

Speech: Jeremy Wright – Society of Editors speech

Good morning.

Appearing at the Society of Editors is a challenging prospect for most politicians.

But I was keen to come here today both to celebrate our press and to contribute to this critical debate about its future.

Today's theme is 'The Trust Factor and how to fund it', and every day in my role I see the importance of trust in our communities.

And I see the vital work that all the different elements of our civil society do to reinforce it.

Our press has a level of trust and freedom that is rightly envied and respected across the world.

But a free and trusted press must also be a sustainable press.

A benefit of the digital revolution is that so many people from around the world can now see your content.

But I recognise there is a real problem in converting that interest into revenue.

And the strength and sustainability of our press is something that should concern us all.

Especially when we look at this in a global context.

Across the world, we are seeing journalists under threat and state sponsored disinformation drowning out the free and open press.

And the risks of a diminished press are very real. A less informed public, a democratic deficit and less of a spotlight on vital public institutions. Institutions like the courts.

In my previous role as Attorney General, I was always impressed by the diligence of the journalists who informed the public about complex and challenging cases.

And the careful way in which they, most of the time, combined accurate reporting with respect for the law so everyone is able to get the fair trial they deserve.

It is a good example of the importance of a healthy and sustainable free press.

A Press that gives people not just what they want to read but what they ought to read, makes our society is stronger.

And helping you to deliver that is one of my big priorities in my new role as Secretary of State at DCMS.

Cairncross Review

As many of you know the Government has set up a Review under Dame Frances Cairncross in recognition of the pressing need to sustain high quality news.

Thank you for your engagement with it, whether it's through our expert panel or through sharing your views in the consultation. We are on course to publish the review early next year.

Now, this is an independent review and it wouldn't be appropriate for me to speculate on or pre-judge its findings.

But it is clear that the days of print sales and print advertising meeting the costs of producing quality journalism are largely behind us.

And that the trend for consumers to seek news content online will not be reversed, but will, if anything accelerate.

But I am confident that the review will show there are ways for quality journalism to go from strength to strength in the digital era.

It is undeniable that the digital revolution has led to a world in which the value of quality content is not sufficiently rewarded.

This means an understandable but harmful trend towards cheaper to produce content, which endangers the investigative journalism that needs time and resources to do well.

There is an urgent need to turn this around. On the one hand, I firmly believe that technology is a force for good and that social media platforms have brought great opportunities.

But many of these platforms are powered by the sharing of news, and it is vital that the producers of this news are recognised and rewarded.

I have urged Dame Frances to look carefully at this point.

Of course, whilst I believe the Cairncross Review will be an important step in setting out a new future for our quality press, it will not be a silver bullet. Nor will it produce one single model for every publisher to follow.

And so it is important that we all look at what is within our gift to change, as we strive to strengthen our free press and democratic engagement.

Representation

The government is thinking long and hard how to support a vibrant press

industry in the years ahead.

But the press must also look at itself. Not only in terms of testing new business models, but in terms of remaining relevant to our discourse as a society in representing and reflecting the communities that you serve.

In Edinburgh I spoke of how our Public Service Broadcasters are national institutions, and today as I speak to another group of institutions that are vital to the fabric of our nation, my message is the same. The transfer of trust from generation to generation can no longer be taken for granted. But neither is it unachievable.

The shift to online presents opportunities to engage new audiences. And proper representation is vital to winning and maintaining their trust.

That means greater ethnic and gender diversity and greater diversity in the background of those who work in the press industry, and drawing on the talents of more of the country's geography.

We are currently in Manchester, where the BBC and ITV now produce much of their output.

And whilst it will of course be disappointing for this great city that it was not announced as the new home for Channel 4's National Headquarters, I must congratulate Leeds, and indeed Glasgow and Bristol for securing new Channel 4 creative hubs.

And I congratulate Channel 4 for seeing the value of getting beyond the capital and using the creativity that can be found in all parts and communities of the UK and I am delighted that they have committed to commission more content outside London too.

Proper representation can be achieved in a variety of ways. And I would urge you, just as you ask probing questions of others, to ask probing questions about the make up of your own organisations.

Not simply because it is the right thing to do, but because it makes good business sense.

A more representative press is more likely to reach more people.

Investigative journalism

And there are some areas in which we should all want more people to read what you produce.

And finally I want to touch on an area in which I think our press is the best in the world – the exceptional quality of investigative journalism.

Some of this has been through traditional sources, like the Guardian and Channel 4's excellent work on Cambridge Analytica.

Standing side by side with first class investigative journalism online.

Like BBC Africa's excellent online investigation into the killing of civilians by soldiers in Cameroon, which went viral worldwide on Twitter, showing there is still appetite for dogged and forensic investigative journalism.

It has been encouraging to see new outlets like BuzzFeed working with traditional media to break headline hitting stories, and I am sure we will see more of these in the coming years.

I really wanted to come here today and applaud the importance of what you do.

British journalists regularly produce stories that drive major changes for the better in politics and society more broadly.

And you have been sharing your investigative skills with others too. There has been some excellent work on media literacy by publications represented in this room, helping young people to develop the critical thinking skills they need.

These initiatives are so important, especially in an era where disinformation is prevalent, and often commercially lucrative.

Thank you for this work, and the Government is looking at how we can complement it to help people of all ages separate fact from fiction.

Because high quality investigative journalism holds our institutions to account and makes our country, and public life, a much better place.

And it's the kind of journalism that can and must be part of the antidote to so called 'fake news'.

Conclusion

So, at a time when trust is in short supply, our media is as important as it has ever been.

The fight against disinformation and the sustainability of our press are two sides of the same coin.

You help guarantee a society with rigour and accuracy at its core. And you do excellent work. We might not always like what you write about us. But your right to report and publish freely is critically important for us all.

Thank you very much and I'm looking forward to taking your questions.