate speech. The indicators of lower concern are the Representation of minorities in the media, even though national news in minority languages is available, the UK only has two minority language public service broadcasts and concerns have been raised about their discoverability; Local and community media in the UK have been protected, however, current forms of support will not be enough to stop the decline of local journalism; and Media literacy which is above average for European populations, but still has room for growth given the fact that it is only present to a limited extent on educational curriculums, and the programmes do not explicitly refer to digital media skills.” (Tambini and Madrazo, 2022; 27)

In terms of the current RSF rankings, the UK is ranked 23rd (out of 180) in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, a rise from 26th in 2023 and 35th in 2019 (RSF, 2024).

Regulatory environment

The UK is a “largely deregulated” media market, with relatively little state intervention and a “well-developed professional culture” (Ríos et al., 2018: 228). Ofcom regulates TV, radio and on-demand services in the United Kingdom. Its Broadcasting Code is mandated by law:

Ofcom is required under the Communications Act 2003 (as amended) (“the Act”) and the Broadcasting Act 1996 (as amended) (“the 1996 Act”) to draw up a code for television and radio, covering standards in programmes, sponsorship, product placement in television programmes, fairness and privacy. This Code is to be known as the Ofcom Broadcasting Code (“the Code”) (Ofcom, 2023c).

Broadcast journalism in the UK is “legally bound to be accurate and impartial in its journalism, to comply with ethical codes, and to fulfil a number of other public service commitments” such as contributing to public debate and the public interest (Sanders and Hanna, 2012: 220). Ofcom also “monitors and enforces special impartiality requirements and other legislation that must be applied at the time of elections and referendums” (Firmstone, 2018). Ofcom found GB News in repeated breach of impartiality rules in 2023, while TalkTV were also reprimanded (Newman, 2024).

In 2023, the Online Safety Act bolstered Ofcom’s powers to regulate social media and video sharing platforms (Ofcom, 2023b). Its website states: “services that fall under our remit will have to follow certain rules, including protecting users from illegal content and activity online, as well as protecting children from harmful content. Examples of illegal content include child sexual abuse material, terrorism, fraud, selling illegal drugs or weapons, and content encouraging self-harm or suicide” (Ibid.).

The United Kingdom’s media laws may soon be amended to ban SLAPP cases (such as spurious defamation claims), with the UK government recognising that lawsuits to silence reporters constituted a threat to journalists’ safety (RSF, 2024). Reporters without Borders described this as “welcome news” (Ibid.).

The written media in the United Kingdom are not subject to statutory regulation and operate within a system of voluntary self-regulation that is not organised or funded by government. Newspapers and online news providers can choose between signing up to be self-regulated by one of the two regulatory bodies, IPSO and Impress, applying their own internal regulatory guidelines, or doing neither (uncommon).

The press council: IPSO

The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) replaced the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) as the UK’s press council in 2014 (Ríos et al., 2018: 226) (PCC, 2020). The PCC, established in 1991 (Harcup, 2002: 104),⁴ lost credibility after the Leveson Inquiry and the outcome of the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal (Rios et al., 2018: 226). IPSO’s code of ethics is developed by the Editors’ Code of Practice Committee, and is called the Editors’ Code and is available via the IPSO website (Editors Code, 2024). This code “defines professional standards for print and online journalists and editors” (Thurman et al., 2016: 50). IPSO is part of the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe, which hosts an annual conference but does not have a formal membership system or secretariat (AIPCE, 2024).⁵ IPSO holds a contentious position in media freedom debates, including

⁴ The PCC replaced the General Council of the Press, founded in 1953 (Ibid.).

⁵ All countries in the DFoP project except Slovakia are informal members.

questions of whether or not it is fit for purpose as a genuine regulator (Sparkes, 2019). It regulates more than 1,500 print and 1,000 online titles (ICO, 2024).

Recent press council report/cases: IPSO

The most recent report available on the IPSO at the time of writing is the 2022 annual report. In terms of complaints received, IPSO received 38,658 complaints and enquiries during the year, up from 8,084 complaints and enquiries in 2018 (IPSO, 2023). Out of these, 358 cases were investigated, with 65 complaints upheld, 86 complaints not upheld and 142 resolved directly with the publisher (Ibid.). Mediation settled 29 complaints (Ibid.).

The table below lists complaints according to organisation (Ibid.: 16), showing that four of the five most complained about news providers were online versions of tabloid newspapers. The *Daily Mail's* print version was second only to *MailOnline* in facing IPSO complaints. Some members of the quality press like the *Financial Times* and the *Guardian* have their own internal complaint processes (Guardian, 2014), and have chosen not to voluntarily self-regulate through IPSO or Impress.

2022 MOST COMPLAINED ABOUT PUBLICATIONS BY ARTICLES							RULINGS		
	Number of articles	Number of complaints in remit *	Rejected **	Not pursued by complainant ***	Resolved by IPSO mediation	Resolved directly with publication	Fully Upheld	Partially upheld ****	Not upheld
Mail Online	515	432	384	14	1	24	1	0	8
Daily Mail	184	312	287	8	2	5	1	1	8
thesun.co.uk	127	73	55	4	1	9	0	2	2
express.co.uk	118	101	81	6	1	8	0	1	4
mirror.co.uk	114	82	67	3	1	6	1	1	3
The Times	94	111	97	2	1	3	2	1	5
The Daily Telegraph	91	400	344	35	0	12	2	1	6
dailyrecord.co.uk	68	208	197	4	1	2	0	1	3
telegraph.co.uk	58	42	38	1	0	2	0	1	0
The Mail on Sunday	56	6317	6306	5	0	2	0	0	4
The Sun	52	65	56	1	0	3	1	2	2
metro.co.uk	47	56	50	1	0	4	0	0	1
walesonline.co.uk	42	24	16	3	0	3	1	0	1
mylondon.news	33	15	11	0	1	1	0	1	1
manchestereveningnews.co.uk	29	15	11	1	1	0	1	0	1
The Sunday Times	28	26	21	0	1	1	1	0	2
hulldailymail.co.uk	27	13	10	1	1	1	0	0	0
Daily Mirror	21	784	779	3	0	0	0	0	2
thescottishsun.co.uk	15	13	11	0	0	1	0	0	1
edinburghlive.co.uk	12	40	35	3	0	1	0	1	0

* Includes: Breaches (all)/No breach - after investigation/Not lead/Not Pursued (all)/Rejections (all)/Resolved (all)

** Includes Rejection confirmed by Committee

*** Includes Not pursued - no further contact after referral to publication and Not pursued - during IPSO investigation

**** If a complaint is upheld on one or some points, but the complainant had raised further points that were not found to be in breach, the Committee may determine that the complaint is partially upheld.

(IPSO, 2023)

The press council: Impress

Impress became the United Kingdom's first independent press regulator when it was recognised by the Press Recognition Panel (PRP), established by Royal Charter in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry (Impress, 2023b). No national newspapers have joined Impress, with most being members of IPSO, and several choosing not to join either regulatory body in favour of internal regulation (The Guardian, The Observer, The Independent, Financial Times). Impress regulates 220 publications from 132 publishers (Ibid.). These include independent, not-for-profit, hyperlocal, local and digital first publishers. On its website, Impress states its vision is "for an empowered public to have access to a trusted and resilient information ecosystem" (Ibid.). Impress has its own standards code, designed "to support journalists and protect the public from unethical reporting and practices. It applies to all forms of news delivery, including print publications, news websites and social media" (Impress, 2023c). The Impress Standards Code is available to download from its website (Ibid.).

Recent press council report/cases: Impress

The most recent Impress annual report, available on its website, is for 2022-23 (Impress, 2023). In the year to March 31, 2023, Impress received 35 complaints, 13 requests for advice and 36 general enquiries, with one whistleblowing enquiry (Ibid.). One complaint was investigated, adjudicated and upheld (Ibid.). Another 24 were resolved by the publisher while 10 involved non-regulated publishers or were outside the scope of the Impress regulatory scheme (Ibid.).

Other bodies and codes of ethics

The National Union of Journalists has its own code of conduct which all members must ascribe to, with queries on it directed to its own ethics council (NUJ, 2024). A Welsh translation of it is also available to its members, and the codes must be read in conjunction with the NUJ's rule book (Ibid.). A number of other unions and associations have their own codes of practice. The British Association of Journalists (BAJ) is a trade union that also has its own code of conduct (BAJ, 2024b; see also: BAJ, 2024a). The Chartered Institute of Journalists "promotes standards and ethics", and they also have their own code of conduct (CIOJ, 2024a; see also: CIOJ, 2024b). The Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union has a code of practice, although it is not available on their website (BECTU, 2024). Fewer than half of UK respondents in the 2016 Worlds of Journalism Study were members of professional associations (43.8 per cent) (Thurman and Kunert, 2016). Many newspapers have their internal codes of ethics readily available to the public, such as the *Guardian's* Editorial Code (2014), and the *Financial Times'* Editorial Code (Financial Times, 2024). Separately, The MediaWise Trust is a charity that assists the public with information on how to make complaints to both public and private organisations (MediaWise, 2021).

Journalism culture

Reporters without Borders state that UK journalists work “without significant cultural constraints”, although online abuse has increased, in line with political polarisation (RSF, 2024). Journalists remain at risk from paramilitary groups and organised crime gangs in Northern Ireland. Journalist Lyra McKee was murdered in 2019 but two charged suspects have yet to be tried (Ibid.), while nobody has been held responsible for the 2001 murder of *Sunday World* journalist Martin O’Hagan (Ibid.). Iranian journalists working in the United Kingdom faced increasing threats in 2023 (RSF, 2024), while there was widespread approval for the publication of a National Action Plan to improve journalists’ safety in March 2021 (Ibid.).

From research in December 2015, the most recent Worlds of Journalism Study for the UK ($n=695$) was published in 2016⁶. It showed that British participants had worked an average of 18.53 years as journalists, with 52.9 per cent respondents working at specific desks like politics, local news, or sports (Thurman and Kunert, 2016: 1). Journalists were trained, many with a university degree (86.4 per cent), and of these, 33.3 per cent had studied journalism (Ibid.). Training and accreditation for journalism courses and degrees were offered by two main bodies: the National Council for the Training of Journalists and the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (Firmstone, 2018). In general, British journalists adhered to a value of factual and objective reporting (Thurman and Kunert, 2016: 1). The categories that most participants responded to in terms of values (i.e. more than 50 per cent ranking the value as “extremely” and “very important”) were: “Report things as they are” (93 per cent), “Educate the audience” (78.7 per cent), “Be a detached observer” (76.8 per cent), “Provide analysis of current affairs” (67.2 per cent), “Tell stories about the world” (64.9 per cent), “Monitor and scrutinise business” (58.6 per cent), and “Let people express their views” (53.9 per cent; Ibid.: 2). Almost all of the participants in the study “strongly” or “somewhat agreed” that they must respect codes of professional ethics in every instance (94.1 per cent), while a smaller number thought “what is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation” (65.9 per cent). Just over a third felt “it is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it” (34.9 per cent), and over a quarter thought that ethics came down to the individual’s judgement (Ibid.: 3). However, the study found that UK journalists were more willing to bend the rules in their practice, as outlined by the authors:

“... despite a close alignment between their views and those of their professional bodies, and the fact that they tell us ethical standards have strengthened in the last five years, and despite the fallout from the Leveson Inquiry, UK journalists remain, in comparison with some of their international colleagues, relatively willing to justify practices that, under

⁶ See Appendix 4 for the survey results (Thurman et al., 2016)

normal circumstances, their professional codes of ethics would prohibit”
(Thurman et al., 2016: 54).

Other information

Governing framework

Parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy (Parliament.uk, 2024a)

Seats

House of Commons, 650 (Parliament.uk, 2024b)

Last election

July 4, 2024. Majority government: Labour Party (House of Commons Library, 2024b)

Seats held by women

35% (The World Bank, 2024)

Populist party

Reform UK (Sandle, 2024)

Constitutional text on freedom of speech/expression/the press

(Bill of Rights 1689) Heading 25: Freedom of Speech. That the **Freedom of Speech** and Debates or Proceedings in Parlyament ought not to be impeached or questioned in any Court or Place out of Parlyament.

(Human Rights Act 1998) Article 10: Freedom of expression. 1) Everyone has the right to **freedom of expression**. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This Article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises.

Media model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 67)

North Atlantic or Liberal Model

Key events

2024: Sir Keir Starmer replaces Rishi Sunak as prime minister, as Labour win a 167-seat majority in the general election (House of Commons Library, 2024b)

... [click here for the BBC's recent articles on the UK.](#)

... [click here for The Guardian's recent articles on the UK.](#)

Appendix

1) National newspaper circulation in 2022

Table 5. Average daily print circulation, national newspapers (2022)²⁷

Publication	Share of circulation (2022)	Average circulation (2022)	% change 2021-22	Average circulation (2020)	% change 2020-22
The Sun	23.31%	1,058,350	-5.87%	1,102,263	-3.98%
Metro	22.50%	1,021,687	13.08%	754,922	35.34%
Daily Mail	18.83%	855,229	-9.21%	1,028,879	-16.88%
The Times	7.24%	328,700	-2.72%	323,817	1.51%
Daily Mirror	6.82%	309,663	-12.62%	397,379	-22.07%
Daily Telegraph	5.14%	233,255	-8.97%	264,520	-11.82%
Daily Express	4.39%	199,232	-14.70%	258,665	-22.98%
Daily Star	3.98%	180,595	-15.30%	243,474	-25.83%
The i	3.10%	140,646	-1.90%	163,417	-13.93%
Financial Times	2.53%	114,924	2.00%	108,809	5.62%
Guardian	2.17%	98,755	-7.93%	115,626	-14.59%
	100.00%	4,541,034	-3.96%	4,761,770	-4.64%

Source: ABC/MRC¹

(Media Reform Coalition, 2023)

2) National newspaper circulations in June 2024

Figures from ABC (Audit Bureau of Circulations), published in UK *Press Gazette*

Publication	June ABC average circulation	Month-on-month % change	Year-on-year % change
<i>Metro</i> (free)	951,294	0	0
<i>Daily Mail</i>	684,840	-1	-9
<i>Mail on Sunday</i>	577,642	-1	-9
<i>Evening Standard</i> (free)	275,026	0	-11
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	223,794	-1	-14
<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	165,720	-2	-15
<i>Daily Express</i>	138,443	-1	-16
<i>i</i>	125,545	1	-14
<i>Daily Star</i>	125,525	-1	-15
<i>Sunday Express</i>	122,524	-2	-6
<i>FT</i>	110,736	2	0
<i>Daily Star Sunday</i>	68,003	-2	-18
<i>City AM</i> (free)	68,112	0	1
<i>Sunday People</i>	53,501	-1	-20
<i>Daily Record</i>	48,869	-2	-17
<i>Sunday Mail</i>	46,794	-3	-18
<i>Sunday Post</i>	34,566	0	-16

The last ABC figures available for other titles are as follows:

- The Sun: 1,210,915 (March 2020)
- The Sun on Sunday: 1,013,777 (March 2020)
- The Sunday Times: 647,622 (March 2020)
- The Times: 365,880 (March 2020)
- Daily Telegraph: 317,817 (December 2019)
- Sunday Telegraph: 248,288 (December 2019)
- The Observer: 136,656 (July 2021)
- The Guardian: 105,134 (July 2021)

Falls in line with rest of the industry would result in these circulations for February 2024:

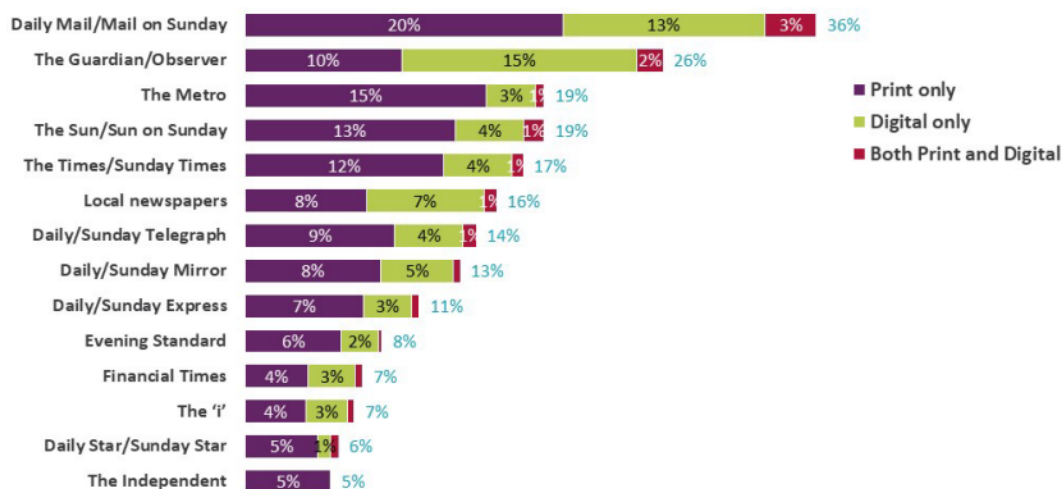
- The Sun: 700,000
- The Sun on Sunday: 600,000
- The Sunday Times: 322,000
- The Times: 180,000
- Daily Telegraph: 190,000
- Sunday Telegraph: 125,000
- The Observer: 80,000
- The Guardian: 60,000

(Tobitt and Majid, 2024)

3) Print versus digital newspaper consumption (Ofcom, 2023; Ofcom, 2022)

2023:

Figure 6: Print vs digital readership among all using print or digital newspapers nowadays



Ofcom News Consumption Survey 2023. Question: D3a/D4a. Thinking specifically about daily/weekly newspapers, which of the following do you use for news nowadays? D8a. Thinking specifically about the internet, which of the following do you use for news nowadays?

Base: All using newspapers (print + website/app) for news – 2023=1767

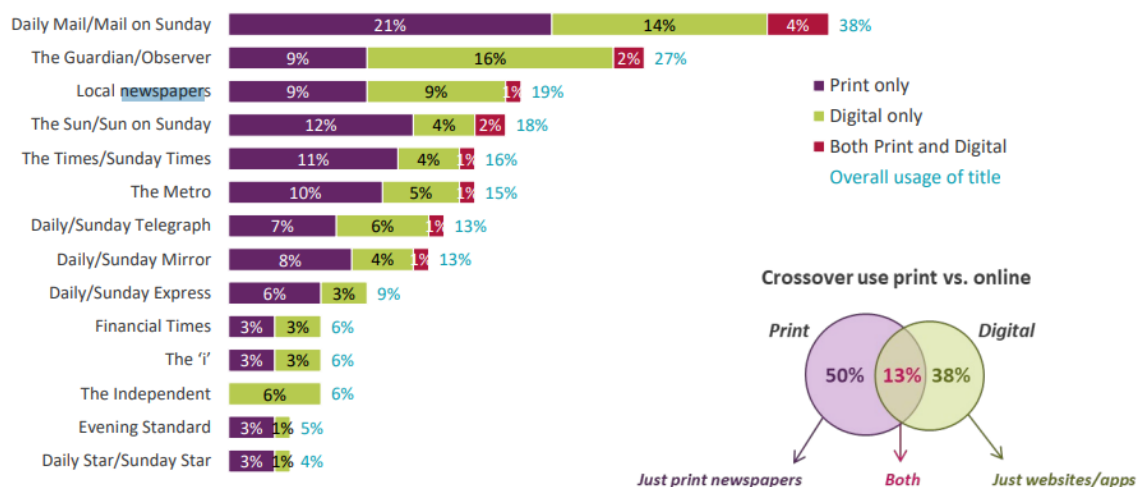
(Ofcom, 2023)

2022:

Figure 6.3

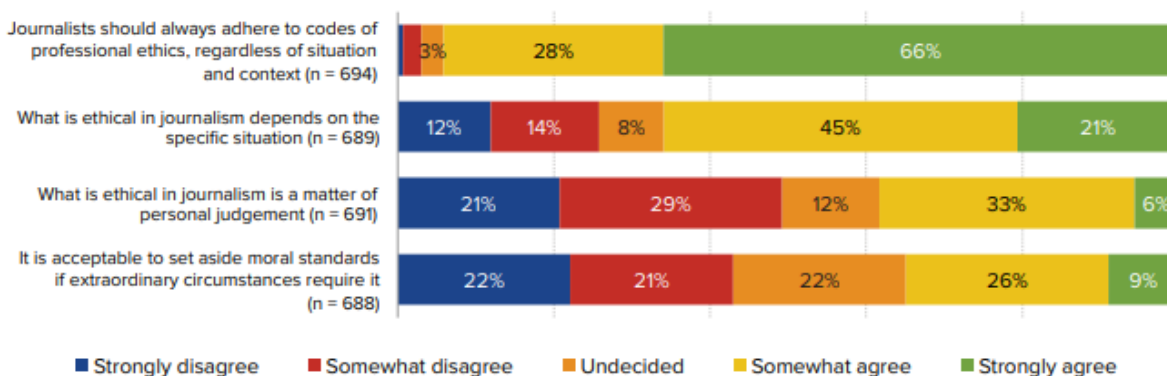
Print vs. digital newspaper readership 2022*

All using newspapers (print + website/app) for news



(Ofcom, 2022)

4) Worlds of Journalism Study for the UK, December 2015



(Thurman et al., 2016: 50)

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Defining Freedom of the Press: A cross-national examination of press ethics and regulation

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Defining Freedom of the Press: A cross-national examination of press ethics and regulation

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