

**aop** Advocate for Quality  
Original Digital Content

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# AOP Journalism Advisory Board Green Paper



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## *Background*

The AOP Journalism Advisory Board (JAB) was created with the support of Google to build awareness of the key issues facing journalism and, ultimately, to support journalists in the UK with the most pressing challenges, as well as any potential opportunities.

The first JAB meeting was held on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2019 and included senior editorial representation from leading organisations, including the BBC, NewsNow, JPI Media, HuffPost and The Independent. The group discussed several sources of concern and interest, alongside some potential actions and solutions to these areas, which have been organised into two clearly defined potential work streams: Skills & Development and Public Perception of Journalism.

This Green Paper summarises these discussions on these key work streams and aims to kick off an ongoing dialogue with AOP members and the industry more broadly to address some of the challenges and opportunities the JAB identified. The Paper also acts as a precursor for the AOP's first Journalism Summit, to be held on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2019, where priorities will be set to identify the best way forward.

## *Skills & Development*

Within the fast paced, ever-evolving media industry, adapting and keeping up to speed with digital developments can be difficult, especially for experienced journalists whose careers began at a time where the digital aspect of the media was less evolved. Newly qualified journalists, on the other hand, have a natural confidence and understanding of the digital world by the virtue of their generation. However, they may not always be equipped with the more traditional skills within journalism, such as shorthand or court reporting.

A formalised mentorship scheme across all levels of experience within journalism could be a possible way to address these issues. This has been successfully trialled by Al Jazeera, for example. As well as the above, online training has been identified as a particularly valuable means of providing low-cost, ongoing support to address specific skills gaps. In order for online training to be useful, it would need to be supported and reinforced with face to face interactions, such as events or workshops.

An additional level of consideration is needed for mid-level journalists as they seemingly have the least access to sufficient, ongoing support. Google's APAC mid-career support is a good example of this and something which could be explored further.

Another observation with problematic and far-reaching consequences is the lack of consistency across university courses and/or training providers, with particular concern

that some universities focus more on graduate employability, rather than the core skills needed for the profession. A potential solution for this inconsistency could involve creating best practice/guidelines for degree/training providers around the skills needed for modern journalism. Another approach would be to establish stronger relationships between publishers and these educational/training institutions to foster more constructive, informative dialogue.

There is ambiguity and a lack of consensus around the expectations of the role and responsibilities of journalists, within the variety of perspectives from new journalists, universities, editors and publishing organisations.

This particularly broad challenge could benefit from a few smaller, more focused actions, such as increasing work experience opportunities to enlighten prospective journalists and creating better communication channels between various stakeholders to better align expectations.

Another key point is that easy access to centralised resources and training opportunities is currently limited. In addition to the proposal for centralised online and face to face training, there are already some great tools in place which could be surfaced more widely and made more accessible through the AOP, such as Google's GNI Training Center.

In many publishing organisations, skills budgets are low, which has resulted in training being perceived as a reward rather than a necessity. This could be addressed by an internal document to help prioritise training, focusing on both editors and HR. Consideration should also be given to accessing external funds to help support publishing organisations to adequately fund training and develop skills.

Outside of the above, there are a couple of issues that are more challenging to address, due to the significant cultural changes that would need to be implemented to help alleviate any of the associated problems. This would apply to the top down influence of editors, which is sizeable and can have a negative impact on the development and ability of editorial teams to flourish, particularly within legacy publishers. However, a starting point could take the form of an educational piece, working with editors directly to shape their understanding of the challenges, expectations and opportunities for all journalists operating in a modern newsroom.

Similarly, whilst not regarded as such, in practise journalism is a vocation, but one which lacks the necessary support systems to help those who choose it as a career path. Although there is not a clear stand out solution, a combination of the above solutions should go some way to address this particular concern.

### ***Public Perception of Journalism***

There is a stigma attached to journalists where they are seen as untrustworthy and the general public are suspicious of the news and its motives, primarily due to a growing anti-media bias. There also appears to be a general lack of understanding of journalism, including what it entails and the purpose it serves. A possible solution would be for more time and money to be invested in showcasing the full journalistic process. The BBC's

expose of the provenance of a viral video via their @BBCAfrica Twitter account through a series of detailed, descriptive tweets is a great, albeit currently unsustainable, example of opening the public up to the process of content creation and discovery. Although trying to aid the public's understanding may be intangible, these negative perceptions could also be addressed through a carefully devised educational piece around journalism, focused on providing transparency and accessibility. Additional actions and solutions should be considered to target these challenges on broader scale.

There appears to be further ambiguity around the definition and recognition of quality journalism and premium publishing, especially in the era of fake news. Kitemarks are one potential solution to help identify quality, but this may not be the best approach, as not all premium publishers fit into a well-defined, traditional publisher mould, so any kitemark would be too simplistic. In order for this ambiguity to be tackled, further consideration will be required to provide greater nuance with regards to the public's understanding of quality, premium content.

In more recent years, it has become clear that there is diminishing loyalty to singular news brands and an erosion of media brand awareness; news is regularly consumed off-platform meaning that readers are increasingly less aware of the sources of content. This is a particularly topical concern in the context of the simultaneous rise of voice and audio, as brand awareness continues to be eroded from multiple angles. Publishers have welcomed the recent AMP announcement to re-establish brand URLs on all AMP articles, which is a great step in the right direction, but further consideration is needed to ensure full visibility for premium publishers and journalists across all platforms, devices and mediums.

Whilst news readership is reportedly increasing, audience/reader engagement is declining and the time spent with articles is dwindling. As a starting point for this issue, the AOP's fifth CRUNCH event on 'Creativity for the Attention Economy' included a presentation from the BBC's R&D team which demonstrated the value of trialling new, creative formats to deliver and display content, as they successfully engaged different audiences in new ways. This could be a useful exercise for other publishers to carry out, but it would require careful consideration and support in terms of funds and resources.

There is a lack of opportunity for underserved and local audiences to get involved with news, with underserved audiences also typically being harder for news brand to reach and engage with. Efforts made to engage with local audiences, such as HuffPost Listens in Birmingham, have proved extremely successful but they are limited by cost and time constraints which many publishers struggle to justify. Greater financial investment, as well as logistical/operational support, could help make this a direct solution, and one which could be more widely accessible to lots of publishers. Likewise, adopting more and similar models to Google's planned local news collaboration with McClatchy would be another valuable approach to reach local and minority audiences.

Whilst both work streams have many interesting areas for further exploration, as well as points that may currently feel less tangible, the aim of JAB is to create a starting point for, and draw awareness to, the importance of ensuring journalism continues to thrive and be celebrated, as well as supported.