

### THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN DEMOCRACIES: WHAT IS IT, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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#### Summary

- The media plays a vital role in healthy democracies. It provides an arena for the exchange of information and opinion, a source of accountability, and a means for politicians to communicate with the public.
- Media independence and pluralism are essential to support this role. But recent concerns have been raised about both. In addition, parts of the media have been accused of amplifying polarising rhetoric, and spreading damaging misinformation and disinformation.
- Maintaining a healthy media sector requires action from both politicians and the media. Politicians should refrain from undermining or driving down public trust in reputable media; the media in turn must take seriously its responsibility for accuracy and the tone of public debate.

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#### Background

In a democracy, the media [educates, informs and entertains](#) – including through news, opinion, analysis, satire and drama. It is a key route through which the public hears about politics, and it plays an important role in shaping the public agenda and forming public opinion.

However, in recent years [frequent concerns](#) have been expressed about the health of the news media. Attacks on media independence or broadcaster impartiality have raised alarm. Media market changes have led to cuts in local and investigative journalism and have amplified polarising rhetoric and misinformation. Monopoly ownership may yield undue concentration of power.

#### Why does the media matter for democracy?

The media is central to democratic participation. It creates an arena for the exchange of opinion, discussion and deliberation – a space sometimes referred to as the [‘public sphere’](#). It provides a channel of communication between politicians and the public, allowing politicians to communicate their beliefs and proposals, giving the public the information that they need in order to participate, and allowing the voices of the public to be heard by politicians. The media also assists in [holding politicians to account](#) – through reporting, and direct scrutiny such as interviews.

The media has an important role in the [formation of public opinion](#). Via the content and tone of its coverage, it can influence how members of the public understand an issue, which topics they consider important, and what information they use in forming overall political judgements.

These central media roles of influencing public opinion and aiding political accountability mean that politicians engaged in [‘democratic backsliding’](#) around the world often threaten media independence. This can take [many forms](#), from overt censorship, persecution via the law and violence against journalists, to funding cuts and the takeover of supposedly independent media outlets or regulators.

## What does a free and healthy media look like?

A free and healthy media requires several features, including media independence, pluralism, the existence of impartial outlets, and high journalistic standards.

Media **independence** refers to editorial independence from both political interference and financial control. Though politicians have a right of reply relating to media content about them, independence requires that media outlets or individual journalists should not come under undue pressure to present (or suppress) particular points of view or facts.

Media **pluralism** requires a diverse sector, providing a range of viewpoints. Monopolistic ownership can threaten pluralism, if this reduces the range of views represented. Beyond that, diversity is best achieved through a mix of market-oriented outlets, [public service media](#) (responding to needs that purely commercial outlets might not address, such as current affairs or arts programming), as well as media presence in local, community and minority settings, to avoid '[news deserts](#)'.

**Impartial media outlets** ensure the public can access unbiased information – a function with [strong public support](#). The UK's split model requires broadcasters, but not other outlets, to be impartial.

**High standards from journalists** are also crucial. Journalistic [ethics](#) include high standards of fact-checking and verification, avoidance of misleading emphasis, protection for sources, and respect for privacy. Such ethics are vital to maintaining public trust, as shown by the 2011 [phone-hacking scandal](#). They also allow the media to counter disinformation – rather than unwittingly to spread it.

**Regulation** of standards is necessary, but also complex, requiring balance with the need for media independence. For example, the current [Media Bill](#) proposes to repeal punitive damages for newspapers that do not belong to an [approved regulatory regime](#). Some have seen this system of damages – which exists in law but has never been implemented – as threatening press freedom, while others have considered it essential to ensure minimum regulatory standards.

## What risks does the media face?

As indicated above, responsibility for maintaining a healthy media rests with both politicians and the media directly. Experts have identified risks from both quarters.

### 1. Threats to broadcaster impartiality

- Impartial broadcasters in the UK are important sources of reliable and non-partisan information. This is particularly true of the public service broadcasters – which comprise most famously the BBC, but also ITV/STV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and the Welsh-language S4C.
- Public service broadcasters are often subject to [allegations of bias](#) – which ironically come from different sides of the political spectrum. While politicians have every right to respond to critical coverage, claims of bias are likely to weaken trust. They may also hinder the broadcasters in holding the powerful to account – for example, some [have alleged](#) that such criticisms have made the BBC overly cautious in its coverage.
- Beyond public service broadcasting, threats to broadcaster impartiality have also been seen in the emergence of highly opinionated new broadcasters such as [GB News](#) and [Talk TV](#). Ofcom [upheld three complaints](#) against GB News for breaching impartiality in 2023, with [others](#) still under investigation.. The GB News model of using serving politicians as presenters has broken previous [boundaries](#) and is also [subject to ongoing investigation](#).

## 2. Threats to media independence

- In a context of ongoing attacks on public service broadcasters, threats to change existing funding or ownership models [raise fears](#) of a ‘chilling effect’ on reporting. Such proposals include the [recently announced](#) formal review into the BBC’s licence fee funding model, which follows suggestions for change made [during the Johnson government](#). The [privatisation of Channel 4](#) – proposed in 2021 but scrapped in 2023 – was also criticised for threatening its public-service offerings, including by former Conservative Culture, Media and Sport Secretary [Karen Bradley](#).
- The appointment of government allies to media regulators or public service broadcasters undermines trust and endangers independence. The Johnson government’s [reported](#) support for Paul Dacre, former *Daily Mail* editor, as chair of the media regulator Ofcom was particularly egregious. The [Richard Sharp affair](#) reignited longstanding concerns over partisan appointments to the position of BBC chair, prompting David Dimbleby and others to [advocate reform](#).
- The [potential sale](#) of the *Telegraph* to a consortium backed by the Vice-President of a non-democratic foreign state with a [poor record](#) on press freedom has also provoked fears for the newspaper’s future editorial independence.

## 3. Polarising content

- An essential aspect of media pluralism is that a range of content and views should be included, creating a space for debate and disagreement. However, there are [growing concerns](#) that [healthy discourse](#) between those of opposing views risks tipping into dangerously [polarising rhetoric](#).
- Such concerns were particularly expressed during the [Brexit process](#), when the *Daily Mail* dubbed judges ‘[enemies of the people](#)’, House of Lords members ‘[traitors](#)’, and MPs ‘[saboteurs](#)’. Such headlines risked furthering existing Brexit polarisation, and stoked distrust in key political institutions. Scholars have also highlighted the prevalence of polarising content targeted at particular issues or groups – for example, [climate policy](#), and [religious or ethnic minorities](#).

## 4. Weakened local and investigatory reporting

- Changes in the media market have weakened some forms of reporting. The growth of social media and the [advertising model](#) underpinning it has incentivised eye-grabbing and emotive ‘clickbait’. By contrast, falling circulations have led to large cuts in newspaper staffing, particularly to the detriment of investigatory reporting.
- Likewise, [large numbers](#) of local news outlets have closed or downsized over the past 20 years. The [Local Democracy Reporting Service](#) has done something to counter this, but funding pressures have for example recently led the BBC to announce [cuts to local radio](#).

## 5. Disinformation and misinformation

- Both [disinformation and misinformation](#) – intentionally or unintentionally misleading information, respectively – can threaten the media’s role in democracy. Inaccuracies may mislead citizens about important factual matters, promote polarisation, and drive down trust. Yet regulation is challenging: preventing misinformation must be balanced with free speech. Government proposals made in 2019 to regulate online speech were [later dropped](#).
- The public still see news broadcasters as significantly [more accurate](#) than social media platforms, and some news organisations already undertake valuable public fact-checking aimed at countering misinformation – examples include [Channel 4 Fact Check](#) and [BBC Verify](#).

- However, presenters and interviews are not always able to interrogate claims made in real time. This can lead to false or misleading claims [going unchallenged](#). In some cases, presenters have also spread inaccurate information, for example relating to the [Covid-19 booster vaccine](#). National newspapers such as the [Daily Telegraph](#), [Mail Online](#) and [Sunday Times](#) have also been found to have breached newspaper accuracy standards.

## 6. Monopolies

- Media pluralism is threatened by concentrated ownership, which can reduce the diversity of viewpoints that are represented and lead to an overall media bias toward particular political views.
- Anxieties about media ownership are nothing new. In 1931, Stanley Baldwin famously characterised placing the power of the media in the hands of a few individuals as '[power without responsibility](#)'. However, concerns about the extent of media concentration in the UK persist, especially with respect to the press. Presently, three companies – DMG Media (publishers of the *Daily Mail*, *Metro* and *i*), News UK (the *Sun* and the *Times*) and Reach (*Daily Mirror*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Star*) – [own 90% of national newspapers](#), with the overall right-wing slant of the national press [widely recognised](#).

## How can the media's role be safeguarded?

Politicians should respect the media's role in communicating with the public and as a mechanism for accountability, even when that is uncomfortable. In practice, this means recognising the importance of an independent, pluralistic media, including ensuring that public service broadcasting remains free from political pressure, and that regulators' independence is protected. It also means taking seriously the dangers that unfettered media freedom, and changes brought about by the economic pressures on the sector, may pose to healthy democratic discourse.

For its part, the media needs to recognise the impact that it can have on public life, and the responsibility that this entails. This includes the importance of accuracy – not only through fact-checking stories, but also through challenging false or misleading claims by others, and prioritising the availability of authoritative information.

More broadly, both groups have a responsibility to adopt a moderate tone that promotes [healthy discourse](#), prevents misinformation, and avoids a polarising effect on society.

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