

Culture Secretary: Government Will Stand Right Behind Our Media And Protect Press Freedom At Every Turn

Op ed for Journalism Matters by Culture Secretary Lucy Frazer MP

It's hard to think of a time when journalism matters more than now. Brave reporters bring us daily dispatches from the frontline in Ukraine and in the past fortnight have shone the brightest possible spotlight on the horrific terrorist acts committed by Hamas.

Journalism has long been the prism through which we understand the world and the events that shape it; reporting from inside warzones, uncovering corruption through networks of sources, analysing and explaining our political landscape. Publications like the one you're reading right now help to hold the people in power to account - including, of course, politicians like me.

And journalism can change the course of history. The questions from reporters at a press conference that acted as a catalyst for the fall of the Berlin Wall. The drip drip of stories that would turn into a flood, washing Richard Nixon from the White House. The Telegraph investigation into parliamentary expenses that shook our political system to its foundations. The solo article in the New Yorker that not only exposed the vile, predatory behaviour of Harvey Weinstein, but also kickstarted the entire MeToo movement.

As Culture Secretary I am proud of the exceptional journalism we have in this country and the 900 news titles that make up our flourishing media scene. Local newspapers, powered by committed local reporters, copy editors, photographers and publishers, are part of the lifeblood of that industry.

This week, during the News Media Association's Journalism Matters week, I want to pay tribute to the people who dedicate their lives to news. It's become an established fact of life that when a crisis hits and a situation escalates, journalists, camera crews, photographers and producers are among those on the first plane into any danger zone. It takes bravery and courage, and a willingness to risk it all to bring us the facts.

In a world increasingly defined by new technologies, the battle for attention is fierce. But the commitment to the truth is part of what gives our media an edge over the competition. Social media platforms today are awash with individuals who are happy to exchange misinformation for influence. And when those channels, for better or worse, give out megaphones to individuals indiscriminately, our media and broadcasters become one of the few places where people can consistently find quality reporting, grounded in facts.

My priority, and that of this Government, will always be standing right behind our media and protecting freedom of the press at every turn. That means helping our media organisations tackle the challenges of today.

To support them, we have published a draft Media Bill. That Bill will not only level the playing field for our public service broadcasters with streaming giants, it will repeal Section 40, an arcane rule which could threaten media freedom and risk financial ruin for any publisher.

To defend investigative journalism from the potential chilling effects of powerful individuals using strategic lawsuits against public participation, otherwise known as SLAPPs, we have launched a new taskforce to explore how we end the practice for good. This group of experts will ensure that rogue individuals cannot muzzle journalists just because they have infinite resources at their disposal.

And, to stop journalists being abused and threatened, we've this week updated our National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists to ensure that journalists in the UK can operate without worrying for their safety. Through this Plan we are working with industry partners, the police and others, to ensure those who abuse journalists are made accountable for their actions and that would-be abusers are deterred from doing so.

To protect media organisations from some of the more harmful possibilities of artificial intelligence, in parallel to the Global AI Summit the UK Government is convening next month, we've been hosting a series of roundtables to hear directly from the media industry about the impact this tech could have on the way news is gathered and presented. AI can boost productivity in news rooms and help journalists focus on the investigative journalism at which they excel; but it also carries the risk of spreading disinformation which undermines trust when it is needed most.

In Government we're doing all we can to help our brilliant journalists to go about their jobs without fear or favour. But everyone has a role to play.

So today let's pause to reflect on just how important our free press is. Whether you are reading this in the sheets of your local paper, or online, on the next page or the next link you click you will read something you didn't know or be exposed to a new perspective or argument. You will gain knowledge you can trust, it might spark a debate or discussion. Every single day journalism helps to keep our democracy healthy, provide accountability where it's lacking, and acts as our first line of defence of news and misinformation. By picking up a paper, becoming a subscriber or just tuning in, you're helping support our free press to remain free and perform the vital role in supporting and strengthening our society and democracy.