

Shadow Culture Secretary: Tech Platforms Must Pay News Media For Their Content

Op ed for Journalism Matters by Shadow Culture Secretary Thangam Debbonaire MP

Quality journalism matters as much as ever. Distressing but brave coverage of the crisis in the Middle East has proven that. Tragically, more than 20 journalists have been killed in the conflict. The deadliest since Russia's barbaric invasion of Ukraine. It's in these dark and dangerous times that we need quality journalists shining their spotlight even brighter.

We are fortunate enough to enjoy an impartial free press reporting on the stories that matter - from the cost of living crisis to the climate emergency. But whether around the world or at home, the industry faces a number of significant challenges.

As the UK hosts the global artificial intelligence summit this week, we will hear about the incredible benefits it could bring to people's lives. But, as the news media sector knows, there are significant risks too. The potential for harmful mis and disinformation will increase. We must protect and sustain sources of trustworthy information, particularly as we enter a year with elections in both the UK and the United States.

There is also an urgent need to level the playing field between news publishers, the main investors in journalism, and big tech platforms. We must maintain robust copyright protections for content creators, and they must be fairly rewarded for their work. Labour has called for the Government to require platforms to pay newspapers for their content. If negotiations fail, we believe an independent arbitrator would set a fair price. Newspapers and publishers should also have greater control of their data and content.

Labour will also put an end to the use of SLAPPs, the strategic lawsuits which enable the super-rich to weaponise their wealth to silence their critics. We cannot let our legal system be abused. Journalists must be able to ask legitimate questions. I welcome the Government's announcement of a new taskforce but want to see results. I'll be pushing them on this. Freedom to scrutinise, freedom to investigate and freedom to speak truth to power should not be for sale.

There is also more to do to make sure those who make the news are representative of the communities who consume it. It means different perspectives influencing decisions and a wider range of content that is more trusted by more people. Diversity, not just for those who hold the pen or present in front of the camera but at every level and across every aspect of the industry.

Quality regional and local media is also crucial for democracy. It's the glue that helps bind and build resilient communities. Yet, under successive Conservative governments, there are now probably fewer local newspapers than at any time since the 18th century. Although local media's digital

audiences have seen strong growth, more than 320 print local titles closed between 2009 and 2019. That risks local and regional administrations going without the scrutiny local people deserve. Neglected, hollowed-out local services from health, to housing and the police going unchecked. Keir Starmer has set out Labour's plan to give more power to local communities. That must be coupled with strengthened regional and local news media holding those at every level of power to account.

The next Labour government will act to protect quality journalism. It keeps us informed, it uncovers abuses of power and rightly holds us politicians to account. The result is a beautiful thing called democracy. Our country and our world are far better for it.