

Trusted Journalism Has Become More Important Than Ever Before

Op ed for Journalism Matters by News Media Association chief executive Owen Meredith

During another tumultuous year, the role of journalism in our society has become more important than ever before.

The conflict in Ukraine has graphically shown us the critical importance of having eyewitnesses on the ground to document and explain the horrific brutality of war.

Spin and disinformation are used to confuse and destabilise, yet trusted journalism from well-known brands serves to neutralise this potent threat.

Closer to home, we are beginning to face up to the consequences of an economy under severe pressure on multiple fronts.

There is no doubt we have tough times ahead and the role of journalism in making sense of complex events, holding power to account, and campaigning on our behalf, will be more important than ever.

New research to be published by marketing body Newworks during this week's Journalism Matters campaign will demonstrate the critical role journalism is playing in helping families navigate the cost of living crisis.

But we must not take trusted news and information – which require significant resource to produce and distribute - for granted.

The news media industry today faces a multitude of threats. Overseas, this can take the form of authoritarian regimes who seek to clamp down on freedom of speech by murdering or imprisoning journalists.

Thankfully, we do not face such dire problems here, but we must always guard against insidious attempts to muzzle freedom speech such as Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act.

This insidious piece of legislation - which would burden news publishers with crippling costs even if their journalism was vindicated - must be repealed immediately, delivering on the Conservative government's manifesto commitment.

The business of journalism is also under threat with the tech platforms continuing to exercise huge power and abusing their dominance in the digital market to the detriment of news publishers.

The government made a good start by setting up the Digital Markets Unit – a tough new regulator tasked with levelling the playing field between the tech platforms and news publishers – but it still lacks the statutory teeth it needs to get the job done.

Just last week, MPs from an influential Parliamentary committee issued an unequivocal call for government to publish the draft Digital Markets, Competition and Consumer Bill without delay. Calls which have been echoed by report after report over the last decade.

This legislation will enable the DMU to tackle the entrenched power and market abuses in the digital economy, driving down prices for consumers and small businesses, while helping to level the playing field between news publishers and the tech platforms.

It's a win on all fronts and open goal for a government seeking ways to allow households to keep more of their money.

In recent years local journalism, which underpins democracy in communities right across the UK, has enjoyed a boom in audiences as people increasingly turn to sources of trusted information.

A fascinating study from government showed a direct link between higher local newspaper circulations and electoral turnout, proving that local papers boost democracy.

Local journalism is a precious resource, and it must be protected from the ravages of the deteriorating economy and the all-consuming tech platforms who exploit journalism to drive engagement yet contribute next to nothing back into the industry which invests in it.

A study earlier this year demonstrated the extent of the problem, finding news content created by British publishers generates approximately £1 billion in UK revenues for Google and Facebook every year.

That money should be flowing back to publishers, enabling them to invest further in journalism, rather than being diverted into the coffers of the tech platforms.

Government should explore ways to assist the local news media sector – such as through tax credits or business rates relief, as well as a firm commitment from government to keep public notices in print local newspapers – so publishers can continue to serve the growing audiences for trusted local news and information.

An overzealous BBC, seemingly determined to expand its local news services in direct competition with commercial providers, must be steered towards partnership with the commercial sector rather than competing with it.

Despite the challenges, there is cause for optimism as we celebrate Journalism Matters this week. In the UK, we are incredibly lucky to have a vibrant and diverse media which fights for our causes.

I ask you to join us in celebrating what journalists do, and by calling for those in power to take all the steps required to ensure highly trusted journalism has a truly sustainable future.