Think
new *things*
Make
new *connections*

Terms of Reference

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?

A Ditchley conference in collaboration with the MacArthur Foundation

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Introduction & Context

Around half the world's population has gone or will go to the polls this year. Elections have already taken place in the UK, India, France, the EU, South Africa, and Mexico, among others, with the US presidential elections looming on the horizon. Elsewhere, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza continue to rage. Against this backdrop, trustworthy reporting and access to accurate information is perhaps more essential than ever. And yet, the news media finds itself increasingly under siege from all sides, including audience apathy, unsustainable business models, technological challenges, assaults on press freedom, and the threat of dis- and misinformation.

Building on the discussions of the last two years, the conference will explore what this mega-election year tells us about how local, national and international media interact. With a bumper year of elections behind us, we will be able to ask how journalism has held up around the world. What are the issues – both expected and unexpected – that have emerged? And what have we learned to help us move forward?

Trust in the media diminishes year on year and consumers are now reporting increasing news fatigue or news avoidance. Newspapers are laying off staff or shutting down completely, leaving more and more people stranded in "news deserts", and media organisations are grappling with falling ad revenues, a limited public appetite for subscription-based services, and the reduction in search and social traffic as tech platforms tweak their approaches to news. In addition, they must meet the challenges of whether and how to deploy AI in the newsroom, as well as the proliferation of mis- and disinformation that undermines trust and deepens partisan divides.

The way that people access news across online platforms is increasingly fragmented. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's (RISJ) Digital News Report 2024 found that six outlets now reach at least 10% of respondents, compared with only two a decade ago, with YouTube leading the pack. Linked to these shifts, RISJ noted that video is becoming a more important source of online news, especially with younger groups, and that news videos are overwhelmingly consumed via online platforms rather than publisher websites. And with many tech platforms now deprioritising news and political content in favour of light entertainment or content generated in house, the gateway to accessing quality reporting is narrowing still further.

Assaults on press freedom are taking many and varied forms. As well as the soft threats of failing business models and dwindling audiences, journalists must also contend with the "hard threats" of press censorship, whether through the courts or by governments, and physical threats to journalists' lives and safety in many countries around the world.

The challenges are clear. 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 the audience's new habits and preferences. There are green shoots that give hope in democratic societies' resilience.

This conference, Ditchley's third in a series of annual conferences examining the media landscape, will bring together leaders from traditional media, new media, digital platforms,

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policymakers, regulators and NGOs to address these challenges and to explore policy and regulatory options, business models, and ways to rebuild media credibility and audiences. It will also examine what the potential roles of government, the private sector and civil society are or should be in this necessary evolution.

Detail

Looking back over this year of elections, what are some lessons we can extract from how the media performed in each case? What does it mean that in India the authoritarian-leaning Prime Minster Narendra Modi did much less well than anyone expected, including him? In France the parliamentary elections threatened a far-right prime minister, but ultimately left and right united controversially to frustrate the far right. What role did the media play in that election? And the recent success of the far right in regional elections in Germany has set alarms bells ringing. Of course there are many more 2024 examples, including elections in South Africa and Mexico, each with their own unique stories and media landscapes to unpick.

In terms of dwindling trust in the media, we will look specifically at how the mis- and disinformation challenges played out – in elections, warzones, and elsewhere. Did this look different in different countries? And if so, how can we build resilience in those countries that are more vulnerable? There is a growing school of thought that the disinformation threat that consumed media discussions at Ditchley and beyond in 2023 may have been overblown and that, thus far, and certainly in terms of elections, it has turned out to be nowhere near as influential as anticipated. Researchers at the UK's Alan Turing Institute wrote that of 112 national elections in 2023 and 2024, just 19 showed AI interference. The "evidence demonstrates no clear signs of significant changes in election *results* compared to the expected performance of political candidates from polling data." However, they also noted that although the current impact of AI on specific election results is limited, these *perceived* threats show signs of damaging the broader democratic system. Overstating the disinformation threat could have the opposite outcome to that intended and undermine media credibility still further.

Has the preoccupation with disinformation distracted us from more pressing threats at hand? For example, how do we tackle, via legal means or otherwise, the issue of countries where journalists are censored, prevented access to report, exiled, jailed, or find themselves the target of physical attacks? Geopolitical crises are deepening structural issues in media development, and the silencing and intimidation of journalists have become increasingly normalised in some areas. Across multiple crises journalists have often been treated as active participants rather than neutral observers.

It is broadly agreed upon that democracy cannot thrive without a strong and free media and that both democracies and the role of the Fourth Estate are currently under threat. But if people are just not consuming news in the way that they used to, how does the media landscape evolve in response to this? What should the media be doing to assess its own actions and approaches to its role in society? The RISJ report notes that: "We find that high standards, a transparent approach, lack of bias, and fairness in terms of media representation are the four primary factors that influence trust." But is this enough?

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As Clare Malone wrote in *The New Yorker* earlier this year: "The future will require fundamentally rethinking the press's relationship to its audience." The media industry has long been plagued by institutional inertia and a reluctance to embrace change or innovation, but there are media organisations now trying to meet "readers" where they are and, for example, shifting to video (as per the RISJ report) rather than trying to convert them back to text. Young people are increasingly turning to social media influencers for their news, and politicians and others are starting to take notice, as evidenced by the accreditation of more than 200 influencers to the Democratic National Convention in August this year. How are these efforts faring and how can they be supported and expanded?

On the business end, what is or are the models for sustainable journalism going forward? It is clear that there is no "one size fits all" solution to this issue, so how can we begin to address it on multiple fronts? And what can we learn from those media business models that are succeeding? Funding must, of course, be a part of this conversation. The success of the MacArthur Foundation's Press Forward initiative – a coordinated philanthropic effort to support local news in the US – has led to the launch of "cousin" networks in Europe. It is important to remember, though, that different regions face different contexts and challenges. For example, the UK's funding and philanthropy environment is distinct from the US, facing unique legal and cultural barriers. And when we examine the state of public news services, should we also take into account the idea that funding media in other countries is a type of soft power and therefore has an essential role to play in supporting democracy?

With AI making its presence felt in newsrooms around the globe, publishers continue to ask themselves how the media should approach these changes. Reports suggest that audiences are sceptical about the use of the technology in news, and that this creates the potential for further loss of trust. Transparency around AI usage in journalism is key, as well as ensuring that humans ultimately remain in control.

Differing approaches towards the regulation of tech and media between the US and UK/Europe may also see a divergence emerge in this area. How do we ensure that regulatory frameworks deliver a fair and transparent system?

If 2022's conference helped define a call to action and 2023's conference turned that into an agenda, this year's conference aims to outline practical solutions and plans to come to terms with and adapt to this evolving media landscape.

For the middle part of the conference, we will break into smaller working groups to examine the following three interrelated areas in more detail:

Group A: Sustainable and trusted business models

Studies consistently show that audiences trust local news more than they do national and international news. Local audiences tend to be less partisan and find common ground in the issues that directly affect them and their families. However, in many communities there is no local news coverage, or else Facebook and WhatsApp groups have filled that vacuum, creating spaces where misinformation is often allowed to thrive. What basic media needs do local communities have and how can journalism support democracy at a more local level? Building upon this idea, how can trust in local news build towards trust in national and

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international news? And how can we further develop this relationship to create more sustainable and broader media business models for the future? Collaboration is something that has not typically been associated with the media industry, however perhaps it is time to consider what the goals of sustainable media businesses truly are and to investigate where collaboration and information-sharing might be of benefit. Do media companies have to be profit-making enterprises? And does that goal inherently clash with the lofty mission of "truth telling"? Where should media funding come from in the future — philanthropy, government, citizens, private enterprise – or a blend of all of these? Equally, it is essential to bear in in mind that media sustainability means different things in different geographies. For example, In the UK, sustainability largely revolves around financial viability, whereas in crisis zones like Myanmar, it refers to ensuring the protection and survival of data amid threats to journalists.

Group B: AI and media regulation

In 2023, many newsrooms began experimenting with the Generative AI, and the use of AI both in journalism and as a disinformation weapon has been much talked about since then – but how is this actually playing out? The general public tends to be sceptical of AI use in journalism and transparency will be key if public trust is not to be eroded further. In terms of media and tech regulation, several new laws in the UK and the EU have moved to address the challenges of protecting public service broadcasting, making social media companies and search services more responsible for the safety of users, and safeguarding media freedom and editorial independence. Will there be a divergence or a convergence between US and UK/Europe in terms of media regulation moving forwards? What might this mean in practice and why does it matter? How can we ensure that regulatory frameworks deliver a fair system? In the stand-off between tech platforms and publishers, both regarding use of content and as gateways to the news, where do we want to land? To remain relevant in a world where we are all overloaded with content all the time, news platforms will need to offer something to the public that the algorithm and AI cannot, while still remaining accessible to a broad audience. What is this magic formula, and how do we get there?

Group C: Threats to press freedom & credibility

Fact-checking and transparent verifying of reporting remain crucial tools in the fight against disinformation and flagging media credibility. Education around media literacy, disinformation, and the value of truth also remain essential, but whose responsibility are they? Recent initiatives in the UK to teach children how to read critically and spot misinformation online, and in New York to fund student newspapers in every high school are two approaches, but wider-reaching efforts and collaboration on a global scale are needed. Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski recently said in his Ditchley lecture that the truth itself is not enough to win the information war and that tackling disinformation should be part of a whole of society approach to defence. But on the other hand, if it is true that the potential threat of disinformation to democratic elections has been blown out of proportion, then we must refocus our energy on tackling other concrete threats to press freedom and, by extension, media credibility. One example could be spotlighting efforts to silence journalists through imprisonment, censorship and physical attacks, as has been seen recently in Russia, Israel and Guatemala, among other places. However, in order to tackle these issues, we must

first address the issue that societal regard for journalism's value is so low. According to RISJ: "Re-engaging audiences will also require publishers to rethink some of the ways that journalism has been practised in the past; to find ways to be more accessible without dumbing down; to report the world as it is whilst also giving hope; to give people different perspectives without turning it into an argument." Are we up for the challenge?

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