



BRIEFING

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

January 2024

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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.

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.

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

- 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 *New Express*) – [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 [comm32 3ic atg](#) with the public and as a mecha2 3ism for accountability, even when that is uncomfortable. In practice, this means recognising their importance

from political press [DEWKDWUHJØDWRUVI¶QHSHQEHHLVSURWHFVWHS](#) means taking serio95.3sly the dangers that unfettered media freedom, and changes brought about by the economic pressures on the sector, may pose to healthy [tic discourse](#).

For its part, the media needs to recog2 3ise 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-

the availability of authoritative information.

Constitution Unit Briefings

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