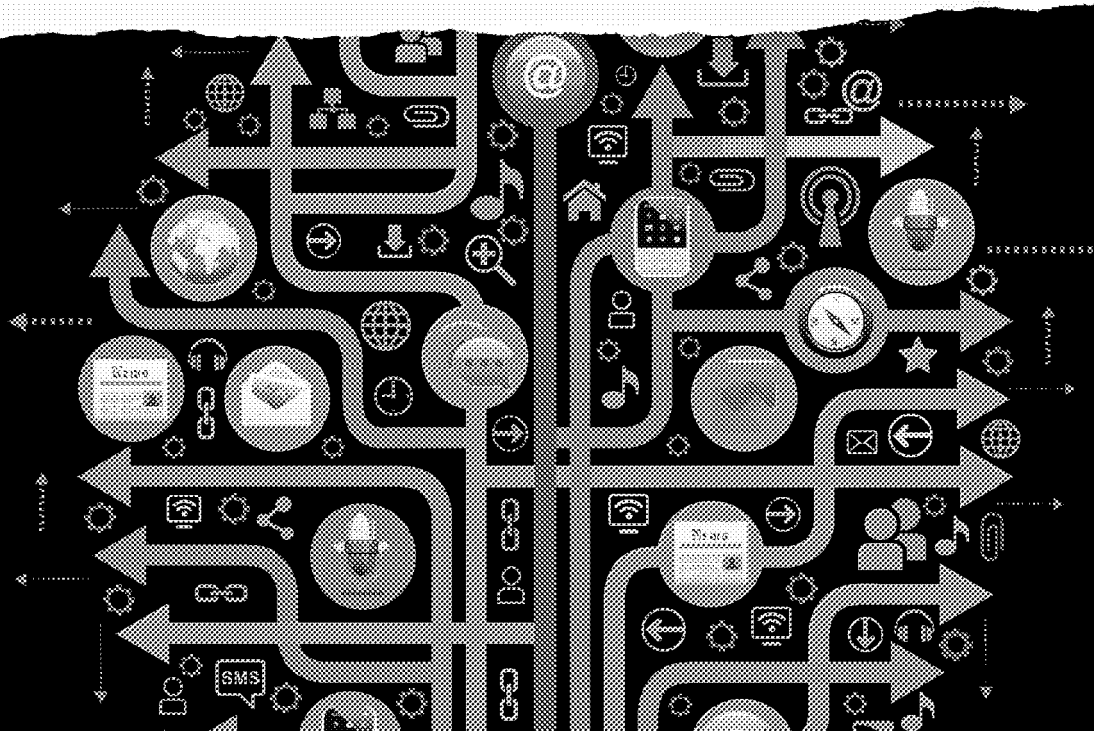


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CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES



Executive Summary

Better Journalism in the Digital Age

Blair Jenkins

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Executive Summary

Journalism is a profession based on trust. People need to know that the news they are viewing, or listening to, or reading is fair and accurate and honest. In the end, journalists have to be proud and protective of their ethical and editorial standards, built on the secure foundations of integrity and experience.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the challenges and opportunities facing serious journalism in the UK and to make suggestions about actions and initiatives that will strengthen the supply of high-quality news.

The establishment of the public judicial inquiry under Lord Justice Leveson has triggered a great deal of speculation and reflection on possible or desirable changes to the UK system of press regulation. It is understandable that this should be the focus of public attention in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal,

but it is important that the many issues concerning the future of journalism on all platforms should not simply be reduced to a new regulatory imperative for the printed press.

News media accountability is of great importance and the Carnegie UK Trust has proposals in this paper on how it might be strengthened and improved. But news quality and news availability are just as significant. There is more than one priority in this debate.

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Stronger or smarter regulation is only one of a number of levers that will have to be applied if we are to secure better journalism in the digital age. The work of regulation is largely that of eliminating various forms of bad behaviour, whereas the public interest also requires positive actions in support of good journalism. Tougher regulation on its own is not enough.



There is no question that there is a lot of really good journalism around today. In recent years, we have seen some exceptional reporting of challenging stories from difficult parts of the world, stories told with honesty and conviction. This kind of journalism is expensive and proving difficult to sustain. As is now well known inside and outside the industry, the business models of traditional news media have looked increasingly vulnerable in recent years due to the growth of internet content and advertising.

The quality of our national debate and discourse is directly related to the quality of our news media services. Journalism is part of the necessary checks and balances in a healthy society.

The key argument to the effect that there is a strong public interest in high-quality news media is based on the belief that a well-informed society has a better chance of being well-governed. With transparency comes accountability, and with proper accountability come better policy and legislation and, indeed, the

consent of the governed. Vigilant media help to prevent the erosion of civil liberties and provide significant benefits for wider society.

There is, therefore, a collective interest in providing good news media and in the public thereby having an informed sense of engagement in society. It is hard to underestimate the importance of this to our democracy. We need to know about the key decisions that are being made – the ones that really do shape our lives, the ones that are sometimes hidden from us. We need to know the facts that underpin the decision-making process.

While all news media are facing budgetary and editorial challenges in the digital age, it is evident that there are particular concerns about how some parts of the press operate in the UK:

- ✦ Newspaper owners and editors are perceived as having too much power and influence, particularly in their dealings and relationships with elected politicians.
- ✦ There have been many examples of unwarranted intrusions into private lives, sometimes by illegal means.
- ✦ Some newspapers breach their own industry code of conduct by blurring – or completely ignoring – the distinction between facts and comment in their news coverage. This is done in order to influence public opinion and shape national debate – and indeed to sell newspapers.

There is a need to restore public trust and confidence in the press. It seems clear that newspapers are going to have to be more prepared and better able to defend their conduct and content in future. It could be said that the same is true of other forms of journalism. But broadcasting is more tightly regulated and there is less concern about lapses in standards. Internet news sites and blogs, while growing in impact, do not yet have the scale or reach of newspapers – although they do raise some of the same concerns.

There is a need to restore public trust and confidence in the press.

The approach of the Carnegie UK Trust is to look for ways of encouraging and supporting better news media in the digital age and we are recommending a number of related actions:

- ❖ The adoption of a new industry-wide code of conduct by all journalists and news organisations to give much clearer guidance on the higher ethical and editorial standards expected – standards which ought to be universal and transferable between all bona fide press, broadcast and online news services.
- ❖ The maintenance or strengthening of public service broadcasting to ensure that not all news ventures are commercially driven, and that the public has access to services with guaranteed impartiality and fairness.
- ❖ Civil society organisations offering help to fund new initiatives in journalism (with an emphasis on technical and editorial innovation) to ensure greater quality and diversity of news sources and more journalism that holds the powerful to account.
- ❖ A renewed emphasis in journalism education and training on professional ethics as well as production skills, including a clear commitment to understanding and upholding the public interest.
- ❖ Extending and completing the availability and take-up of high-speed broadband to enable universal access to a wide range of digital news services and participatory media.
- ❖ The encouragement by industry regulators, universities, civil society organisations and the news media themselves of more public debate around issues to do with media ethics and behaviour and more serious discussion of editorial decisions and challenges.

Much of the public discussion about securing improved news services in the UK has tended to focus on press regulation. This is because there is a wide apprehension that at least some newspapers have paid lip service to the current, self-regulatory framework of the Press Complaints Commission, while in practice feeling at liberty to behave more

or less as they pleased – in some cases even choosing to ignore criminal laws on data protection.

It is clear that we need a regulatory solution that is independent of both government and the newspaper industry, to avoid real or perceived interference and conflicts of interest. In the absence of statutory regulation, a new independent press regulator would have to operate a system of voluntary registration by newspapers and digital news services. We think it should be possible to devise incentives which secure unanimous support and participation by all newspapers which wish to be regarded as serious providers of news and information.

One practical and persuasive incentive would be based on the already existing conventions around press accreditation and recognition, a system which gives newspaper journalists privileged access to important venues and events and people. This access is generally not available to ordinary members of the public. It is not unreasonable for society to ask that in return for the privileges of recognition as serious news providers, news organisations should undertake to deserve that status. This might be done through a voluntary system of certification and labelling recognising adherence to a new regulatory and ethical framework.

The many benefits of accreditation and recognition could be the key incentive that is required to persuade newspapers to sign up for a new voluntary system of independent regulation. If organisations decide not to participate, they are self-identifying as not being serious news sources and therefore not eligible for certification. They are still free to publish what they like, subject to the laws of the land, but they are not given the privileges and access of responsible news media. Registered news organisations can display a recognised standards mark on their various outlets, a label or badge that identifies them as a principled and accredited operator.

The Carnegie UK Trust recommends:

- ※ A new and more evidently independent press regulator with more substantial (but not statutory) powers to investigate unethical behaviour, as well as the ability to impose significant sanctions including financial penalties.

This paper makes some recommendations on all of the key issues facing serious journalism, but the central argument is that the main changes have to take place within the news industry and its employees. It's not just that the public should be able to have higher expectations of journalists, but that journalists should have higher expectations of themselves.



Blair Jenkins OBE is a Fellow of the Carnegie UK Trust and one of the most experienced figures in Scottish media. He has been Director of Broadcasting at Scottish Television and Head of News and Current Affairs at both STV and BBC Scotland.

In 2008 he chaired the independent Scottish Broadcasting Commission set up by the Scottish Government to make recommendations on the future of the industry, and from September 2010 to January 2011 he chaired the Scottish Digital Network Panel which examined funding models for the proposed new Scottish public service broadcaster.

In 2010 Blair was appointed an OBE for services to broadcasting. He is Visiting Professor of Journalism at Strathclyde University and a Governor of Glasgow School of Art.

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