

Think

new things

Make

new connections

Conference Summary

The Role of the Fourth Estate in Democracies: how should the news and information ecosystem evolve to develop resilience and meet audience needs in a turbulent political, technological and commercial landscape?

5-6 December 2024

A Ditchley conference held in collaboration with The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

DITCHLEY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This conference took place against the backdrop of an impending second Trump presidency, the annulment of the first round of presidential elections in Romania, after the declassification of intelligence documents suggesting that the winning candidate benefitted from a mass influence operation conducted on TikTok and directed from abroad, and a strike to protest the sale of The Observer newspaper in the UK. Proof, if further proof were needed, that issues of declining trust, failing business models, and the challenges of how to work with tech platforms continue to pervade conversations about the future of media around the world.

Participants noted that today's increasingly fragmented media landscape meant it was ever more important for news organisations to meet their audiences where they are, rather than the other way around. This might take the form of established broadcasters developing and migrating content onto social media platforms, or the process of "seeding" or "bundling" journalism into or alongside other content like sports or lifestyle, whether that be via podcasts, newsletters, or news influencers. Ultimately, the audience has more choice and is more discerning than ever before and so, as one participant noted, building authentic connections with them makes all the difference. "The media misses the public, but the public does not miss the media," as one participant succinctly put it.

A similar reframing was suggested when examining the threat of mis- and disinformation in the media space. While some participants said there was no real evidence of these threats disrupting the many elections over the course of the past year in any significant way, others argued that there is much more out there that we do not know about and we should be careful of underestimating what we haven't seen yet. There was also heated debate around the role and responsibility of platform algorithms in promoting this type of content, as well as concerns over purported social media practices, such as "shadow banning", which underscore the fragile and often precarious trust between platforms and media organisations. Ultimately, there was also encouragement to work with the tech platforms where there is common cause.

The urgent need to rebuild public trust in media emerged as a recurring and central theme as audiences have increasingly turned towards alternative and often less conventional sources. Civic and local journalism were identified as vital mechanisms for restoring public trust, particularly in regions where national outlets fail to establish meaningful connections or provide necessary civic information. Trust-building efforts, therefore, can begin at the most localised levels, offering a pathway for fostering trust upwards, establishing connections between citizens and media institutions through localised engagement, and building community and connection, rather than just dispensing content.

Criticism of the general level of business and entrepreneurial skills of news management was also a theme that emerged multiple times throughout the discussions. It was agreed that serious upskilling was needed in media management and that this could be addressed in various ways, but not least through funding initiatives to support training. Philanthropy, one participant noted, should not be seen as a business model for media; however, the development of "patient capital" over a 5 to 10 year-timeline could help provide a bridge to transformation and accelerate change.

Despite the clear challenges still facing the media, conference participants observed notable progress and increased clarity on a path forward when compared to previous years, including concepts such as creating a centralised playbook for successful business models, collaboration between tech, government and philanthropy on funding, and collaboration between media organisations and across different countries on issues such as AI, regulation, and the provision of solidarity for those working in non-democratic states or in exile.

The conference also acted as a launching pad for Ditchley's 2025 programme on the media in partnership with the MacArthur Foundation, which will seek to build on the road map for change outlined at the conference through a series of discussions in the UK, Europe and the US over the course of the year.

Context and why this was important

Around half the world's population went to the polls this year and wars in Ukraine and the Middle East continue to rage. Against this backdrop, trustworthy reporting and access to accurate information is more essential than ever. And yet, the news media finds itself increasingly under siege from all sides, including audience apathy, declining trust, unsustainable business models, technological challenges, assaults on press freedom, and the threat of dis- and misinformation. At the same time, the pace of innovation in journalism and news is increasing. Initiatives to support new business models are gaining traction. And on social media platforms themselves, new creators are developing content that aims to adapt serious news analysis to new formats and consumers. People still want the news, but it is down to media organisations to find and adapt to their audiences.

People

This conference brought together senior leaders from established media, emerging and digital media, technology platforms, policymakers, academia, and media-focused funders and NGOs, and drew international participation, including from the US, the UK, Canada, Germany, Austria, Denmark, South Africa, India, Colombia, Russia and Poland.

FULL REPORT

In 2024, people across the globe expressed their discontent by handing election defeats to incumbents at a consistent clip, a second Trump presidency is on the horizon, and the number of journalists either killed or in exile continues to mount. Lest we forget that issues of declining trust, failing business models, and the challenges of how to work with tech platforms continue to pervade the media conversation, this conference took place against the backdrop of a strike to protest the sale of The Observer newspaper in the UK, as well as the annulment of the first round of presidential elections in Romania, after the declassification of intelligence documents suggesting that the winning candidate benefitted from a mass influence operation conducted on TikTok and directed from abroad.

In the US, President-elect Donald Trump has not even been formally installed in office yet and we are already seeing signs of appeasement, or at the very least rapprochement, by certain sectors of the media: the editorial boards of The Washington Post, owned by Jeff Bezos, and the LA Times, owned by Patrick Soon-Shiong, declined to make a presidential endorsement, despite both papers having a decades-long tradition of doing so. Even before President-elect Trump's inauguration, sections of civil society and journalism are voicing concerns about the motivation for this seeming repositioning towards the future administration. And just two weeks after the November 5 election, MSNBC hosts Mika Brzezinski and Joe Scarborough made what has been described by some as a "pilgrimage" to Florida to call upon the incoming president. Meanwhile, at the Ditchley conference, journalists from the Global South stressed that it was essential to maintain resilience in the face of authoritarian pressure and warned against the normalisation of 'violent contempt' by political leaders for journalists.

While much of this may seem dire, conference participants homed in on the business of change and the critical challenges and emerging opportunities within the evolving media landscape. Key themes investigated included the rise of personal platforms, the importance of local journalism and its relationship with national/international news organisations, and the evolving role of algorithms and

platform trust and responsibility. There was considerable focus also on proposing actionable recommendations, as well as emphasising the need for international collaboration on everything from media and tech regulation, to AI in the newsroom, to developing best practices and new business and funding models.

Participants noted that today's increasingly fragmented media landscape meant it was ever more important for news organisations to meet their audiences where they are, rather than the other way around. This might take the form of established broadcasters developing and migrating content onto social media platforms, or the process of "seeding" or "bundling" journalism into or alongside other content like sports or lifestyle, whether than be via podcasts, newsletters, or news influencers. Ultimately, the audience has more choice and is more discerning than ever before and so, as one participant noted, building authentic connections with them makes all the difference.

The move, especially by younger audiences, to consuming most of their news online and especially via video has led to lazy assumptions about reduced attention spans and a lack of interest in news. But this is not borne out in reality, where the younger demographic will, alongside videos on YouTube and TikTok, also listen to hours of in-depth podcasts or longform audio interviews. Some participants warned, therefore, against characterising younger audience as either uninterested or uninformed. "Have young people ever really read the New York Times?" one participant quipped.

In addition, established media in particular must resist the urge to sit in an ivory tower and bemoan the golden age of journalism. Condescension in media narratives was identified as a major contributing factor in the growing divide between the public and journalists, and some of this could be addressed, participants suggested, by a shift in language towards the public, for example using terms such as "minority beliefs" instead of "false beliefs", a term which risks alienating audiences and exacerbating distrust. An analogy was made, for example, around what we deem to be a religion and what we call a cult. Is it simply the passage of time? The tipping point of social acceptance? Not everything always comes down to objective truth.

A similar reframing was suggested by several participants when examining the threat of mis- and disinformation in the media space. While some participants said there was no real evidence of these threats disrupting the many elections over the course of the past year in any significant way, others argued that there is much more out there that we do not know about and we should be careful of underestimating what we haven't seen yet. The decision in Romania to annul the first round of the presidential election due to influence interference appeared to bear out this warning. Also, several participants disputed the use of the term "mis/disinformation" and preferred to frame the debate around "information operations" or "information ecosystem issues", whereby all information, true or not, has the potential to be manipulated and used as a political tool.

There was a heated, but ultimately civil, debate around the role and responsibility of platform algorithms in promoting this type of content, as well as concerns over purported social media practices, such as "shadow banning", which underscore the fragile and often precarious trust between platforms and media organisations. There were also calls for increased transparency and accountability in the design and implementation of platform algorithms, as such measures are seen as essential for fostering a healthier, more trustworthy information environment, while also recognising the challenges platforms face in balancing content moderation, freedom of expression, and transparency. There was also encouragement to work with the tech platforms where there is common cause.

Some participants advocated for addressing the underlying systemic trends that enable the spread of misinformation, rather than focusing exclusively on fact-checking, which was seen by some to have limited impact. The issue of misinformation has developed into a deeply polarised information

problem, and while fact-checking remains an important tool, it is not a universal solution and can, at times, prove counterproductive. The discussion underscored the need for a more holistic and systemic approach, addressing root causes and the structures that enable misinformation to thrive.

The urgent need to rebuild public trust in media emerged as a recurring and central theme throughout the discussions. The perceived loss of relevance by traditional media has driven audiences towards alternative and often less conventional sources. Civic and local journalism were identified as vital mechanisms for restoring public trust, particularly in regions where national outlets fail to establish meaningful connections or provide necessary civic information. Trust-building efforts, therefore, can begin at the most localised levels, focusing on foundational civic issues such as pothole repairs and other routine – if mundane – community concerns. This approach offers a pathway for fostering trust upwards, establishing connections between citizens and media institutions through localised engagement and building community and connection, rather than just dispensing content.

Criticism of the general level of business and entrepreneurial skills of news management was also a theme that emerged multiple times in the discussions, with one participant saying: “The problem is hopeless incompetence and arrogance.” All participants may not have chosen to put it this way, but they did agree that serious upskilling was needed in media management. This could be addressed in multiple ways, but not least through funding initiatives to support training. With regard to paths for the future, philanthropy, one participant noted, should not be seen as a business model for media; however, the development of “patient capital” in a 5 to 10 year-timeline could help provide a bridge to transformation and accelerate change. Embracing a start-up mentality and a for-profit mindset could also help drive innovation.

Journalism, of course, has long held itself to standards of objectivity, but where we *must* be biased, one participant stressed, is about the importance of a free press and its role in democracy. If we cannot stand for democracy, and even if we don’t believe journalists should be activists, then what are we doing? This is not about the survival of journalism per se, but rather the existence of a free and independent media that must be in service of the public’s right to know.

Despite the clear challenges still facing the media, conference participants observed notable progress and increased clarity on a path forward when compared to previous years, including concepts such as creating a centralised playbook for successful business models, collaboration between tech, government and philanthropy on funding, and collaboration between media organisations and across different countries on issues such as AI, regulation, and the provision of solidarity for those working in non-democratic states or in exile.

For the middle portion of the conference, participants split into three working groups to discuss these issues in more detail. The groups considered sustainable and trusted business models for media, AI and media regulation, and threats to press freedom and credibility.

Sustainable and trusted business models

Participants in this group analysed several key and concrete challenges in this discussion about how to identify, replicate and scale media models that work, are trusted, and can be sustainable. These included debates over the relationship and possibilities for collaboration between local news and national/international news, the issues of focus versus scale, the limits of relying on philanthropy as a funding model, the need for better media management, and the role of influencers in the evolving media landscape. Models in the future, it was thought, are either going to be very big or very small (in terms of people, not output or earnings), with a subsequent hollowing out of the middle ground.

Group members, who had experience across a wide range of media business and funding models, identified as a pressing problem the “gaping middle” between local media and national/international media. There is currently almost nothing between these two ends of the spectrum and monetising it “seems impossible”. One participant suggested that today’s audience simply reads less now, and that audio-visual content would be a big part of reaching them. There was also discussion of the “funnel theory”, whereby media outlets work to draw in shallow but broad audiences via free or bundled content, in the hope that some of those people will stick around and eventually make up a narrower but deeper and more committed base of consumers. Another model that attracted interest was Village Media in Canada, which runs 35 profitable properties that are ad-funded and provide information on local communities in a sort of “re-invention of community news”. This example also highlighted a trend back towards old-school “bundling” in both local news and at the influencer level, where news comes in a package with sports, lifestyle and other content.

It was also suggested that one way to bridge this middle ground could be to foster collaboration between local and international/established media businesses, with the first step being to identify what they could helpfully offer each other. On the one hand, established media businesses have struggled to innovate and would benefit from adopting more of a start-up mentality, but on the other they have the international reach and legal heft that smaller organisations lack. By contrast, local media (when done well) can build community and connection (and often also trust), rather than merely being a content dispenser. Examples of mutually beneficially collaboration were offered, such as an exchange of information (hurricane coverage vs access to Syrian rebels) between CNN and its local affiliates, or large news organisations providing digital resources to local media.

One participant posed the question of whether it was in fact time to let some established media die so that new models could grow up in their place. Other participants pushed back on this, saying that the media should be viewed as an ecosystem and one change could have catastrophic and unforeseen consequences. Therefore, they suggested, what we need instead is a forensic analysis of how to adapt and collaborate as a whole. The group did broadly agree that a persistent challenge for established brands is that they often have really outstanding editorial talent but tend to be much weaker on the business side. It was time to “blow up the church/state division” and recognise that journalists do not exist in a kind of priesthood that should be “kept away from the grubby business of making money.” It was felt then that this might be a productive area of focus for funding and training models going forward; developing a bootcamp for media management, as one participant put it.

In terms of funding, participants were blunt about the fact that “philanthropy is not a business model.” They agreed that philanthropy was not suitable for underwriting ongoing operating costs, but they felt it could play a role in capital investment. There was a need for “patient capital” – investors and funders willing to invest over 5-10 years with no expectation of immediate returns. Philanthropy then should rather be seen as providing a bridging mechanism through a period of transition and/or a lever to accelerate change. A successful example of this model is the New York Times, where in 2012 digital was 11% of revenue and eight years later it was 53%. The owners were patient and allowed long-term experimentation. However, “[t]he space to just figure it out and learn by doing is gone.” Some also felt that needing to operate on a for-profit basis might provide sufficient motivation for media organisations to become more focused on their business models, instead of relying on the lofty goals of journalism as mission enough.

Generally, the group felt that in contrast to previous years, there was cautious optimism when looking ahead, however translating ideas into concrete outcomes would be essential. One way to do this could be via playbooks, i.e. a centralised way to provide data on tried and tested media business models that can be replicated. The first page of the playbook would always need to be market analysis, i.e. knowing what works for the community you are in, and recognising that different

playbooks would be needed for different settings, for example one for small, rural communities with no capital, another for a mixed-income suburban community, and yet another for big cities etc. And you need national media that can collaborate up and down this ladder. It's worth noting that the UK government wants to develop a local media strategy, so there may be ways to have input into that and then for the government to help amplify this playbook. Scalability of models is a challenge that needs further investigation.

AI and media regulation

The discussions in this group concluded that most news editors and management are now saying we should be using AI in the newsroom, but there are questions over how it should be used and what for. In fact, participants noted that there is a lot of use already going on in newsrooms, but it is important not to conflate the use of AI (trained to do a specific job within a specific set of rules, but not creating anything new) with that of Generative AI (creating original, creative content from a simple starting prompt).

In this first use case, AI can create efficiencies, especially in smaller newsrooms, to great effect, whether that be developing translations of news articles, versions for different audiences, or other mundane tasks that are high intensity and low reward. However, in the second instance, there is considerable fear in newsrooms around replacement. One part of this is cultural and participants noted that it is notoriously difficult to get journalists to accept change. One participant quoted a senior editor as saying: "The objective is to do great journalism and use all tools available, not try to protect your jobs. We need to adapt to the tech out there." Another participant estimated that some 40% of people working in newsrooms have not touched an AI tool. There is, therefore, a lot of work to do in building AI literacy within the media and this is an important piece of the puzzle. In addition, building optimism and interest around it is essential. However, there was also an overall fear voiced that AI is better for bad actors than it is good for good actors.

Interestingly, according to research around public perceptions of AI, it would seem that most people are optimistic about AI and society, and fairly optimistic for themselves. This understandably varied by sector, depending on trust and expectation, however AI's impact in newsroom was seen as generally negative. Why is that? Is there still a trust issue and could regulation make a difference? It is also worth noting regional differences, for example in southeast Asia there is great enthusiasm for AI. This could be because there is a lot of early adoption of tech there in general, and people are not uncomfortable with the idea of an article written by AI. Ultimately, though, all agreed that if the news media do not experiment with AI they will be at a disadvantage. Certainly, it was also agreed that transparency was key in this area, but there was no consensus reached on what that actually means – AI spellcheck probably doesn't need to be declared, but a whole article written by AI?

In addition, participants highlighted the debate happening in many newsrooms over whether to license their content to large AI companies. Do media organisations, for example, take the route of the Associated Press, the Financial Times, Le Monde and others, and make a deal for their content to be used in training AI systems, or do they instead choose the NYT model and sue for unauthorised use of their content that could potentially impact any subscription model? How do we think about the implications of these choices, including the impact on the public, and are there better models that could be developed? It was also noted that large AI companies will likely only need access to one or two high-quality news providers in each country. The value of archival material from news organisations is of limited value given that the models have already likely been trained on this data (without authorisation). Where then does this leave smaller news organisations, whose content will likely not be required by AI companies?

With regard to media regulation, there is a clear divide between the lighter touch of the US and the stricter regulatory frameworks of the EU and the UK, and concerns were voiced over whether this

might inadvertently stifle innovation. In the UK there is a patchwork quilt of regulation at the moment and there are legitimate questions around the coherence of this, as it has evolved over time but has not kept pace with development of new media. Most established is the regulation for broadcast, overseen by Ofcom, which can investigate and impose sanctions or even revoke broadcast licences. This also begs the question, as one participant noted, of whether it is right that only broadcasters are being held to this impartiality standard, but not other news providers. How then, the question was asked, do you go about standardising regulation for media?

The regulation of the media, in its various forms, has of course existed for some time, but the issue of developing regulation around AI and tech platforms is newer. What we need, one participant said, is thoughtful regulation rather than the politicised regulation we are getting. We need to be thinking about who should play the role of imposing standards (although all agreed this was not the government), and the shape of the ecosystem that we want to create. In the US, where you have a focus on bottom line rather than public good, how can you incentivise the self-organisation of regulation and have people come together where there is a gap?

Threats to press freedom & credibility

The modern media landscape is increasingly vulnerable and faces a complex web of threats that have significantly undermined trust, reduced credibility, and heightened risks for journalists and news organisations worldwide. These challenges stem from a combination of authoritarian political strategies, economic coercion, and technological disruption, all of which endanger the principles of press freedom. Central to this group's discussion were the use of legal mechanisms by authoritarian regimes to suppress dissent, the role of technological change in facilitating disinformation campaigns, and the declining levels of trust in media. Participants proposed recommendations such as fostering transparency, promoting cross-border collaboration, engaging with technological experimentation, and redefining the role of media to reconnect with audiences.

One of the most pressing threats to press freedom is the use of legal strategies by authoritarian governments to intimidate journalists and suppress critical media. This practice – referred to as *lawfare* – involves the strategic use of legal systems to target media outlets and create an environment of fear and intimidation. Some examples cited were the use of anti-terror laws and tax investigations in India, where these mechanisms have been weaponised to suppress critical voices, and the use of fines, censorship, and punitive lawsuits against investigative outlets in Russia, aimed at silencing dissent. And while this has received particular attention in countries such as India and Russia, participants emphasised that journalists and media organisations worldwide face similar tactics.

With this in mind, some participants urged journalists in the Global North to broaden their perspectives and learn from the experiences of those who have already been subject to the strategies of an 'authoritarian playbook'. It was essential, they said, to maintain resilience in the face of authoritarian pressure. Participants also stressed the danger of the normalisation of leaders' 'violent contempt' for journalists, already evident in India, and increasingly visible in the US.

Economic coercion also emerged as a key concern. Authoritarian governments frequently use methods such as the withdrawal of government advertising, punitive tax investigations, and other financial pressures to limit journalistic independence. The erosion of traditional business models exacerbates these vulnerabilities, leaving media organisations financially exposed and struggling to resist coercive strategies. Moreover, discussions highlighted the use of litigation by private entities, particularly in the disinformation space, which has a stifling effect on researchers and independent investigations, even as this remains a contested issue.

Participants raised concerns about state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, their influence on public perceptions, and the complex role of social media platforms in exacerbating this issue. Notably, debates centred on the extent to which regulation of platforms – particularly given controversial statements by figures such as Elon Musk – may create friction within transatlantic alliances. A decline in public trust was identified as a key underlying factor exacerbating the challenges facing press freedom, driven by factors such as perceived bias, elite detachment, and the breakdown of clear distinctions between fact and opinion. Participants highlighted the fact that this crisis is further compounded by the rise of misinformation, which some said was being amplified by social media algorithms and the increased prevalence of conspiratorial and divisive narratives, although this was an area of significant debate.

The group identified international collaboration as a vital strategy to address the threats to press freedom. While the media often operates in isolation, its long-term sustainability depends on stronger cooperative efforts. Authoritarian tactics such as disinformation campaigns and economic coercion frequently cross borders, and therefore require cross-border responses. Networks connecting journalists, NGOs, civil society organisations and governments could act as force multipliers to tackle the systemic challenges facing media organisations. There was broad agreement that journalists' multiple "*theatres of war*" necessitate coordinated, collective responses, with increased resources and strategic efforts, in part to raise the global political costs of repressive actions. Collaborative strategies could include strengthening joint legal defence funds and amplifying visibility for endangered media outlets. Recommendations focused on transparent, impact-oriented reporting, innovative experimentation with audience engagement, and efforts to reconnect media with communities. Some participants argued for "radical transparency" in terms of funding and editorial independence. One idea posited was the need for media organisations to engage audiences more personally, rebuilding a sense of shared purpose and demonstrating how journalism strengthens public accountability.

Looking ahead: Ditchley is planning to run an expanded media programme next year, with generous support from MacArthur Foundation. This will be framed around four anchor events – planned to take place at Ditchley London, in New York, at Ditchley Park and in Germany – which will pick up the themes discussed in this conference and explore them further over the course of 2025.

This summary reflects the writer's personal impressions of the conference. No participant is in any way committed to its content or expression.

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