

WORLD NEWS DAY

Securing the future of quality journalism

Credible content that audiences value and new sources of revenue needed to sustain newsrooms



WARREN FERNANDEZ

THE poster boy for robust health in the media industry used to have decidedly Indian features. Even as their counterparts elsewhere languished, Indian media houses were once busy launching new titles, snapping up journalists and

Media Consulting, at a Wan-Ifra conference held in Singapore in May. He pointed to the phenomenon of newsrooms repenting for the folly of their "original sin" of giving away costly-to-produce content for free, in the vain hope that doing so would draw audiences—and advertisers would follow. New digital revenues might then make up for the decline in print readerships and revenues.

It did not happen—or rather, did not happen fast and far enough. While some news groups—including this newspaper—have seen significant growth in both digital readership and revenues, these increases have come off a low base and so are not quite enough to make up for the print shortfall.

Besides, the bulk of digital advertising has been hoovered up by the likes of Facebook and Google, riding on the backs of media groups that produce the content they amalgamate to draw audiences, while insisting they bear no responsibility for the content on their platforms.

Today, just about every media group is dabbling with paywalls and digital subscriptions, moving from "advertising



customer references and retail services. A study on media viability published in May by the DW Akademie, a German media-related think tank, draws a similar conclusion: "Media outlets are confronted with a sobering truth: They can no longer sustain themselves on advertising revenue alone." Instead, they will have to have a range of revenues, spread across a variety of sources, to prevent over-reliance on any particular

It published a 160-page report titled "The Cairncross Review: A Sustainable Future For Journalism" in February.

In a recent interview over the phone, she told me that her commission began by asking themselves some fundamental questions: Why should anyone care if media organisations survive? What would happen if they did not? Why should public funds be used to support them?

They figured that there was no compelling reason taxpayers' money should be used to fund gossip and lifestyle columns, concert reviews or sports reports. "If people want these, they will have to pay for them," she says.

But she is quick to add: "It is very important that a healthy democracy has ways in which individuals can follow what their elected representatives are doing on their behalf—and have trained intermediaries, which we call journalists, who can question those representatives and the institutions that they stand for, so that we have questions being aired and their replies made available for people to read."

She sums this up as "public interest

news risks being crowded out by reports that draw wider audiences for their ability to shock and awe. Fake news also tends to spread faster and further for similar reasons, studies show.

How best to support public interest journalism? The commission made nine proposals in its report, submitted to the British government then led by Prime Minister Theresa May. Whether the new government under PM Boris Johnson, a former journalist himself, will pursue them remains to be seen, she says.

Yet, the ideas are of wider interest, since they might apply to other countries as well. The commission proposed:

- Rebalancing the relationship between publishers and online platforms, with codes of conduct drawn up and overseen by media regulators to govern the commercial relationships between media publishers and technology platforms.
- Investigating the online advertising market to study if it is working competitively and, if not, what should be done about it.
- Setting up a news quality obligation that would require and regulate online platforms' commitment to delivering quality news.
- Boosting media literacy, with government agencies working with media players to help audiences navigate the increasingly complex information landscape, especially amid the proliferation of fake news.
- Helping local publishers which are most vulnerable, for example, through the state-funded BBC sharing some of its local content as well as technical expertise.
- Setting up an innovation fund with government support to boost innovation within media organisations.
- Offering new forms of tax relief to media organisations, such as by extending zero-rating for value-added taxes to digital newspapers and magazines, or tax reliefs similar to those given to charities or film and other creative industries.
- Funding public interest news with grants and sponsorship for local reporting and quality journalism projects.
- Setting up an independent Institute for Public Interest News with a mission and mandate to ensure the sustainability of public interest news, including the implementation of the above proposals.

The report concluded: "Ultimately, the biggest challenge facing the sustainability of high-quality journalism, and the press, may be the same as that facing the sustainability of many areas of life: The digital revolution means that people have more claims on their attention than ever before."

"Moreover, the stories that they want to read may not always be the ones that they ought to read in order to ensure that a democracy can hold its public servants to account."

"This review has therefore dwelt on what it considers to be the most significant functions of journalism—ensuring public accountability and investigating possible wrongdoing. And whereas new business models may continue to support good journalism in many forms, they may not always support public interest news... so, this review proposes that most energy be given to the provision of public interest news."

"This will require new sources of funding, removed from government control. It will need institutional and financial structures that combine a guarantee of independence with adequate support."

"That will be a difficult combination to secure, but the future of a healthy democracy depends on it."

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"Those who wish to impose restrictions on free media and manipulate the public debate often prey on imbalances or weaknesses in the media system. They often use economic means to set their agendas or limit access to information."

revenue to reader revenue", notes Mr Senior. "If you are not producing content you can charge for, you should get out of this business," he declares, adding "if you have no digital business, you have no future" and "money is made where content is viewed."

Despite the stark warnings, he insists he is optimistic about the future of journalism. Fake news, he contends, "will save journalism". Declines in trust amid the welter of fake content will drive audiences to seek out credible voices for reliable content and they will pay for quality content they can count on.

"Newsrooms will have to move from the idea of being print or digital first, to journalism first," he concludes, arguing that paying audiences will gravitate to those news organisations that are able to offer engaging, quality and insightful content, as well as value-added services—from events, business intelligence or investment tips, memberships, to customised newsletters, books and even

source of funds. "The financial constraints are affecting the overall quality of journalism and the independence of journalists," the report says. "In short, independent, high-quality journalism depends on a viable media sector. It requires a variety of sources—from money and infrastructure, to community support and strategic alliances."

"Those who wish to impose restrictions on free media and manipulate the public debate often prey on imbalances or weaknesses in the media system. They often use economic means to set their agendas or limit access to information. Therefore, viable media are crucial players in the protection of freedom of expression as a whole."

Perhaps the most comprehensive study done to date on how best to secure the future of quality journalism was that undertaken recently by an independent commission in the United Kingdom, led by the journalist-turned-academic Dame Frances Cairncross.

journalism", namely, the reporting on the "machinery of government and how well it is working", from the courts and legislature, to local and state councils, to school and statutory boards.

The public submissions and research that her commission compiled make it clear that "a dearth of public interest news and information, especially reporting of public authorities, can have dire democratic consequences."

There was a "clear link between the disappearance of local journalists and a local newspaper, and a decline in civic and democratic activities, such as voter turnout and well-managed public finances."

Indeed, the presence of a printed newspaper widely available to the community, backed by a professional newsroom, often helps to focus minds on the need to be open and above board in public affairs, she notes, calling for further studies into this.

Without societal support, public interest

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 28, 1542
California "discovered"

Explorer Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, known as the "discoverer" of California, landed on this day in 1542 near what is now San Diego and became the first European to set foot on the west coast of what would become the United States.

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AMERICAN LINGUIST, PHILOSOPHER, SOCIAL CRITIC, AND POLITICAL ACTIVIST

Everybody's worried about stopping terrorism. Well, there's a really easy way: stop participating in it.