

The News Media Associations response to the Ofcom's [Call for Evidence](#): Public service broadcasters and the UK production sector

1. Background

- 1.1. The News Media Association (“**NMA**”) is the voice of UK national, regional and local newspapers in all their print and digital forms - a £4 billion sector read by 49.2 million adults every month in print and online. Our members publish over 900 news media titles - from The Times, The Guardian, the Daily Mail and the Daily Mirror to the Yorkshire Post, Kent Messenger, and the Monmouthshire Beacon. Our membership spans the industry - from the largest groups to small, independent, family-owned companies publishing one or two local titles.
- 1.2. Collectively these publishers are by far the biggest investors in news, accounting for 58 per cent of the total spend on news provision in the UK. The Government and DCMS wish to sustain such high-quality journalism, particularly in the local and regional press. That investment in journalism is largely financed by advertising revenues from their print and online news publications and services.
- 1.3. The independent commercial press competes with public service broadcasters (“**PSBs**”) for audience and advertisers. It is therefore important that the Ofcom’s examination of the future of PSBs assess any potential impact upon the local, regional and national news publishers.

2. Key Lines

- 2.1. Our members currently have to navigate the current market imbalances caused by PSBs. We are, therefore, concerned that no further regulatory or funding advantages should be introduced for PSB broadcasters which would bolster the BBC and other PSBs at the expense of the independent, commercial press and its independent journalism, be it day to day news reporting, investigative journalism, or lively campaigning at local, national or global level. To do so would risk further undermining the free press in a democracy and its ability to hold power to account and provoking, informing and contributing to democratic debate. This will in turn adversely affect the audiences and the communities which the independent press serves.
- 2.2. This does not mean that our members, and the industry more broadly, would not welcome the development of genuine, equal partnerships with PSBs, so long as there is no compromise of editorial independence or sacrifice of commercial press revenues. Indeed, many of our members are interested in developing existing partnership initiatives. For example, the local democracy reporter scheme developed by the BBC and the NMA demonstrates that successful collaboration is possible.
- 2.3. Funding options could have particular impact upon the industry and it is important that no policy should be recommended which could unfairly handicap our members’ ability to compete with PSBs. Further public funding ought not be diverted to public service

broadcasters to incentivize their expansion into local, regional or national markets traditionally served by the independent press. That would create conditions of unfair competition which undermine the independent commercial press, to the detriment of its immediate audience and disadvantage of society more generally.

2.4. The government has [recognised](#) the role of the press as the ‘fourth emergency service’ and the ever-growing demand and audience for its trusted content at local, regional, national, and international level have been highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis. However, the pandemic and counter measures have also led to drastic fall in the advertising revenues which underpin the press, exacerbating and accelerating the problems, particularly those created by the dysfunctional nature of big tech companies. We would also welcome the opportunity to explore whether there are opportunities as well as threats for the industry.

2.5. The role of the role and remit of the BBC continues to be a crucial issue and the Cairncross Report recommended that Ofcom, now the BBC’s regulator assess its impact upon commercial newspaper publishers:

‘BBC’s market impact: Ofcom should assess whether BBC News Online is striking the right balance between aiming for the widest reach for its own content on the one hand and driving traffic from its online site to commercial publishers (particularly local ones) on the other. The BBC should do more to share its technical and digital expertise for the benefit of local publishers’

2.6. The NMA and our members are firmly of the opinion that of the review should give proper consideration to the local and regional impact of the BBC upon local and regional news publishers, as well as its national and international impact upon UK national publishers. If the Government is interested in sustaining news and information for local communities, it should not encourage, fund, or support BBC and other public service broadcasters’ intervention and displacement of the existing local news publishers and other media. Funding could instead be channelled into a pool that might fund extension of public interest reporters, employed by local publishers and others. This would sustain and support local journalism, print, online, broadcast, and other innovative services.

3. Conclusion

3.1. The NMA and its members would value the opportunity to discuss with Ofcom as it develops its proposals and thinking with regard to public service broadcasting, together with other relevant matters within its remit which impact upon the news publishing industry.

16 March 2021

News Media Association

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