



A Sustainable Future for National, Regional and Local Media

A policy manifesto from the News Media Association



www.newsmediauk.org



The News Media Association (NMA) is the voice of UK national, regional and local news media in all their print and digital forms - a £4 billion sector read by more than 46.2 million adults every month. Our members publish around 900 news media titles - from The Times, The Guardian, Daily Telegraph and Daily Mirror to the Manchester Evening News, Kent Messenger, and Monmouthshire Beacon.

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Introduction

This manifesto sets out the opportunities and challenges facing local, regional, and national news publishers. At the NMA, we hope the Government will listen and work with us to address the challenges and embrace the opportunities to ensure a sustainable future for a free press.

Over the course of the next Parliament, artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to deliver the next Industrial Revolution and fundamentally change all of our lives for the better. In our first chapter we explore the measures needed to ensure that, as AI develops, publishers can continue to invest in high-quality journalism; ensuring a free press, as a key pillar of our democratic society, is able to operate on behalf of citizens in holding power to account, campaigning for communities, and reporting on the world around us.

Next, we discuss the important role of the BBC as a national institution as we look ahead to the Charter renewal in 2027. With an increasing digital presence, BBC News risks exacerbating the financial challenges facing commercial news providers as they serve growing audiences online. A new settlement is needed to ensure the BBC complements and supports a free and plural press across local, regional, and national news media, rather than undermining it.

With the UK's standing in the RSF press freedom index at only 23rd place, we must work hard to sustain and enhance our international reputation as a world leader for media freedom and free speech. We also explore measures the next Government can and should take to ensure journalists continue to have the ability to challenge power and unveil the truth in the public interest, as well as key steps the Government must take to support plurality and the ability of consumers to access editorially controlled quality news.

Finally, we highlight the policies to support devolution, local growth and place-based news media. The business model of local news continues to evolve, but as more power is handed to regional mayors and devolved governments, we must redouble efforts to ensure local publishers have a sustainable future so they can live up to their true potential and report unfettered on the levers of powers exercised in the public's name.

All of the policies set out here must be underpinned by one fundamental commitment by the next Government: to protect and promote the freedom and sustainability of the UK news media industry. A free and sustainable press is vital to protect our democracy and is a cornerstone of a well-functioning economy and society.

1. Artificial Intelligence And Intellectual Property

The next Government must ensure that publishers can control the use of their content by Large Language Models (LLMs) and are able to consent to its use. Transparency obligations are necessary, as are mechanisms to allow publishers to negotiate for the value of content. Artificial intelligence firms continue to use publishers' copyrighted content without permission or remuneration. This is despite copyright law being clear that rightsholders have control of their intellectual property (IP) when it is used for commercial text and data mining.

If publishers are not fairly compensated for the use of their content by LLMs that are seeking to directly compete with publishers, investment in trusted journalism will inevitably fall. Soon, LLMs will have nothing to feed on other than their own outputs, leading to 'model collapse', whereby LLMs break down under the weight of their own AI-generated misinformation. This is damaging not just for UK citizens, but also poses an existential risk for AI firms, as publishers and other creators will stop investing in the original content that fuels LLMs.

“ Without quality journalism to train and ground large language models, these technologies would struggle to make sense of the world around them. A strong copyright framework, transparency around how quality journalism is scraped and used, and a willingness to stand up for the right of investors in intellectual property to receive fair compensation for the use of their work should be at the heart of a balanced approach to AI policy of the next Government.

KATHARINE VINER, EDITOR IN CHIEF, THE GUARDIAN

To ensure a sustainable future for trusted journalism, news media and AI firms alike, and to combat the spread of misinformation and disinformation online, there are three key requirements. These must be underpinned by a requirement for AI firms to abide by UK law – including copyright law – if they wish to trade in the UK:

- **Control:** The Government and Intellectual Property Office must clarify that publishers have control over their content and must be asked for their consent before it is scraped and used to train AI systems. AI firms must identify all crawlers and their purpose, and separate crawlers according to purpose so that rightsholders have a clear choice about which to block and which to licence. Heavy penalties should be imposed on AI crawlers

which scrape content in defiance of a machine-readable signal (such as robots.txt).

- **Transparency:** Obligations must be placed on AI firms so that publishers are able to understand when their content is used by a LLM, both in the inputs and the outputs, including the mandated listing of all content used to train LLMs and generate output. This will also be critical in ensuring that UK citizens are able to understand if the AI content they are consuming is based on trustworthy sources;
- **Reward:** The Government must support structures and mechanisms which allow publishers and other creators to be compensated on fair and reasonable terms when their content is used by LLMs. This mechanism will need to account for the huge market power of AI businesses owned and backed by Big Tech firms.

2. Ensuring That The BBC Does Not Crowd Out Local News Publishers

The next Government must ensure that the BBC is prevented from distorting the digital news market and crowding out commercial publishers. Instead, the Corporation should work collaboratively and partner with publishers to sustain a plural news market and ultimately help the public navigate an increasingly complex world.

Whilst the Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) new digital markets powers will help local news publishers deal with global tech monopolies on a more level playing field, the BBC's immense market power and increasingly severe impact on the local news sector remains unchecked.

“Funded by the enforced licence fee, the BBC's anti-competitive incursion risks hundreds of journalists' jobs as it steals audience and the advertising revenues associated with them.

GARY SHIPTON, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR, NATIONAL WORLD

The BBC Charter requires the BBC to “avoid adverse impacts on competition” but in recent years the guardrails which are supposed to protect commercial media from harmful market distortions caused by the BBC have completely failed. The next Government must use the Charter renewal period to ensure that the BBC's status as a publicly funded, dominant market actor does not allow the Corporation to further supplant the key role of the commercial news sector. This must include:

- Placing guardrails on the scope of the BBC's online news services, with proper scrutiny from Ofcom;
- Reshaping the objectives and remit of the BBC's online news operations to place an emphasis on collaborative working, and bolstering plurality in the local news market;
- Ensuring that any future funding plans for the BBC do not have the effect of diverting revenues from commercial news publishers.

3. Press Freedom

The next Government must ensure that new legislation does not impinge on press freedom, as well as reviewing laws already on the statute book. Action to combat strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) is necessary to prevent the rich and powerful from stopping the disclosure of information in the public interest.

“ Preserving press freedom is essential for our democracy. A free press represents voters and enables different voices to be heard in our society, allowing the public to make fully informed decisions and share in the democratic process.

But for this to continue, journalists must be able to report on matters without fear or favour, having the access necessary to inform the public. The next Government must also ensure that existing and future legislation preserves and promotes press freedom, never taking our hard-fought freedoms for granted.

VICTORIA NEWTON, EDITOR IN CHIEF, THE SUN

The freedom of the press is a cornerstone of British society, ensuring that journalists can hold power to account and publish the public interest journalism that underpins our democracy. However, press freedom is never guaranteed, and it must be constantly protected and promoted. The next Government must:

- Ensure that, as a matter of course, relevant draft legislation is reviewed to ensure that it does not impinge on press freedom. Existing legislation such as the Defamation Act, Data Protection Act, and Human Rights Act should also be reviewed to bring these laws up to date to ensure the right balance is struck between individuals' right to privacy and protecting the crucial democratic function of the media;

- Put legislative and non-legislative solutions in place to combat SLAPPs, preventing the rich and powerful from manipulating the UK's legal system to stop the publication of public interest journalism;
- Make a firm commitment to ensuring that journalists are able to have proper access to public interest information and events, such as: Government briefings; party political gatherings; and high-profile events of public interest (such as major sporting events). Decisions to grant access should never be prejudiced against particular journalists or media organisations, and - as referenced above - new legislation should be reviewed to ensure it does not restrict or impede journalistic access.

4. The Promotion Of Media Plurality

The next Government must ensure that regulatory interventions support a plural UK media environment. This includes ensuring that trusted news can be accessed freely online; publishers can negotiate for the value of trusted content; and any regulation of online advertising does not unfairly penalise trusted publishers or undermine the established system of self-regulation and commercial free speech.

At a national and local level, we need the right regulatory conditions in place so that a plurality of media voices can be heard. To achieve this, the next Government must:

- Support Ofcom in its efforts to bring media plurality rules up to date, as the power of global tech platforms means they have immense influence over what information the public sees;
- Support the CMA as the Digital Markets Unit becomes operational, using the Strategic Steer to highlight the importance of competition in ensuring trusted publishers can monetise their huge digital audiences successfully;
- Ensure that legislation and regulation covering key elements of publishers' businesses – such as online advertising – is proportionate and targeted, and does not have unintended consequences for trusted publishers. Support for the existing Advertising Standards Authority system of regulation for non-broadcast advertising is essential.

“ *The next Government has a responsibility to empower regulators that play a key role in bolstering a plural UK press ecosystem. This includes supporting the Digital Markets Unit to move quickly to guarantee a fair value exchange between Big Tech and trusted news publishers.*

The wider public is largely unaware how much influence Big Tech has on what is served to them to read. It's not an exaggeration to say without action a fundamental part of our democracy is at stake.

SARAH LESTER, EDITOR, MANCHESTER EVENING NEWS

5. Recognising The Importance of Local Media To Devolution And Local Growth

The success of further devolution and local growth is predicated on people being able to properly engage with and shape the decisions that impact their daily lives.

Therefore, plans to give more control to local communities and regions must be matched by a commitment to supporting local news publishers. Local newspapers and their websites play a critical role in reporting on local government activities, policies, and decision-making, whilst also providing a unique platform for local people to express their views. Absent this crucial link, it is impossible for local decision makers to be truly responsive to the needs of the communities they serve.

“ *Local papers play a critical role in informing readers about local government activities and decision-making, while also giving a platform to voice opinions. Without this crucial link, local authorities cannot respond suitably to their community's needs.*

The Government must explore ways to support local news, such as keeping the requirement for local authorities to print public notices in local newspapers and diverting a greater proportion of its ad spend into local media. By doing so, we can ensure that local journalism thrives and that our communities remain informed and engaged.

ANDREW HARROD, EDITOR, THE BARNSELY CHRONICLE

Therefore, the next Government must explore ways that local news publishers can be supported, for example by:

- Maintaining the requirement for local authorities to place public notices in local newspapers, preserving a vital revenue stream for local titles whilst ensuring all citizens have access to key information;
- Review the Government's own advertising spend to ensure that trusted local publishers are being fully and effectively utilised as a key route for the Government to communicate critical information in a trusted environment;
- Consider a local journalism tax relief, and an extension of the business rates relief for local titles beyond 2025, allowing publishers to focus investment on putting more journalists on the ground.

Conclusion

The pace of change in our world is ever-accelerating. Over the course of the next Parliament the Government will face new and unexpected challenges. The measures set out in this manifesto establish the minimum requirements to ensure a truly free and sustainable news media landscape through to the end of this decade.

Above all, the next Government - and all those who seek to represent and serve their local community in Parliament - must commit to upholding the democratic value of a free press and work to support the sustainability of a plurality of voices across a diverse media ecosystem.



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