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Michał Kuś,  
University of Wrocław, Poland  
Achilleas Karadimitriou,  
Panteion University, Greece

## \*CORRESPONDENCE

Petros Iosifidis  
✉ p.iosifidis@city.ac.uk

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# Digital platforms and news publishers: uneasy relationship

Petros Iosifidis\*

Department of Sociology and Criminology, City St George's, University of London, London, United Kingdom

People across the globe increasingly rely on digital platforms to communicate, entertain and access information. Whereas many of these activities were conducted through legacy news media, entities such as Google, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram currently dominate in most national contexts. The business models of digital platforms, their global nature and the pace that digital technologies and services evolve challenge existing regulatory frameworks concerning consumer protection, transparency, and power imbalances, especially in ensuring that substantial market power does not reduce competition in media and advertising services markets. This article deals with regulating relations between digital platforms and news publishers. It discusses recent reforms which respond to the unequal bargaining power between digital platforms and news media publishers. It questions whether tech giants should pay news media for news content that they carry and whether there are guarantees that funds received by news publishers will be reinvested into public interest journalism. By doing so, it examines the competitive impacts and implications of their existing commercial relationships, in particular the role of online advertising in the dissemination and monetisation of news content and the long term impact on the sustainability of the news media sector. It is clear that news media providers and digital platforms are both benefiting from the distribution of news content. However, the digital platforms need to improve the transparency of their operations for news media providers as they have a significant impact on the capacity of news media organisations to build and maintain an audience and derive resources from the media content they produce. Overall, the article asks whether the discourse surrounding digital platform regulation generally, and measures by nation-states to rebalance market relations to the benefit of news publishers, can safeguard public interest journalism, promote reliable information, and promote democracy.

## KEYWORDS

digital platforms, news publishers, big tech, policy, regulation

## Setting the scene

Digital platforms (including social media, chat, search engines, generative Artificial Intelligence models and applications) and news publishers (providers of original print, digital, or broadcast news) have had an uneasy relationship for a number of years. This has been triggered by the shifting nature of news, the manner in which news is delivered, and the ways people trace it. The ongoing digital revolution or third industrial revolution (i.e., the transition from analogue to digital electronics) is bringing benefits to consumer-citizens as online outlets offer unprecedented choice of formats and perspectives, but is also affecting the future provision of news. While the rise of online services have widened the concept of news, public interest news and investigative journalism are decreasing. “Public interest news” can be interpreted to include informative, reliable and accurate news that reflect a wide plurality and diversity of viewpoints that typically can be delivered through high-quality journalism.

As traditional business models and revenue streams are declining, trust in online news across the world is decreasing and news avoidance is rising as a growing share of audiences are turning away (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024, p. 26–27). Meanwhile, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is altering internet research and the profession of journalism.

Various government reports from around the world have attempted to address unconscionability among digital platforms and news media publishers. Let us first define unconscionability, which reflects precisely the tensions between digital platforms and news media publishers. It points to conditions where powerful platforms take advantage of their dominance over news publishers, potentially resulting in less quality and more homogeneous news content. This can materialise in disparity in negotiating strength, terms of reference that are hard for users to understand, unclear content moderation practices that can be used to penalise users, and lack of transparency in platform algorithms. Online platforms often use algorithms to prioritise content recommendations, which can reduce exposure to different viewpoints. This is common in politics. For example, if a user regularly accesses content favouring a particular political viewpoint, the algorithm may rank high that content, even if it is not the most objective or accurate view.

But how have governments tackled unconscionability? In the UK, the Cairncross (2019) Review considered the long-term survival of the production and distribution of high-quality journalism, and especially the prospects of the press industry, in a radically transforming ecology. It has looked at the overall state of the news media market, the threats to the financial sustainability of publishers, the impact of search engines and social media platforms, and the role of digital advertising. In Australia, the ACCC (2019) report looked at the impact of digital platforms on: consumers, businesses using platforms to advertise to and reach customers, and news media businesses that also use the platforms to disseminate their content. The Canadian Broadcasting and Telecommunications Legislative Review Panel (2020) examined Canada's future of communications in the light of rapid market changes and the dominance of digital platforms.

Academic studies have also paid attention to the disruptive nature of social media platforms to commercial news business operations and also shifting consumer habits. Nicoli and Iosifidis (2023) analysed the European Commission's competition policy approach regarding big tech by adopting a critical political economy of communications approach. By using the Australian ACCC Report as a case study, Flew and Wilding (2021) discussed digital platform regulation with a focus upon the impact of digital platforms on news and journalism. Schlesinger (2020) reflected on the accelerated transition from the mass media epoch to the ramifying entrenchment of the internet era and the impact on the public sphere, which he refers to as unstable-post-public sphere. By taking the Codes introduced in Australia and Canada as case studies, Flew et al. (2023) provided an account of how news media bargaining codes may regulate the connection between digital platforms and news publishers. The authors' main objective was to check whether these codes adequately defend public interest journalism and ensure accurate information.

This paper builds on research in platform studies, journalism studies, as well as the above relevant literature by dealing with regulatory relations between large, mainly US-based platform companies such as Meta and Google and news publishers. It attempts to address two research questions. First, it asks whether the recent reforms by national governments which respond to the unequal

bargaining power between digital platforms and news media publishers are suffice to rebalance market relations to the benefit of news publishers. Second, it asks whether there are guarantees that funds received by news publishers will be reinvested into public interest journalism. The paper addresses a crucial research gap, namely whether the discourse surrounding digital platform regulation generally, and measures by nation-states to rebalance market relations to the benefit of news publishers, are likely to yield necessary safeguards required to sustain public interest journalism, promote reliable information, and stabilise democratic societies.

To achieve the above, the paper discusses contemporary measures that intend to address unconscionability among digital platforms and news media publishers. The paper could work well as an introductory text going through the relationship between digital platforms and news publishers to future research and/or editions of the journal containing more detailed analyses on the specific issues discussed in it. The first section deals with the platformisation of the internet and provides statistics and data showing the power of social media platforms. Having provided this background, the next section directly addresses the question of whether news media firms should get support from digital platforms. The third section of the paper explores the international regulatory responses from both the Global North and the Global South, whereas the last section makes a case for maintaining and promoting public interest journalism as a guarantor for the continued availability of public interest news. While it is clear that news media providers and digital platforms are both taking advantage of the wide distribution of news content, the paper joins forces with those arguing that digital platforms should improve the openness of their activities and support news publishers, for they can benefit financially from the media content they deliver.

## Platformisation of the internet

News media developed into an increasingly independent institution in the 20th century but are now becoming dependent upon new digital intermediaries that structure the media environment in ways that both individuals and powerful organisations have to adapt to (Nielsen and Ganter, 2017). The new media landscape is dubbed platformisation of the internet, and is associated with the prominence of digital platforms as the dominant model for the web. Platformisation is not static but should be understood as an ongoing process as it is constantly evolving. It is defined as the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms (Poell et al., 2019). According to Flew (2019a), debates about the internet in the past two decades tend to go along one of two distinct tracks. The first pointed to the new affordances of digital and social media. The second track focused upon the growing concentration of ownership and control over the internet by a handful of giant digital entities. The platformisation of the internet is a key development as it leads to the end of open internet and toward concentration of control. The concentrated immense economic, political, and communicative power in the hands of tech giants and tech barons such as CEOs Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook/Meta), Jeff Bezos (Amazon), and Elon Musk (Twitter/x) calls for fresh media laws and policy (Iosifidis and Andrews, 2020; Nicoli and Iosifidis, 2023).

The rising popularity of online platforms influences the infrastructure of the digital field and may narrow the range of voices that are heard and disseminated. This is because online platforms can create so-called “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles,” thereby limiting exposure to diverse perspectives, reinforcing existing biases, and ultimately resulting in a narrow range of viewpoints (Rhodes, 2021). Specifically, the terms echo chambers and filter bubbles refer to conditions in which people have access to opinions that align with their pre-existing beliefs. The mechanism that enables this to happen is social media algorithms that can personalise content recommendations. The end result can be increased polarisation, limited critical thinking and assessment, and homogenisation of online culture. It might be worth mentioning here that some studies (for example, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242388425\\_Consumer\\_trust\\_in\\_an\\_Internet\\_Store](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242388425_Consumer_trust_in_an_Internet_Store)) have raised questions about the conventional wisdom that the internet creates a “level playing field,” for it influences individuals’ assessments of trustworthiness.

The fact is that social media platforms are now more prominent than linear media both in terms of advertising expenditure and news consumption. Let us start with advertising. The advertising-supported financial model of news production, which dominated mass media in the 20th and early 21st centuries, is no longer sustainable (Flew et al., 2023). Search and social media giants in the likes of Google and Meta command the digital advertising market. In the US, UK and Australia these two companies have been recipients of more than 70% of all digital advertising revenue. To illustrate, US ad spending for TV in 2024 was \$58.99 billion while social network ad spending (with Google and Meta at the forefront) was much higher at \$86.75 billion. Print media (newspapers and magazines) currently get <5% of total advertising revenue. In the UK, the Advertising Association/Warc Expenditure Report noted online formats are now recipients of more than three quarters of the total. All the growth went to tech giants with Alphabet (Google’s parent company) the biggest winner (Ponsford, 2024). Advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) are accelerating market developments. Generative AI tools promise faster and easier advertising and personalised content, potentially changing consumer engagement with experiences (E-marketer, 2024).

Perhaps more importantly, television is no longer a monopoly or the core source in news provision in a number of national contexts. In the UK, for example, where TV has been considered the leading source of domestic news since the 1960s, when it overtook radio and newspapers, recent Ofcom research shows that 71% of adults now access news shows online, compared to 70% for TV (Ofcom, 2024). The trend toward the increasing use of social media for news is evidenced by a recent Ofcom report which states that more than half of UK adults (52%) now use online platforms to access news. Similar trends have been observed in other countries. For instance, Australia’s Generation Z use social media as their main source of news (Park et al., 2022). The worrying sign though is that only 6% of people in the UK and 14% of people in the US trust the information on social media (Newman et al., 2022). This is worrying and directly relates to the trends toward mis/disinformation. The issues of mis/disinformation have been widely discussed in academia but also in regulatory agency reports. Nicoli and Iosifidis (2023) delve into this ongoing, global discussion, by aiming to conceptualize both the theoretical frameworks and policy initiatives in fighting digital disinformation.

Discussion on disinformation has mainly focused on authoritarian regimes like Russia and China engaging in

information warfare. However, democratically elected leaders are now accused of spreading disinformation, complicating the issue. State-sponsored disinformation poses a heightened threat to Western liberal democracies, undermining human rights and democratic processes (Iosifidis, 2024). On the regulatory body side, Ofcom (2024) found that online news sources—and social media platforms in particular—are rated much less favourably than traditional platforms such as TV and radio for accuracy, trust and impartiality.

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) claimed that the growing role of social media as a source of news can increase the production and distribution of disinformation and fake news due to the confluence of three factors. The first is associated with the rapidly declining costs of producing and distributing news content online. The second relates to the trend toward news packages (collectives of news stories presented on digital platforms, that turn it difficult if not impossible to identify the accuracy and source of the story). Third, practices of sharing, liking and commenting build upon established friend/follower networks where there may be a relatively high degree of ideological agreement, leading to the formation of what are known as “filter bubbles,” where the relationship of a news story to pre-existing preferences is more important than its accuracy (see also Flew, 2019b).

## Should news media firms get support from digital platforms?

So far, the paper has discussed the increasing power of Big Tech firms and the various concerns this has raised, including the spread of disinformation. This section considers the institutional relations between platforms and news organisations and delves into the discourse of whether digital platforms should pay news media companies for the news content they carry. Certainly, the aforementioned developments call for a reconsideration of the relationship among digital platform and news businesses. Shall we treat these trends as part of an inevitable upheaval associated with fast technological shift? For those advocating this line of argument, incumbent media businesses should not be protected from trends like shifting of ad spend to tech giants. To gain more systematic insight into this, the paper first goes through the arguments by pro-market economists and digital platforms before engaging with voices that dispute them and favour compensation to news publishers.

Matthew Lesh (2023), Director of Public Policy and Communications at the UK Institute of Economic Affairs, summarised the arguments against platforms providing financial support to news publishers. He admitted that the internet has brought about a new business model that has expanded competition both for advertising revenue and audiences. In this new environment, news outlets have struggled to attract advertising revenue and/or subscribers, whereas digital platforms are (unfairly?) profiting from the thoroughly researched and fact-checked work of news publishers’ journalists. Lesh also acknowledged that most publishers’ responses have been to seek revenue transfers from digital platforms. Publishers’ main argument is that they need some form of compensation from the tech platforms if ad-funded news media is going to survive in the digital era. But his view is that, as the economic change continues, news publishers should not get compensation, for this should end up in a mistargeted system that could have a negative impact.

Lesh explained that firstly, in his view, the major digital platforms are not directly to blame for the bleak financial position of news publishers. Instead, responsibility should rest with the drop of classifieds advertising, which in turn undermines the traditional publisher business model. A relevant factor is that consumer habits shifted as new technology surfaced. Lesh continued that the value of news to digital platforms has been overstretched. He noted that the significance of news to digital platforms is not great, for the presence of this content is unimportant compared to e-commerce, social networking, etc. Lesh concluded that the introduction of a revenue transfer system could stifle innovation and diminish journalistic quality. This is in line with most pro-market reports which claim that regulation reduces aggregate equilibrium innovation and growth (see, for example, [Aghion et al., 2023](#)).

Unsurprisingly, big tech companies share similar arguments. Meta, the parent company of Facebook, has recently shared some opinions about carrying news content as well as opposition to the News Media Bargaining Code introduced by the Australian government ([MetaANZ, 2024](#)). These can be summarised as follows. First, the tech giant claims that interest in news content is dropping on its platforms. Second, users use Facebook and Instagram mainly for other types of content, rather than news. Third, Meta actually benefits news publishers as their services have much greater visibility. Fourth, technology firms are not to blame for the financial struggles facing news organisations. Meta concludes that the future availability of public interest journalism very much depends on how news publishers will cope with new technology, the shifting consumer behaviour, and the prevalence of online advertising, all of them impacting on old traditional business models.

[Gawer \(2023\)](#), Professor in Digital Economy at the University of Surrey, contradicted the above arguments by pro-market economists and digital platforms. Gawer emphasised that revenues for the news publishers now more than ever depends on negotiations with technology firms. The author reiterated that digital platforms have the upper hand in such negotiations for several reasons. The platforms are more powerful due to a series of consolidations in the past decades, enabling them to achieve the role of gatekeepers. At the other side of the spectrum, news organisations are smaller in size and have typically a more pluralistic and competitive structure. Therefore, platforms' negotiating power is much higher. In addition, the platforms have collected and monetised user data from various publishers and do not normally share these consumer data with news publishers. Gawer concluded that we need to address the bargaining power imbalance between digital platforms and news publishers and suggested: addressing concerns about the transparency of algorithms; giving publishers appropriate control over presentation and branding of their content; driving improved practices in the sharing of user data between publishers and those platforms that host their content.

The issue of algorithmic transparency is particularly important. In their recent report, the [House of Lords \(2024\)](#) quoted Dame Melanie Dawes, CEO of Ofcom, who mentioned that the lack of transparency about how tech platforms' recommender algorithms work remained "one of the biggest challenges" around improving the health of the online media ecosystem. She called for the regulator or vetted researchers to be given access for testing. The report claimed that Audits of algorithms could investigate potential biases or the impacts of service changes. It added that, under the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024, the Competition and Markets

Authority could require greater transparency over recommender algorithms.

The next section explores the legislative initiatives taken by governments mainly in the Global North to address news media sustainability in the era of Big Tech. Although digital platforms in the Global South compete with news publishers in a similar way (i.e., attention, advertising revenue, consumer spending), it appears that most Southern regions are in the process of employing "principles" with regard to media sustainability rather than taking initiatives via legislation and competition authorities.

## International regulatory interventions

Legislators and policymakers in various national contexts across the globe share the view that digital platforms benefit significantly from featuring news and should therefore pay news media companies for news content they carry. In 2021, Australia devised and implemented a novel regulatory approach. In particular, it introduced a News Media Bargaining Code that established a framework forcing digital platforms to undertake deals with news companies. The main objective of the reform is apparently not to designate platforms, but rather to motivate them to do enough deals that the government is satisfied with their commitment to sustaining the Australian news media sector that they derive value from ([Flew et al., 2023](#)). A year later, Canada adopted Australia's regulatory approach and enacted the Online News Act (C18). According to [Flew et al. \(2023\)](#), the differences in regulatory approach in Australia and Canada is that the former has adopted a market-oriented angle to the survival of commercial news media, while the latter is promoting public interest journalism rather than commerce. Seemingly, the drive behind the Canadian Act is attention to social externalities associated with public interest journalism. But the take-away from both initiatives is that public policy is needed to rebalance the relations between platforms and commercial publishers.

Several countries from the Global North have introduced legislation along these lines. In June 2023, the Senate Judiciary Committee in the US passed the [Journalism Competition and Preservation Act \(JCPA\) \(S. 1094\) \(2023\)](#) bipartisan bill that intends to help news publishers and safeguard the American free press by addressing the market imbalances imposed by Big Tech and guarantee that small and local news publishers/broadcasters have a future. In the UK, the former Conservative government proposed a regime to enhance competition in the digital epoch that would also incorporate obligatory codes of conduct applying to digital firms with Strategic Market Status (SMS). Specifically, in April 2021, then Digital Secretary asked the Digital Markets Unit (DMU) in the competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to work with Ofcom to "look at how a code would govern the relationships between platforms and content providers such as news publishers, including to ensure they are as fair and reasonable as possible." The CMA's and Ofcom's response to that request was that a code would work better than direct price setting by the regulator. To reach that conclusion, the CMA and Ofcom consulted widely with publishers who expressed concerns about the reliance on Google and Facebook for traffic.

As it is the case with Global North, digital platforms in the Global South compete with publishers for attention, advertising revenue, as well as consumer spending. [Bouquillion et al. \(2023\)](#) examined the

strategies of some of the main US-based Big Tech platforms toward the Global South and considered the relations between them and the constellation of local or regional platforms that have emerged. The authors also noted that news publishers in Africa, Asia, Latin America or the Middle East have raised concerns about the expansion of Western digital players and in particular the new forms of cultural entrepreneurship that has reconfigured the conditions in which cultural contents are produced and circulated in the Global South. A recent report by Nielsen and Cherubini (2022) examined the various strategies pursued by a range of news media operating in eight developing countries, namely Colombia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru and South Africa. The report found that the overall approaches the publishers take to platforms have these commonalities: clarity about editorial mission, funding model, and target audience; adaptability to a constantly changing environment and transient platforms; selective and diverse investments in platforms to pursue key platform opportunities while hedging against platform risk; proactive relations to identify useful contacts inside platform companies; constant monitoring of the editorial and financial return on investment in platforms.

The 2023 “Big Tech and Journalism – Building a Sustainable Future for the Global South” conference, held in Johannesburg, made it clear that most countries in the Global South are currently considering “principles,” rather than policy measures, to address news media sustainability in the era of Big Tech (*Big Tech and Journalism: Principles for Fair Compensation*, 2023). The conference was attended by journalists, news publishers, media organisations, scholars, activists, lawyers, and economists in order to address the crisis of the sustainability of journalism and its intersection with the role of major tech platforms. It aimed to “share lessons learned and identify commonalities within and across regions with regard to media sustainability initiatives via legislation and competition authorities.” In the end, it proposed 10 principles for fair compensation, intending to “help with the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policy mechanisms that oblige digital platforms and news publishers to engage with each other to develop fair economic terms.” There are public interest, plurality, diversity, sustainability, fairness, collectivity, transparency, accountability, independence and outcomes. It appears that countries in the Global South, while carefully designing principles for fair compensation, play a wait-and-see game to check how initiatives via legislation and competition authorities develop in the Global North in order to proceed with their own specific policy interventions to address the power of technology platforms.

## Public interest journalism: can it survive?

As mentioned in the opening, the remainder of this paper makes a case for maintaining and promoting public interest journalism as a guarantor for the continued availability of public interest news. The objective of public interest journalism is to promote democratic ideals by encouraging the public to engage with journalists and news outlets and building community’s trust in journalists. This is particularly important in the current era of information abundance, mis/disinformation and the widespread of fake news. In 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that, together with the health pandemic, it was also

addressing an “infodemic,” that is, an “overabundance of information, both online and offline” (WHO Director General, 2020). Many years later, the “infodemic” continues to undermine trust in vaccination efforts aiming to bring an end to the pandemic. In addition, disinformation is as much a weapon of war as bombs are, judging from the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war, where disinformation is particularly widespread (Iosifidis, 2024).

Trust in journalism and news is key. In the UK, for instance, the 2018 Dame Frances Cairncross was asked to conduct a Review into the sustainability of high-quality journalism in the country. The report emphasised that at the heart of any thriving democracy is a free and vibrant press. This is because it plays a vital role in holding power to account and keeping the public informed of local, national and international issues. Yet it painted a concerning picture, for there are now around far fewer journalists than a decade ago and print circulation of national and local newspapers has declined sharply. As the Review makes clear, the main driver for these developments is a rapid change in how we consume content as the majority of people now read news online. But trust in social media and online news is lower than in legacy media. A recent research (Fletcher et al., 2025) found that across the world “trust has declined more in environments that have become less structured by television news use, and increasingly structured by social media new use.”

This paper’s stance is that news and journalism involve public good characteristics that cannot be left to the market to guarantee the delivery of specific forms of news such as public interest journalism and local reporting. Public interest journalism – the kind of journalism that serves the interests of the public by going beyond the commercial viability of individual brands - is essential for maintaining and developing a workable democratic political system and a democratic public sphere, independent of vested political and economic interests (Flew et al., 2023; Schudson, 2020; Walters, 2022). The issue of trust and the right to get accurate information are central to the future viability of news and journalism.

“Free and independent media constitute the cornerstone for a healthy and thriving democracy” (Media Intelligence Service, 2021, p. 2). Strong, well-funded, politically independent, non-profit media guarantee the democratic health of contemporary nations whose democratic values may be in danger due to the rise of platformisation and spread of disinformation (but also populism and political apathy). In particular, platformization, with the increasing presence of global platforms such as Google, Amazon, Meta and Apple in the digital economy, as well as how platforms shape economic and social relationships, has impacted on the public service remit of promoting key public values in the likes of universality, independence, diversity. On the misinformation front, as mentioned above, we have recently witnessed a surge of disinformation and fake news spread through digital platforms (Nicoli and Iosifidis, 2023). While this certainly undermines the legitimacy of democratic institutions and leads to fragmented public spheres, the existence of public interest journalism may serve as a guarantor of delivering trusted news to a well-informed citizenry. Public interest and investigative journalism can provide public interest, reliable and accurate news, widely acknowledged as one of the instruments of countering disinformation.

The concern about the continued availability of public interest news is exacerbated by the fact that the journalism profession itself is in danger. According to Press Gazette’s analysis, 2023 was a bad year for the journalism industry, with at least 8,000 job redundancies in the UK,

US and Canada.<sup>1</sup> This is in line with the Cairncross Review. The tide has continued in 2024, with around 1,000 people losing their jobs in January alone. The main reason for journalist cut jobs is that the digital revolution has forced publishers to cut costs. In an update, found that layoffs reached a new record in 2024, for at least 17,436 job cuts were announced by June 2024, making the level of cuts even worse than at the outset of the pandemic in 2020, when 16,750 job cuts were announced at the same period. Kahn also mentioned that Artificial Intelligence (AI) may have begun to displace journalists, whereas the ongoing war in Gaza claimed the lives of a record number of reporters.

All this, according to Kahn, was compounded by long hours, chronic underpayment and a declining number of journalism jobs. One needs to remember that investigative reports are difficult to achieve as journalists are typically bringing into light hidden situations. Consequently, journalists need to work extremely hard to uncover the facts. The situation in the journalism profession is expected to get worse with Donald Trump's second term as US President, for he attacked directly US press freedom. The president made it clear during the campaign that he had the press in his sights (*The Conversation, 2024*). In effect, the continued provision of public interest news is in real danger. This has brought to the spotlight the issues of trust and accuracy in the provision of news. Not adequately staffed media are less likely to critically engage with serious political, economic and climate questions and therefore serve the public sphere.

However, the threat has been more profound at the local level. According to *Cairncross (2019)* Review, while investigative and national level reporting have suffered, it is local provision that is most under threat. According to *Howells (2015)*, quoted in *House of Lords (2024)*, the decline in numbers of local journalists is associated with subsequent declines in reporting on local institutions, falling civic engagement and lower voter turnout. The Cairncross Review provides a rather gloomy picture, for while it acknowledges that many news publishers nationally will struggle to be profitable in the online world, those at the local level will be affected greatly in the provision of public interest news.

## Conclusion

The broader question is whether national and/or international policy measures guarantee the delivery of public interest news and journalism. Do they promote accurate information and therefore stabilise democratic societies and rational public spheres? As shown by *Flew et al. (2023)* but also *Brown and Grudnoff (2023)*, the immediate impact of the Australian intervention has been rather positive as evidenced by the growth in journalist job advertisements as well as the payment of money to news media companies. It should be noted though that such interventions, like the bargaining codes, will not by themselves generate the advertising revenue that has been converted to digital platforms during the last couple of decades.

Governments, academics, policymakers and other interested stakeholders should undertake further research and propose workable solutions regarding the long-term relationship between the news media industry and digital platforms. Australia's News Media

Bargaining Code and Canada's Online News Act (*Act C-18, 2022*) have initiated a long overdue debate about who pays for news for the interests of democracy. It is not clear if policy measures such as the effective forced arbitration to digital platforms will provide an answer to the questions raised in this paper. The government and policymakers' role in supporting the future of news is crucial. But the government cannot force people to engage with the news. In addition, well-meaning financial support risks doing more harm than good by undermining media independence.

The industry itself needs to be involved for designing and implementing a "workable solution." The House of Lords recent report *The Future of News (2024)* claimed that much of the work needs to be led by industry itself to ensure audience needs and expectations are well served. Of course there are no silver bullet solutions on the extent of policy intervention to address the influence of technology platforms. But different stakeholders (government, regulators, industry) have options that can be discussed in a round table.

Also, the issues of how to support public interest journalism and public interest news remain very much controversial. In the past, it was largely public service media (PSM), funded by the licence fee, and terrestrial commercial media, mainly funded by a mix of advertisers and subscribers, that provided public interest news. The moving of online news to digital platforms, and the dominance of the digital landscape by a handful of platform providers, has fundamentally changed that environment. There needs to be an extensive dialogue between the major digital platforms such as Google and Meta and news media publishers, in order to design acceptable and workable policies. As *Flew et al. (2023)* noted, "Governments will need to balance inclinations to support the incumbent news organisations with the difficulties of enforcing rules for global digital platforms at the level of nation-states." More generally, there is a need for a wider set of policy interventions beyond commercial bargaining that can support the critical form of democratic infrastructure (*Pickard, 2020*).

High-quality, reliable news is at the heart of a democratic society. According to *Gawer (2023)*, a vibrant democratic society also requires a plurality of voices in its news media. The author detailed that the production of first-rate news requires publishers' time and effort. Policymakers should ensure the preservation of high quality news organisations undermined by global digital platforms in the likes of Google, Meta, Apple and Microsoft which have captured the gatekeeper role. *Iosifidis and Nicoli (2020)* offered a descriptive account of Facebook's public announcements regarding how it tackles disinformation and fake news. Based on a qualitative content analysis, the article examined ways to hold social media platforms more accountable for how they handle disinformation. One should remember that in an era of information abundance media firms and platforms can establish a stronger position if their journalism is built on accuracy and fairness.

Before stating the limitations and possible future research direction, it might be worth finishing the main body of the paper by referring to *Gans (2003)* seminal work *Democracy and the News*. In his volume, Gans highlights that news and journalism should be at the core of democracy, enabling citizens to take informed decisions on important local, national and international matters. He reasserts the claim that the press is considered the Fourth Estate and press freedom should be guaranteed. Gans quotes Pulitzer prize-winner Anthony Lewis who, in his last column for the *New York Times*, wrote "The most important office in a democracy, Justice Louis Brandeis said, is

1 [https://pressgazette.co.uk/media\\_business/journalism-job-cuts-2023/](https://pressgazette.co.uk/media_business/journalism-job-cuts-2023/)

the office of the citizen.” Citizens need to be informed accurately if “the democratic process is to be truly meaningful to them.” Otherwise, as book reviewer McInerney claimed in 2024, “the concept of democracy as ‘a country belonging to its citizens’ risks looking meaningless” (McInerney, 2024).

## Limitations and future research direction

As stated in the first section of the paper, the current piece serves as an introductory note aimed at providing impetus for future research on an under-researched topic. It is a theoretically based overview, both descriptive and critical in its storytelling, as it raises some crucial arguments regarding the core theme in question. The paper places emphasis on antithetical arguments, those advocated by pro-market economists and digital platforms, as opposed to those that favour compensation to news publishing entities. It would be really interesting if future research could shed light on the perspectives of the media market through empirical methods such as case studies, surveys and/or interviews. As mentioned above, “public service journalism” and “public service news” need to be preserved in a democratic society. To achieve this, future research could be based on designing acceptable and workable policies that can only be materialised if major digital platforms, news media publishers, and policymakers sit in the same table to discuss and elaborate them.

Initiating a regular dialogue with publishers, platforms and policymakers to review the broader developments within the industry and assess progress on possible government recommendations is a good way to take things forward. Such a dialogue could ensure that there are further opportunities to help identify additional interventions, where and when they are considered necessary. The common denominator is to ensure audience needs and expectations are well served. In addition, future research direction could focus on how Southern regions, which are in the process of employing “principles” with regard to media sustainability, could actually turn these principles into initiatives via legislation and competition authorities. Potential interviews with local experts could shed light to peculiarities of the Global South and the obstacles to implementing regulatory or otherwise measures.

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