

Journalism is the lifeblood of British democracy. My government will protect it
Keir Starmer, The Guardian, Mon 28 Oct 2024

Journalism is the lifeblood of democracy. Journalists are guardians of democratic values. These simple facts are so woven into the fabric of our society that we often take them for granted. This year, I fought tooth and nail for the honour of serving our country as prime minister. And at every step of the way, I was robustly held to account by determined, incisive and irrepressible members of the fourth estate. Neither myself nor the now leader of the opposition complained about this. Neither of us turned our partisan supporters against the media. We went about our business, just as all our predecessors have, accepting that this is democracy in action. It was ordinary and unremarkable.

And yet this is not a given. All around the world, journalists put themselves at risk in defence of those values. Journalists such as the Ukrainian Victoria Roshchyna, who brought us the horrific story of Mariupol – now dead in Russian custody. Or the more than a hundred journalists killed reporting the unimaginable suffering in Gaza. Or the BBC's Gary O'Donoghue taking cover during the attempted assassination of Donald Trump, still broadcasting while lying face down on the ground behind his car. An extraordinary image that brought home the risks and the purpose of journalism: that, through the bravery of journalists, the world sees what it needs to see.

There are more than 900 local and national news titles in the UK. For all the prophecies of doom about the future of news, that represents an extraordinary strength. The British news industry reaches more than 80% of the population.

However, this vitality should not blind us to the challenges. And while thankfully there is no direct threat to press freedoms in our country, we must remain vigilant so that the growing power of digital technology does not begin to chip away at them. Particularly as artificial intelligence begins to transform our economy and way of life.

Both artificial intelligence and the creative industries – which include news media – are central to this government's driving mission on economic growth. To strike balance in our industrial policy, we are working closely with these sectors. We recognise the basic principle that publishers should have control over and seek payment for their work, including when thinking about the role of AI. Not only is it essential for a vibrant media landscape, in which the sector's provision of trustworthy information is more vital than ever, it is also relevant to our ongoing work to roll out the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act as swiftly as possible. This landmark legislation will help rebalance the relationship between online platforms and those, such as publishers, who rely on them.

We also stand with journalists who endure threats merely for doing their jobs. Just because journalists are brave does not mean they should ever suffer intimidation. This goes for intimidation on social media – the Online Safety Act will introduce new protections from abuse, as well as respecting recognised news publisher content. It goes for journalists around the world, where we will continue to use British soft power and diplomacy to argue for journalistic freedoms. But it also goes for powerful people using strategic litigation against public participation, known as Slapps, to intimidate journalists away from their pursuit of the public interest. Such behaviour is intolerable and we will tackle the use of Slapps to protect investigative journalism, alongside access to justice.

Because this is a government that will always champion press freedoms. We believe in being held to account. I am determined to show that traditional democratic British values are the only way to deliver the change that working people need – that is my political project in a nutshell. And there can be nothing more traditional, democratic or British than a robust free press, fearlessly holding the powerful to account.