

Culture Secretary: I Am Going To Be A Champion Of Journalism

Op ed for Journalism Matters by Culture Secretary Michelle Donelan

Journalism matters. That is not just a slogan; it is a fundamental feature of our democracy. Without publications like the one you are reading right now, we would not be able to hold the people in power to account - including, of course, politicians like me.

Like countless readers, I am really proud to live in a country that has such a flourishing media scene, starting with the 850 local news titles across the UK (including the Melksham Independent News in my own constituency).

These local newspapers act as our neighbourhood watch. They have their ear to the ground of their communities - holding local public services' feet to the fire, monitoring what is happening in the local courts and providing a valuable platform for causes and community groups.

But we also need the reporters and editors who work at national press and broadcast outlets, and who are just as vital to our democracy. Their front pages lead the national conversation. Their presenters ask the questions to which we all want answers. And their investigations shape our society by exposing wrongdoing.

So this week is the perfect opportunity for me to make clear that as Secretary of State, I am going to be a champion of journalism in every way I can. For me, that starts with one of the most pressing things in my in-tray: making sure this industry thrives in the digital age.

That has not always been easy. While the internet has transformed all of our lives for the better, I know that it has also completely uprooted the business models of local publishers. True, online readership of local media is growing - up 18 percent on last year. But it is clear that big tech has swallowed up much of the ad market and contributed to the closure of too many newsrooms.

Journalism is just as important in 2022 as it was before the rise of the internet. So this government is committed to doing a number of things to protect it.

We are going to repeal Section 40, which would threaten media freedom and risk financial ruin for publishers. We have reshaped our world-leading Online Safety Bill to safeguard free speech and ensure Silicon Valley monoliths cannot censor quality journalism on a whim.

And we are stepping in to stop the biggest tech players from using their market dominance to mistreat other businesses and consumers. Our new regulator, the Digital Markets Unit, will level the playing field between news publishers and big tech - particularly when it comes to getting paid fairly for the news articles they create. After all, good journalism does not come for free.

Together, those things should give journalists the space and support they need to thrive, no matter what new tech throws at them.

Sadly, though, one thing seems to have survived the digital age. Being a journalist is just as risky as ever. In fact, thanks to the reach of social media, cases of intimidation, threats - and in rare cases - violence are on the rise.

While the UK certainly doesn't face the same challenges as other countries, one incident of abuse is one too many. No one should have to put up with that bile for simply doing their job.

So I will be pushing ahead with our National Action Plan to ensure that journalists in the UK can operate without fear for their safety. Working alongside industry partners, the police and others, we are committed to reducing the number of attacks and threats against journalists and ensuring those responsible are brought to justice.

I intend to do my bit to help this essential industry thrive. But papers need your support, too. Ultimately it is you - the readers - who keep your local Gazette, Inquirer or Bugle up and running.

When you buy a paper or visit a news website, you are doing so much more than getting up-to-speed on the latest news or gossip. You are supporting an institution that keeps this country running.