

Think

new things

Make

new connections

Conference Note

The New Fourth Estate: building a resilient 21st- century information eco-system

2-3 December 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DITCHILLY

We are in the middle of (another) communications revolution. Journalism is re-finding its place in an evolving news and information system. This conference asked what open societies can do to deliver better models of information *supply* – rigorous journalism and trustworthy news; and to strengthen information *demand* – an appetite amongst citizens to seek out ‘truthful’ sources of information and additional context. A cohesive society, public institutions and democratic politics rest on some level of shared understanding – a spectrum of world views that are at least recognisable from diverse perspectives.

This conference, which included journalists and others from news and media organisations (both long established and new); academics; data and information visualisers; and those with philanthropic interests, did reach consensus about the need to accelerate innovation in how news and information is generated and consumed.

The failures of, and limitations on, current journalism to truly serve citizens; and a risk that journalism (especially investigative journalism) is becoming less valued, were a shared starting point: *“Journalism is speaking metaphorical Latin in an age of the new Tyndale bible”*. Changes in the business models of news organisations are on-going and well recognised but what is meant by ‘information’ or ‘news’ and how it flows through our technologies and culture is clearly changing. The transformation of the medium is changing the message. The fourth estate must renew itself and integrate with a fifth estate to sustain community cohesion, democratic institutions and a functioning democracy.

What is available from the current news and media landscape is uneven. The top end of the market serves a rich supply of a certain kind of (paid for) ‘quality’ news; sophisticated analysis, data, charts and commentary; while in other ‘news’ markets, the content is heavily determined by social media platforms primarily serving other objectives. The driving concern of this conference was to find ways the media system can adapt. We have access to more information sources than at any other point in human history, and yet news and media organisations were thought not to have adapted quickly enough to perform the function of a fourth estate for the benefit of society as a whole.

The challenge for journalism and for media organisations is to respond to changing demand and to innovate and invest in newer models to achieve a ‘good enough’ media ecosystem. There is clearly much innovation and change underway and technological shifts will force further change. AI foundation models for example, with predictive capabilities for the generation of content, are set to challenge some of the ways journalist copy is now produced. A range of developing 3D environments will alter the ways we interact, and more personalised flows of information bring greater individualised engagement and different relationships of trust (with influencers and peers rather than the ‘authoritative’ news anchor). Social media has created space for the distribution of news apps, podcasts and citizen journalism and new forms of local journalism.

As at all Ditchley conferences, the call was made for more and better education to equip people as digital citizens. Of course, education is essential to survive in a digital world, but it is not strong enough on its own to counter the organised forces of disinformation. Mechanisms to allow people more context around ‘news’ can help. And there was much interest in how the context for news can be built. For example, fact checking, data visualisation, charts, ‘explainers’, long-form podcasts and investigative citizen journalism or

on-line communities. These kinds of context generators help make sense of bits of information that can, when presented without context, mislead. Still, education and context are not enough of a response to deliberate (even state sponsored) disinformation. Much more is needed in this domain to publicly expose the mechanisms: who is doing it, why, and how is it being done.

FULL REPORT

Changing environment for journalism

The conference was reminded of the energy, innovation and anticipation for new media production as the internet came to life. The vision was of citizens able to connect unmediated and free. While this vision has been significantly dampened by the power of platform companies, there is still an aspiration for a technology that could be more 'democratically-oriented' with more multi-directional communication. The days of an authoritative gate-keeping news anchor were said to be over. However, this earlier internet emerged at least in part from research and parts of the university sector. Web 3.0 is overwhelmingly privately funded and driven by a different set of values.

The biggest challenge for the future of journalism is whether it can find relevance in a context of much greater competition for both attention and finance. What needs to change to convince people of the value of informative and investigative journalism as a public good when there is so much appealing, attention-grabbing or distracting content? The discussion drew on metaphors of food and nutrition in efforts to articulate the difference between nutritional information (good for you) and junk news (comforting but unhealthy). A lot of journalism was described as not good enough at competing with the more attractive and pervasive junk. There was a fair degree of self-criticism: complacency and resistance to change within media organisations was highlighted.

The uses of information

The uses of information are also changing. In the context of geopolitical competition, information is a theatre of war. In domestic politics, it is an omnipresent part of the political struggle. What used to be called propaganda is now referred to as 'weaponising'.

There has always been a tension between the media as a business, reflecting personal choice, and news and information as a public good. But the ways we share information via social media communities shows that our information choices are part of our personal identity. In the funding of journalism whether by membership, philanthropy, advertising, subscription or donation, people want to see media that reflects their values, (or at least a journalistic a quest for truth that also reflects their values).

The challenge is to enable innovation across all funding and business models and to build a wider ecosystem that increases exposure to sources of high-quality news and information. The question is 'What now is the Fourth Estate'? Is this still professional journalism? How does it integrate with a dynamic Fifth Estate of social media?

The importance of context

The importance of context was emphasised repeatedly. Deception is most often achieved by uses of information stripped of essential sense making context – partial truths can be as effective as outright disinformation. Most of what is described as disinformation is the amplification of strands of information taken out of context. This tactic is more powerful than just spreading false information. Greater context can add to a better understanding of news sources and ultimately the trustworthiness of content. There has not been enough journalistic attention on the processes of misinformation and disinformation; that is, who is driving it, where it's coming from and the mechanics of how it is delivered to us.

New business models

Local news has long been a victim of the structural changes in media systems. So many local titles, radio stations and newsrooms have folded. However, a case was made for revisiting business models for high quality local news. Large cities should be able to support local news teams. There are enough subscribers and advertisers to support local news without having to rely on philanthropy. Finding the audience – identifying, attracting and targeting specific audiences – was a key part of the pitch for a newer local news business model. Traditional news organisations tend not to do this. The last few years have also seen the re-emergence of local news that combine elements of citizen journalism, particularly at the city scale.

As well as the clear disadvantages that may come with foundation model-based systems like ChatGPT (such as a massive increase in misinformation), some advantages were thought possible. Could this technology be a tool for journalists to take out some journalistic drudgery? And for consumers, could the use of AI help circumvent and manage interaction with ever increasing quantities of information? Are there new business models for cognitive load management and for searching out and creating context for news and information? Could users control algorithms themselves and set their own parameters? These kinds of facilities will alter what we consider to be journalism. One optimistic thought was that journalists might just be able to stay ahead of the models with offers of new insights until such time as these technologies are able to process new information in real time.

Innovation

Large-scale trends suggest that innovation will come from the global companies based in northern California, Israel and East Asia. Europe is likely to be a receiver of technology rather than a creator. But a strong start-up culture was also anticipated and a continued increase in the use of mobile devices (already a major means of accessing news) with an expectation that people will want to talk to devices and be in conversation with them. People now use social media as their search engines. Media organisations will have to think through how to harness the power of voice and interactivity. Visual meaning-making has also developed and communication via image and representation of numbers is now a solid feature of (especially high end) media and is likely to grow further.

Facilities such as ChatGPT may start with basic production of PR style journalistic copy or passable student essays but in time these are likely to become more sophisticated in generating media content. This is a shift from massive distribution to massive production. However, blockchain technologies were also thought to offer more decentralised media

distribution, facilitating people to pay specific authors for their content. This could create opportunities for journalists and accelerate trends for tracking their own readership numbers (rather than consolidated numbers for the paper, programme or institution), underlining a tendency for people to trust and follow individual journalists rather than media organisations.

Podcasts have in some ways been an unexpected success. They allow people to explore a news story in more depth and the intimacy of the format also encourages relationships of trust. The danger, of course, is that once trust is gained, it can be hard to manage. How do you challenge a distorted view? The barriers to entry for podcasts are also much lower.

There was some discussion about news avoidance (with research evidence for avoidance amongst certain younger age groups) as part of a growing frustration with the state of the world. But also, there is evidence for new kinds of political engagement driven by new social media influencers with effective communicative skills rather than traditional journalism training. The interaction of traditional news and social media is underway with social media effectively driving the news agenda. Traditional media stories often pick up on or report on news gained from social media and the spread of news across national borders can lead to positive outcomes. Social media can extend the reach of trustworthy news outlets. For example, the availability of foreign news was crucial for South Korean citizens in finding out more about the deaths in the Halloween crush and the failings of the police in October 2022.

The argument for a reinvention of the public media for the digital age was made. Given AI and the associated trend towards personalisation in communication, the call was for a new public service media system to help create an inclusive public sphere and so safeguard democracies. The trend towards personalisation was thought to lead to a fragmentation of the public sphere and, to lessen this impact, the argument was that the state should have a stake. But there were also ideas about whether it is possible to incentive truth-seeking within the private sector market. Could the underlying business model for platforms in monetising attention be used to drive and incentivise a range of different sources? Could truth-seeking be incentivised?

The challenges for the future of journalism were summarised as:

- To avoid disaster – that is, the breakdown of community cohesion, democratic institutions and the further erosion of a news and information ecosystem that underpins a functioning democracy.
- To defend and rebuild a minimum viable product – described as a ‘good enough’ media ecosystem to support a fourth estate and to sustain democratic societies. Good enough means recognising changing demand and tackling the existing failures to adapt, innovate and invest. A better understanding of the demand for news and information is an essential starting point.
- To do what can be done immediately to take forward better forms of journalism, despite all its imperfections, in ways that support a resilient citizenry. A framework for the fourth estate.

- To intervene in the design of the emerging information environment. A framework for the fifth estate.
- To consider how a fifth estate will frame the newer kinds of demand both positive and negative; that is, the new media forms and demand for content, i.e. for more emotional, intimate and immediate content and to do so in ways that support and contextualise content that citizens want and need. How is a fifth estate system changing values?
- To recognise that large sections of the population are not being well served by professional journalism. Certain social groups are being 'super-served' whilst others are not served at all. The fourth estate can no longer replicate what went before.
- The minimal viable product includes: challenging lies; tackling the business models that monetise the actions of bad actors; tech transfer between well-funded news organisations who can afford innovation to support less wealthy news organisations around the world; basic education for digital literacy, i.e. that attention is monetised; and support an overriding aim to raise the level of political speech.
- For the fifth estate: there are new opportunities to adapt to new business models; to explore uses of new technologies such as generative AI that might support journalists to invest time and resources in areas of investigative journalism; and to use newer tools such as data journalism and visual communication that offer people new perspectives on the essential context of news and information. There are opportunities to collaborate with platforms and to consider the role of newer influencers and how to engage them in a news and information ecosystem. Is it possible to create truth-seeking profit motives?
- A call to action to both support the development of a minimal viable media ecosystem: philanthropy; universities and research centres; large media companies; journalists; smaller start-ups and to inform the development of the fifth estate and to adapt the emerging design.

This Note reflects impressions of the conference. No participant is in any way committed to its content or expression.

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