

# Speech: Matt Hancock on 'The Future of the Media' at the Oxford Media Convention

We meet at a time of great change. Over the past generation, we have lived through some of the most radical changes since the invention of the printing press.

At the heart of the digital revolution is an unprecedented collapse in the cost of gathering and transmitting information.

And since gathering and transmitting information is at the heart of what you do, it's little wonder the media is probably affected more than anything else.

Not everyone thought that this would be the case. Take the American commentator Clifford Stoll, who wrote in Newsweek magazine in 1995: "Try reading a book on disc. At best, it's an unpleasant chore: the myopic glow of a clunky computer replaces the friendly pages of a book. And you can't tote that laptop to the beach. Yet some predict that we'll soon buy books and newspapers straight over the Internet."

He said "The truth is no CD-ROM can take the place of a competent teacher, no computer network will change the way government works... and no online database will replace your daily newspaper".

Newsweek, of course is now digital only.

But he wasn't the only one who underestimated the transformative effect of technology on our media and on our society.

And last time that the change was this big, the invention of the printing press brought about the fall of the established feudal order, the Thirty Years War, the end of the power of the church, and then ultimately paved the way for the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

And I just hope we can make the path smoother this time round.

The world has changed, and today I want to look to the future.

I only hope my speech will fare a bit better than Clifford Stoll's article.

But Stoll was not all wrong. He went on to say:

"What the Internet hucksters won't tell you is that the Internet is one big ocean of unedited data, without any pretence of completeness. Lacking editors, reviewers or critics, the Internet has become a wasteland of unfiltered data. You don't know what to ignore and what's worth reading."

Sound familiar?

There are a multitude of challenges facing our media today. Falling newspaper circulations, declining advertising revenues, changing consumption and wholesale disinformation.

Trusted, sustainable, high quality media is needed now more than ever.

Yet the established media also face urgent challenges to reflect and represent the citizens they serve.

I want to take a moment to examine these challenges, through three lenses:

Accuracy. Sustainability. And diversity.

And to ask “what is the role of Government in a liberal democracy as we navigate these turbulent times?”

### **Accuracy**

The first area I want to look into is accuracy, where we’re seeing real threats to our media; to our society as a whole; is disinformation, also known as ‘fake news’.

Now let us not pretend that journalism has always been an error free business.

News is fast paced and mistakes can happen as stories change and new facts emerge. We all know the strapline for over-enthusiastic journalists: not wrong for long.

But there is a difference between a mistake under the pressure of a deadline and deliberate disinformation designed to disrupt.

According to last year’s Reuters Institute Digital Survey, only 43 per cent of the UK population felt they could trust the news most of the time.

We know that some of the problem is state-sponsored. Russia, for instance, persistently deploys its state-run media organisations to manipulate democratic institutions.

Some of this disinformation comes from people who simply see a business opportunity.

A recent MIT study showed that falsehoods are 70 per cent more likely to be retweeted than stories verified by fact-checking authorities.

Clicks of course mean money and so there are financial incentives to publish sensational stories, with little regard for their accuracy.

A BuzzFeed report showed that two of the most widely shared fake news stories in the whole of 2016 originated from the same small town in Macedonia, where fake news can be a primary source of income.

Commercial clickbait is in some ways easier to deal with, and the platforms have taken action.

This toxic combination of political and financial motives is not just concerning, but can also be downright dangerous.

We saw a number of widely shared fake news stories after the Manchester terrorist attack, including reports of another attack at Oldham Hospital. This caused panic and alarm and added unnecessarily to the workload of our fantastic emergency services.

We reap massive benefits in this country from our free, open and accessible media. But we must act to deter those who want to take advantage of this to cause harm.

And this ultimately matters to anyone who believes in our way of life in a liberal democracy.

From Cicero to Rousseau, thinkers throughout history have underlined the importance of a successful democratic discourse.

And we should aim for a discourse in which all sides accept objective facts, and then we can dispute what to do about the world we live in. To quote the legendary Guardian editor C.P. Scott "Comment is free but facts are sacred."

And this is why fake news is corrosive. It both allows a discourse in which uncomfortable facts are dismissed as fake news, and allows fake news – in other words lies – to underpin political opinions and decisions, even having been debunked.

Of course fake news has always been around. There's a quote that Mark Twain is said to have said – "a lie gets half the way round the world before the truth gets its shoes on". Although even that quote is disputed, so maybe that's fake news as well...

But this inherent human behaviour is multiplied by technology, and it corrodes our democratic discourse.

It's no good just complaining about it. We must act.

First things first, this impact of technology underlines the need to support some existing institutions.

I firmly believe that for all its faults, if we didn't have the BBC, today we would want to invent it. My God it can be infuriating, and bureaucratic, and desperately in need of more diversity of thought.

But the BBC is our best bulwark against fake news and I celebrate its role in British public life, and I pay tribute to the stewardship of Lord Hall of Aunty.

And I want to see the BBC do yet more around the world. I'm delighted at the World Service expansion. We strongly support its foreign language services,

like Persian, Pidgin and Pashto, and we want to see it do more.

Like the civil service, the principle of objectivity is drilled into its culture, and I want public service broadcasters to be more muscular in asserting their judgement and objectivity.

While more reflection is needed domestically on the BBC's institutional and subconscious biases, this objectivity is vital. And let's be clear what objectivity means.

Objectivity means stating this fact is wrong, and that fact is true, and not giving any airtime to total nonsense at all. Where facts can be established, your duty is to tell the truth.

Objective reality exists. Your job is to find it and tell it. Have confidence, broadcasters. Your country needs you!

But our existing institutions are not enough. We must work on technological solutions.

I welcome recent moves by Facebook and Google to use technology to prevent the spread of fake news online, through algorithms that promote trusted news rather than dubious sources.

I applaud solutions, like we've seen from Twitter, to tackle the use of online 'bots' that aim artificially to boost fake news.

Tech companies are starting on their journey to maturity. The adolescents who moved fast and broke things now accept that they have a responsibility to society, a duty of care to curate an online world of trust, not fakery. But we are in the foothills, and there's a lot of growing up to do.

Part of the solution also lies in education. Our schools and our curriculum have a valuable role to play so students can tell fact from fiction and think critically about the news that they read and watch.

But it is not easy for our children, or indeed for anyone who reads news online. Although we have robust mechanisms to address disinformation in the broadcast and press industries, this is simply not the case online.

Take the example of three different organisations posting a video online.

If a broadcaster published it on their on demand service, the content would be a matter for Ofcom.

If a newspaper posted it, it would be a matter for IPSO.

If an individual published it online, it would be untouched by media regulation.

Now I am passionate in my belief in a free and open Internet. But freedom does not mean the freedom to harm others. Freedom can only exist within a framework.

Digital platforms need to step up and play their part in establishing online rules and working for the benefit of the public that uses them.

We've seen some positive first steps from Google, Facebook and Twitter recently, but even tech companies recognise that more needs to be done.

We are looking at the legal liability that social media companies have for the content shared on their sites. Because it's a fact on the web that online platforms are no longer just passive hosts.

But this is not simply about applying publisher or broadcaster standards of liability to online platforms.

There are those who argue that every word on every platform should be the full legal responsibility of the platform. But then how could anyone ever let me post anything, even though I'm an extremely responsible adult?

This is new ground and we are exploring a range of ideas...

including where we can tighten current rules to tackle illegal content online...

and where platforms should still qualify for 'host' category protections.

We will strike the right balance between addressing issues with content online and allowing the digital economy to flourish.

This is part of the thinking behind our Digital Charter. We will work with publishers, tech companies, civil society and others to establish a new framework...

...that protects users and their rights online, and offers opportunities alongside obligations for businesses and platforms.

Trusted brands will help us to tackle this important issue.

Everyone in this room, whether print, broadcast or online, has a part to play in providing reporting that everyone can trust.

People are increasingly looking for trust in the midst of a sea of uncertainty.

A sustainable, healthy and trusted press is a beacon for our democracy and that it is what we must keep in our sights.

## **Sustainability**

This brings me on to sustainability, the second lens on the future.

The Internet has been an immense force for good, connecting people around the world.

And in so doing, it has turned the established order on its head and raised real questions about the sustainability of high quality journalism.

UK newspaper circulations have halved since 2001. And although digital 'clicks' are rising, the average revenue per digital media user is only 8% of a reader in print.

Local newspapers are particularly under threat, with over 200 closing since 2005. They play a vital role in binding together communities and holding local politicians and authorities to account.

We need to make sure the fourth estate can survive and thrive in the face of rapidly developing technology, and that it's appropriately rewarded for the content it creates.

The role for Government is to work out what's a public policy goal, and what is the natural impact of a disruptive new technology.

And I'm clear about this:

Sustaining high quality journalism is a vital public policy goal. The scrutiny, the accountability, the uncovering of wrongs and the fuelling of debate is mission critical to a healthy democracy.

After all, journalists helped bring Stephen Lawrence's killers to justice and have given their lives reporting from places where many of us would fear to go.

And while I've not always enjoyed every article written about me, that's not what it's there for.

I tremble at the thought of a media regulated by the state in a time of malevolent forces in politics. Get this wrong and I fear for the future of our liberal democracy. We must get this right.

I want publications to be able to choose their own path, making decisions like how to make the most out of online advertising and whether to use paywalls. After all, it's your copy, it's your IP.

The removal of Google's 'first click free' policy has been a welcome move for the news sector. But I ask the question – if someone is protecting their intellectual property with a paywall, shouldn't that be promoted, not just neutral in the search algorithm?

I've watched the industry grapple with the challenge of how to monetise content online, with different models of paywalls and subscriptions.

Some of these have been successful, and all of them have evolved over time. I've been interested in recent ideas to take this further and develop new subscription models for the industry.

Our job in Government is to provide the framework for a market that works, without state regulation of the press.

We have launched an external review to examine the sustainability of this country's press, to propose solutions to protect the future of high quality

journalism.

The review will be led by Dame Frances Cairncross. Frances will bring her experience as a journalist, in business and in academia to bear on the thorny and complex questions at the heart of press sustainability.

Panelists include Peter Wright, a former editor of the Mail on Sunday.

Polly Curtis, Editor in Chief at the Huffington Post.

And Geraldine Allinson, who is chair of the KM Media Group.

The Cairncross review will...

take a clear-eyed view of how the press is faring in this new world...

explore where innovation is working well...

... and explore whether intervention may be required to safeguard the future of our free and independent press.

The review will take evidence, report and publish recommendations within a year. We're confident that we will find solutions that can help both the industry and the Government tackle these issues.

This is not about Government regulating the media, and nor is it about propping up old business models that have stopped being viable.

Rather, it is about making sure that we don't wake up in five years' time to find that high quality journalism has been decimated and our democracy damaged as a result.

It may be that the market will create new, viable business models for high quality journalism, and indeed some of those new models have already started to appear.

Just look at the FT, the Spectator and the Economist. Three publications, all founded in the 19th century, reinventing themselves and attracting new readers at a phenomenal rate.

But high quality news is so important to our democracy that we need these success stories across the board, and to have the right market structures to do so. This is about acting in time, before irreversible damage is done to our news industry.

Our nation has a distinguished history of a fearless and independent press. I made the decision not to reopen the Leveson Inquiry and not to commence Section 40, so we could focus on these big questions of the future.

But I do want to see high standards. I want to see IPSO's low cost arbitration system working, so anyone, of whatever means can get redress. It can't be right that, in some places, a large front page mistake can still get a tiny page 18 correction.

For high standards of ethics and high quality media of all forms is critical to our democracy.

Our broadcasters are also being impacted by these seismic changes. And as Sharon White said last week, young British teenagers recognise the name YouTube more than they do the BBC. That is a striking fact.

So broadcasters also need to be on a sustainable footing. As we leave the EU, and the relevant directives, we are exploring options for mutual recognition.

Our goal is to allow for continued transfrontier broadcasting, which is good for Britain, and good for the rest of the EU too. And I look forward to working with all our broadcasters to make this happen.

## **Diversity**

This brings me to the third lens through which I want to look at the future of our media: diversity.

For our media to thrive, be relevant and trusted in the years to come, it needs to serve all of our communities and all parts of our country.

The future of our media must have diversity at its heart.

Diversity of gender, of race, of sexual orientation. Of social background and of region. Diversity when it comes to attitude, and disability, and personality type.

In the inspiring words of Idris Elba, diversity of thought.

The media has a special responsibility to reflect the nation it serves. There was a time when an Oxford Media Convention could have doubled up as a university reunion.

Likewise, I could forgive you for being sceptical when you see a white, middle-class man in a suit talking to you about diversity. But this is a moral imperative for everyone.

And I care about it not just because it is right.

I care about it because it's good business sense too: I've never seen a decision that can't be improved by discussion with a diverse group.

And I care because I care about my country. And a media with one set of assumptions based in one postcode in the capital can't possibly reflect, represent or serve the country as a whole.

High quality media is public service, and it's got to serve the public.

We've seen some good progress in recent years.

For the first time, diversity, both on screen and off screen, has been enshrined within the BBC Operating Licence. This diversity will help fulfil the BBC's Charter commitment to distinctiveness.



We are taking action to make sure people with disabilities affecting sight or hearing can have equal access to video on demand platforms.

And we have seen the launch and development of Project Diamond, to capture a range of diversity data directly from TV programmes.

But there is so much more to do. Publishers and broadcasters should be a mirror for their communities, and represent the wide variety of views and perspectives that make this country so great.

The publication of gender pay gap data has shown that transparency can shine a light on inequality and bad practise.

I would call on all broadcasters and publications to publish your data on all diversity characteristics, not just those you are compelled to by law.

Because this isn't going away.

Diversity is about regional representation as well.

Local papers play a crucial role in this and we are working hard to give them the support and sustainability that they need.

And there is also a role for publicly owned broadcasters, who need to do more to share their considerable benefits more widely across the UK.

As the BBC has shown with the successful relocation of 2,500 roles to Salford, public service broadcasters can transform communities and build new creative hubs across the UK. BBC Breakfast and Five Live have had a markedly different tone and feel since their move.

But more than two thirds of UK producers are based in London and the South East, while the vast majority of people live elsewhere.

This limits the spread of jobs, prosperity, and opportunity outside the capital, and limits the representation of local views and interests on TV.

I'm delighted that Channel 4 is creating a new National HQ, outside London, and increasing its out-of-London commissioning to over 50%, stimulating our creative economy across the country.

There's a huge swathe of interest, and I'm sure they will see some fantastic bids from across the UK.

This will lead to a greater reflection, both on and off-screen, of the regional diversity of the country, and will support creative clusters across the UK.

It's what the public want, and I pay tribute to the vision and leadership of Alex Mahon in making it happen.

And I hope that others will look to follow her lead.

## **Conclusion**

So, our media faces challenges like never before.

Each way we turn, long held assumptions are turned on their heads.

But the solutions are within our grasp.

Technology will not slow down; it will get only faster and smarter.

Yet the essential human yearning for truth; for a story; for belonging and understanding, will surpass this technological age and endure.

We face many hurdles. Yet among this turbulence I tell you this:

There is no place on Earth with more of a chance, with more rich depth or more capability.

More able to make this work and shape the future.

The choices we make; the decisions we take as we face foursquare the new challenges and new chances of the age we live in will shape our country and our world for generations to come.

So let us face them together. And let us rise to the task.