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Conference Summary

A Ditchley conference in collaboration with the MacArthur Foundation

The new Fourth Estate revisited: **how can we strengthen the news and information landscape in advance of the likely tough challenges of 2024?**

7-9 December 2023

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Conference Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This conference, held in collaboration with the MacArthur Foundation, explored today's changing media landscape and the fundamental challenges that lie ahead for the news media as a source of trustworthy information, in particular as we enter a record year of elections across the world in 2024. It asked what the role of journalists should be in a democracy, how the media can work to rebuild trust, and considered how the current era of rapid technological change is presenting both opportunities and challenges for news organisations.

There was healthy debate about the role of the media in a democracy. Some participants felt that journalists were morally obliged to strengthen and protect democracy and should do this by arguing the case for democracy, rather than being impartial. Others argued that this approach was sanctimonious and off-putting to the general public, who are already sceptical of what they see as "elite" journalists and/or suspicious of media bias, and that news organisations should rather focus on maintaining rigorous reporting standards, fact checking and transparency.

Crucially though, it was agreed that there is something of a crisis in journalism today with regard to public trust and that rebuilding this trust not only bolsters the profession, but also the foundation of democracy. The rise of fake news has played a significant role in the decline of the public's trust in the media, and it is imperative that we understand why people look for, consume and enjoy such information. Suggestions for re-establishing media credibility ranged from investing in fact-checking operations to showing the processes involved in reporting a story, while others felt that journalists should stick to the core ground rules for their trade and make sure there were clear distinctions drawn between reporting and opinion pieces.

The conference explored the idea that local news also has a role to play in re-establishing the public's trust in the media, by engaging people where they are at in their communities and reporting on issues of everyday significance in people's lives. Strengthening local media can also increase media literacy and reduce consumers' vulnerability to disinformation. New and varied models of local media from places including South Africa, Detroit and Manchester were examined and ideas for generating revenue streams to support local journalism were discussed, covering ideas such as public subsidies, government grants or high-value local advertising. It was agreed that there is no one-size-fits-all in local media model and that embracing the unique qualities of each community is essential to success.

The rapid pace of AI development in the past year provides both risks and opportunities for journalism moving forward. On the risk side there may be issues around copyright and intellectual property ownership, but AI could also provide opportunities for increased efficiency in areas including translation of articles or 'versioning' of news stories for different audiences, as well as aiding in identifying deep fakes. This could be particularly helpful in the local news context, where resources are often scarce. On balance, the feeling was that news organisations needed to embrace these opportunities going forward and be prepared to experiment with new technology, despite their fears.

It was noted that this embrace of technology should also include identifying and implementing experiments in digital spaces, like TikTok or other emerging platforms, which could be vital in enhancing editorial processes and adapting to evolving news consumption habits. In particular, this could be vital in reaching younger generations and engaging them in the media landscape. Where

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does (or should) agency lie? We find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, there are new possibilities, especially for new models of local news and other innovative collaborations, that have not existed before. But on the other hand, our current context means there is a handful of people/companies with the power to change the media world in real time with unstoppable technological advances.

Context and why this was important

The year ahead, 2024, is set to be a year with an unprecedented number of crucial elections. Countries representing around 40% of the world's GDP will elect or re-elect their national leaders. In many cases, these elections may change the outlook of the political systems – Donald Trump, for example, has said he would be dictatorial from the first day of his potential presidency. At the end of 2024, democracy could find itself in a larger crisis than it is now. With trust in the media at an all-time low in some countries, the focus of this conference was on strengthening the news and media landscape in the face of challenges on various fronts, as well as considering the media's changing relationship with democracy, the public and technology.

People

The conference brought together media leaders from legacy brands such as CNN, Reuters, Die Welt and the BBC, among others, as well as the heads of new local media organisations in places as varied as Detroit, South Africa and Manchester. It included senior representatives from journalism-focused foundations and nonprofits, such as Reporters without Borders, as well as security and news decision-makers from major tech platforms, including Meta and Google.

Analysis

FULL REPORT

This discussion considered the ways in which the news and media landscape has changed in recent years, and in particular how trust in journalism has been eroded, and asked what can be done to bolster news organisations ahead of upcoming challenges ranging from fake news to public disinterest to the rapid developments happening in AI. With a record election year ahead of us around the world, the conference started by asking what the role of journalists should be in in strengthening democracy?

Here there were opposing views put forward. Some participants felt that journalists have a moral duty to strengthen and protect democracy. In order to do this, rather than being impartial, they should be part of a movement for democracy and argue the case for democracy. They cited as an example of this the *Washington Post's* strapline ["Democracy Dies in Darkness"](). Others, however, strongly disagreed. They argued that journalists should avoid getting on their high horse. In their eyes, hyperbole like the *Washington Post*'s slogan sounds like an agenda and turns people off. The risk here is also that the idea of democracy becomes politically partisan and identified with 'one side'. And if that happens, then democracy becomes easier to undermine. They said it was not part of the journalist's role to sell democracy and that journalists ought to avoid any air of superiority and activism. Rather, they should focus on maintaining good standards and rigorous reporting. After all, surveys suggest that large majorities of respondents prefer impartial journalism.

Having said this, there was an agreement on the need to rebuild trust in the media. Trust is the media's currency, so if people have lost trust in journalism, does this put the foundation of democracy in jeopardy? Surveys by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism suggest that there is a generalised scepticism towards virtually all news sources, except for long-established

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institutions, such as public service broadcasters and legacy newspapers. How then can journalists make themselves be seen as more trustworthy? Some people pointed to initiatives by news organisations to show their processes when reporting stories and said that putting renewed efforts into fact-checking operations had also yielded some success. For example, the purpose of the BBC's new fact-checking department, BBC Verify, is to establish trust by showing the BBC's workings. Others felt that journalists should simply stick to the core rules of the trade to re-establish trust, such as making clear distinctions between reporting and opinion. It was generally thought that the crisis in the media is part of a broader crisis of society, a crisis of polarisation and a crisis of economic exclusion.

Interestingly, statistics show that authoritarian powers are ahead of democracies in investing in media. China and Russia spend significant amounts on media reach in foreign countries, including in Western democracies. If Western governments hope to maintain the alleged advantage they have in soft power, then they need to step up their efforts within this space.

The rise of fake news has played a significant role in the decline of the public's trust in the media, and it is imperative that we understand why people look for, consume and enjoy such information, taking into consideration both the content and the delivery of it. Simplicity of messaging can make content appealing, especially for audiences with low literacy levels. This is also taking place in an increasingly hostile environment for journalists, so that while revealing false information was generally viewed as a positive action, media platforms and journalists often face legal challenges and pressure from politicians and vested interests who feel threatened by this type of reporting. Lawsuits can have a chilling effect, with examples ranging from Prime Minister Narendra Modi limiting newspaper operations in India to US congressional committees making it more difficult for social media platforms to combat fake news.

This is situated within a wider decline of trust in media, whereby the objectivity of journalists is more regularly questioned. Rather than seen as truth-seeking reporters, there has been a normalisation of accusations that journalists are pursuing political agendas. This can lead to physical threats, endangering the journalists' lives and discouraging future recruits from taking up the profession. How then should journalists seek to cover politicians who lie and spread fake news? We cannot ignore them, but we do not want to provide them with constant attention. In the case of Trump, journalists initially provided detailed coverage with headlines about everything he said. However, more recently, journalists seem to have found a compromise in providing sufficient coverage. It was suggested that in covering politicians, journalists would need to find the right balance: they should focus on what they *did* rather than what they *said*.

Tech platforms also have a role to play in monitoring fake news. Meta, for example, publishes quarterly Adversarial Threat Reports to monitor the level of disinformation. The last report was released in late November 2023. They have identified Russia, China and Iran as key "threat actors" that have a stake in many elections. Strategies include so-called "slow twitch" disinformation operations that take months to carry out, as well as "fast twitch" operations that can take place within hours before an election. One of Meta's findings is that threat actors increasingly target local campaigns, such as mayoral races, where frequently no local journalists are left to offer a corrective. Moreover, threat actors often create fake media organisations by setting up websites that look like legitimate and professional news outlets. It is difficult, expensive and time-consuming to take these sites offline.

Legacy media also faces challenges in adapting to evolving audience preferences. Exploring systemic issues across various business models and pivoting toward norms, standards and best practices can help navigate this transition. In the medium term, rigorous testing, experiments, and initiatives supported by philanthropy and policy changes aim to develop a repository of practical models. This

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involves mentorship, sharing successes, and innovating new models that blend traditional journalism with social media. Emphasising diverse leadership and engaging individuals from different backgrounds are critical factors in these endeavours. It was also noted that it is imperative to cater to the behavioural patterns of the younger generations, who consume news in a significantly different way to older age groups. For example, TikTok is now a supplier of news. What opportunities are there for competitor news platforms in this sphere?

Relatedly, some participants said that consuming news exclusively through national and global lenses may contribute to polarisation. The experiential detachment makes it easier to jump to conclusions and adopt others' judgements – often extreme – on topics that are abstract. A dominant focus on events with global consequences covered in large-scale newspapers can create information gaps and local news can best help with filling information gaps in communities, helping make connections, and increasing accountability. Local news can also serve as a bridge to public and national news outlets by increasing media literacy, inoculating against misinformation and serving as an antidote to the narratives prevalent in national media.

Conference participants presented new models of local news from South Africa, Detroit, Manchester – all with varying business models. The lesson here was not to look for systemic one-size-fits-all business models and instead build norms, best practices and standards that can be incorporated as relevant to all, while also allowing for local variations to bolster the deeper goal to build and support local communities. Generating revenue streams to support local journalism, especially in smaller markets, is a complex challenge and exploring structural systems like public subsidies or revised high-value local advertising could offer potential solutions. Embracing ambitious plans for local coverage in rural or remote areas requires understanding each community's uniqueness and leveraging existing civic anchors like public radio or educational institutions.

It was generally agreed that improving editorial processes would necessitate putting fear aside and engaging in experimentation. Identifying and implementing experiments in digital spaces, like TikTok or other emerging platforms, could be vital in enhancing editorial processes and adapting to evolving news consumption habits. This would involve innovative approaches to delivering news content, while maintaining editorial standards and credibility. Regarding the changing landscape and potential shifts in methods and formats, emerging digital platforms suggest a trend towards personalised content consumption. This aligns with broader technological advancements, including AI, which might inundate us with high volumes of content in the future.

The swift development of AI over the past year, and the inevitable acceleration of progress yet to come, was seen as providing both risks and opportunities for journalists. While the risks, such as ownership of intellectual property, are not to be ignored, the use of this technology can also offer journalists 'superpowers' that will help the news industry survive and flourish. Some of the myriad of potential opportunities include using AI to help add context to articles, tweak content to create versions of the same story for different audiences, translate texts into multiple different languages to a high degree of accuracy, and also to identify the existence and source of deep fakes. And generative AI, for example, has the potential to help revive local news by creating content on everyday events (such as sporting events) with little resources required, while maintaining the regularity of engagement. This frequent engagement can in turn work towards rebuilding trust in media, starting from the local level.

It was noted that the only areas thus far where media organisations have been prepared to collaborate have been limited to legal issues and some aspects of public policy, and that creating active partnerships between national and local news could enhance coverage, especially in detecting election rule-breaking, as well as mitigating against the increasing threats that journalists might face. Some examples cited were collective defence funds against lawsuits and a stronger sense

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that an attack against one media outlet (provided it has acted properly and responsibly) is an attack against all. AI was also noted as a space for potential collaboration going forward, especially in a context in which media organisations in democratic countries are unprepared for the threats that will materialise in 2024 as a major election year. On balance the feeling was that news organisations need to embrace these opportunities going forward, despite their fears.

The conference split into three Working Groups to consider the role of local news and new business models for journalism, the impact of AI on newsgathering, and the issue of public engagement with the media.

Local news and new business models for journalism

The loss of local newspapers over recent years has increased concerns about local accountability. Such a decline affects democracy, reduces media literacy, risks an increase in the spread of misinformation and reduces community connectedness, leading to detrimental effects on social stability and, consequently, a country's international capabilities. In addition, participants noted a connection between local and national news, saying that access to a high-quality mix of both could increase trust in the news industry. Investing in local news appears pivotal for fostering meaningful community engagement.

The absence of robust local news coverage can lead to crucial local debates, for example on traffic management or local climate measures, being sidelined. These gaps are being filled by private forums like WhatsApp community groups that engage with these discussions in closed settings. Is there then a way for local news to engage with these types of platforms? There is also an imbalance in access to local media, with the most consumed news being national, which can spark feelings of polarisation and disempowerment in local communities.

The impact of AI on journalism was likened to the disruptive phase of the beginnings of the internet, creating gaps where misinformation thrives and accountability wanes. Capturing and growing audiences becomes crucial, but the primary aim should be to navigate these changes to support communities. Ultimately, local news plays a role in closing information gaps, enhancing accountability, and preserving community connections in an evolving media landscape.

However, generating revenue streams to support local journalism, especially in smaller markets, is a complex challenge. Exploring structural systems like public subsidies, revised high-value local advertising or subscription models could offer potential solutions. Embracing ambitious plans for rural or remote areas requires understanding each community's uniqueness and leveraging existing civic anchors like public radio or educational institutions. Journalism is a crucial pillar of democracy facilitating informed decision-making and holding power accountable, therefore striking a balance between embracing innovation while still honouring journalism's core principles was felt to be essential in navigating its evolution in today's dynamic media landscape.

The impact of AI on newsgathering, content creation, ownership, verification and the information ecosystem at large

Experimentation was regarded being crucial when it came to the use of AI within the media, and that news organisations should be afraid of missing out on the impact of AI, rather than of AI itself. It was noted that a lot of the mistakes involving AI so far have often been caused by human misuse of AI, rather than issues with the technology. Journalists should seek to become experts in AI, while remaining rooted in the principles and standards of journalism. Looking ahead, there is an important role to be played in bridging the gap between the news industry and technology companies and platforms.

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In discussing the role of AI in newsgathering and content creation, participants suggested a number of positive uses for AI such as in assisting in data collection and research. For example, it could be used to track what experts are saying on a specific topic to then analyse trends. Critically, more could be done training journalists in how to use AI. Norms and practices need to be developed to ensure humans check the data and outputs that AI produces for news. Another area where AI could be of use is in helping to reformulate content, for example to create 'versions' of a new story for different audiences. Some evergreen content such as sports reporting or chattier pieces could have more AI involvement, freeing up other areas for in-depth reporting. AI could also provide tools and services such as translation, personalised newsletters, live blogs etc.

Collaboration between smaller news organisations to support developing the uses of AI, as well as with technology companies, could help address the issues of scale and access for smaller outlets. Collaboration does not only need to be with other newsrooms, but could also be more broadly with other adjacent organisations such as businesses and universities. That said, it is vital to understand that establishing guidelines or principles for the use of AI by the media requires a deeper understanding of the technology and the implications of its uses. For example, much recent focus has been on deep fakes, but the quieter, hyper-targeted localised influence campaign is a bigger issue and one that has been enabled at speed and scale by AI. A longer-term consequence of misinformation could be an emerging belief that nothing is real or trustworthy. On the other hand, AI could be also used to trace potential disinformation that could then be flagged to a human controller for review.

While the advances in technology may be disruptive, the media should ensure that journalistic ethics remain. Journalists must engage in governance of AI and proper evaluation and testing of AI's usage. The news industry has thus far left innovation to the market. Should the state intervene with funding to assist in the evolution of AI-enabled news?

Public engagement

Public trust is a fundamental component of public engagement with the media. Why has this been eroded and what can be done to regain public trust in journalism? Several participants suggested that trust in the UK media appears to be relatively high in medical or climate reporting, whereas political reporting has much lower levels of trust. It was felt that this may be partly due to a lack of transparency and the impression that political reposting relies heavily on backroom gossip and WhatsApp briefings. Similarly, it was noted that in some news outlets around the world there has been a shift to focus more on comment, opinion and debate, rather than straight news reporting. It is therefore necessary to reintroduce some basic journalistic hygiene.

More transparency around news gathering could help to build up trust, and one suggestion was that the media ought to bring people inside the tent and show them how journalists act as "fair witnesses". Longer-form journalism and podcasts are able to document the process of journalism, as well as the story itself. However, this is more difficult in short TV clips and soundbites. One example given of a way to provide context was by inserting QR codes on TV screens with additional information about the background of news stories, as has been seen in Mongolia. External bodies could also help to provide checks and balances, for example the [Trusted News Initiative](#) has made important contributions on how to regain audience trust, and the [Institute for Nonprofit News (INN)](#) has created useful [membership standards](#).

Communication, language and clarity matter. One recent example cited was the fact that the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) wrote its initial guidance on Covid19 in a way that was hard to understand and therefore bred public mistrust. Journalists need to be clearer in their communication and avoid

jargon. Moreover, language matters when we talk about issues related to democracy. For example, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement's (PACE) "Civic Language Perceptions Project" found that the phrase "how to strengthen communities" resonates more strongly with people than the words "how to stabilise democracies". It was also suggested that journalism does not do a good enough job in explaining complexities. It was noted that readers particularly like it when journalists point to caveats, explain the complexity of a given situation, and/or point to the limitations of the available evidence. Audiences tend to appreciate nuanced accounts and an admission by journalists that they don't always know everything.

The public is also often interested in engaging with the media and journalists should use this as a mechanism to build trust. A *Zeit Online* project where participants were teamed up to debate the question of whether the EU should abolish the Euro showed that people were keen to engage with news and not just consume it. For many people, simply putting comments underneath articles is no longer enough. In addition, when journalists engage with the public, they need to define target age groups and adapt their way of engaging accordingly: 15-year-olds, 20-year-olds, 25-year-olds etc. require different forms of engagement. For example, local news is most relevant for people who are older than 30, especially people with children who need to learn about the local infrastructure and services, while many younger people have been using TikTok as a news source since they were in primary school. Journalists need to meet their target audience where they congregate. It was also suggested that there is a need for more "solutions journalism" and explanatory journalism. New formats could be snappier, shorter and more vertical. An interrogative format of questions-and-answers could also be a fruitful option.

Another way to meet people where they are is to make use of authentic voices within communities who can speak to their own lived experience of any given news story. For example, stories about AR-15 shootings in the US appear to have been effective in getting gun rights activists to reconsider their positions.[1] Their coverage was based on authentic voices of individuals from communities. This indicates the power of forensic, investigative and interactive journalism, using photos, videos and personal testimonials.

Is there a role for government in rebuilding public trust in the media? Some participants posited that governments could support education initiatives, while others suggested that schools and NGOs should offer education about the role of the press. Other attendees said states should offer financial support to the media. For example, Canada has introduced a labour tax credit for journalistic work. That means corporations can claim a tax credit when they hire journalists. Likewise, non-profit organisations get funding when they hire journalists. The role of public service media was also discussed, in particular with reference to a study by Timothy Neff and Victor Pickard that suggests high levels of secure funding for public media systems and strong structural protections for the independence of those systems are positively correlated with healthy democracies.

Rising to the moment in 2024

As things currently stand, concerns were expressed that the media is not fully prepared for the bumper election year ahead. In comparison, it was felt that news organisations were better resourced, more energised and faced fewer complicating factors in 2020. But, if they can heed this call to action, be open to experimentation and meet this moment in the coming year, then there is room for optimism ahead.

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

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[1] See, for example, Silvia Foster-Frau, N. Kirkpatrick and Arelis R. Hernández, "Terror on Repeat", *The Washington Post*, 16 November 2023.

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