UK Government accepts eight of the Cairncross Review proposals

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The UK Government has responded positively to the Cairncross Review, which was published in February 2019 (see IRIS 2019-4:1/21), concerning the necessary steps to be taken in order to secure independent journalism in the wake of a shift from traditional media outlets to digital media and the proliferation of content that spreads disinformation. Eight of the nine Cairncross proposals have been accepted. Furthermore, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) said that the government would consider the Cairncross proposals in the context of other initiatives, including the Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) review of competition policy relating to digital platform markets, to be published in July 2020, and the Online Harms White Paper, based upon which the government will publish its strategy in summer 2020.

The government has accepted the proposal for a rebalance between the commercial expectations of an online platform and the relationship with publishers. The collecting of data and the use of search engines to drive traffic to a site has to be balanced against the needs of news publishers. The recommendation calls for regulation by an independent regulator to guard against digital news aggregators and advertising which diverts attention to certain news stories or, alternatively, news stories that contain disinformation to attract traffic and advertising revenue, otherwise known as "click baiting".

This complements the acceptance of the second proposal to investigate the workings of the online advertising market in order to ensure fair competition. This would be considered in conjunction with the CMA's forthcoming July report and would include measures to promote transparency and enhance data sharing,

The third proposal adopted concerns the obligation to regulate the quality of online news in order to enhance user experience, including the identification of reliable and trustworthy sources. The regulation would apply to platforms such as Google, Facebook and Apple; for instance,their algorithms could favour high-quality, well sourced material over disinformation and clickbait material, thus ensuring a more proactive role for them. It would be a statutory duty of care to take reasonable steps in the provision of services to ensure user safety and prevent illegal and harmful content, albeit upholding and promoting freedom of expression.

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The government would develop a media literacy strategy to complement the fourth proposal so that the public could discern between fact and opinion. This would dovetail with the following initiatives, namely the Online Harms White Paper, the Department of Education school curriculum proposals to ensure impartial teaching, and Ofcom's statutory duty to promote media literacy.

The fifth proposal that was favoured recommends that Ofcom assess whether BBC News Online is striking the right balance between aiming for the widest reach for its own content and driving traffic from its online site to commercial publishers, including the corporation sharing its technological and digital expertise.

The Cairncross Review's sixth recommendation was for funding focused on innovations to improve the supply of public interest news. DCMS has so far given GBP 2m to NESTA - an independent charitable body that distributes innovation funding for the development of technological prototypes, start-ups and innovation business models to explore ways to tackle the challenges facing news publishers. The first nineteen grants have been allocated, with more to follow, including working with Nesta and other partners to evaluate the possible implementation of a full innovation fund.

The government supported the seventh proposal to introduce tax reliefs, such as extending zero-rated value added tax in a bid to encourage online publishers and to ensure parity with non-digital publishers. It would also support more publishers in adopting charitable status where journalism promotes charitable purposes such as education, the arts, culture and the advancement of human rights. However, the government recognised that charitable status would not suit all journalistic entities, for instance, those wanting to campaign for or support a particular political party (such activities are forbidden under existing UK charity laws). The government was not open to such modifications, unlike the steps taken in the United States that allow news organisations with charitable status to lobby and campaign.

The Local Democracy Reporting Service administered by the BBC has already filed over 50 000 stories and recruited 150 journalists since its inception in 2017. The government supported the further development of this service, whilst the BBC announced proposals to establish a new body to run the scheme in order to harness funding which was external to the BBC.

The ninth recommendation, which proposed the establishment of an Institute for Public Interest News to ensure the future sustainability of public interest news, was rejected by the government, who considered that there were sufficient bodies such as Nesta and Ofcom to oversee such principles.

The government flagged that it supported any initiatives to increase diversity in journalism, including court reporting, and that the government's considerable advertising spend was distributed fairly amongst all publishers.

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The Cairncross Review- A Sustainable Future for Journalism

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779882/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf

Government Response to the Cairncross Review:a sustainable future for journalism

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cairncross-review-a-sustainable-future-for-journalism/government-response-to-the-cairncross-review-a-sustainable-future-for-journalism

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