

**MEDIA REFORM**  
COALITION

**Media**  
**Manifesto**  
2024

**MRC**

# Our media are failing democracy.

A healthy democracy depends on a free and independent media. Yet the UK's media system has systematically failed in its key purposes: to hold power to account, to fully represent all parts of our society and to offer a trusted space for public discussion and creative expression.

Our news media is dominated by giant corporations that wield a dangerous, unaccountable power over our politics and public life. Instead of speaking truth to power with fearless independent journalism, Britain's biggest newspapers profit from stoking division and distrust while protecting the vested interests of their billionaire owners.

Our public service broadcasters have been enfeebled over decades of political interference, creeping commercialisation and catastrophic funding cuts, leaving them ill-equipped against the rise of new competitors like Netflix, Disney and Apple. As the corporate cultures of the BBC and Channel 4 have grown more conservative and risk-averse, these vital institutions are increasingly disconnected both from their founding public service ideals and from the publics they are supposed to serve.

Our local media have also been torn apart by years of corporate takeovers, closures and layoffs, with millions of people across the country deprived of news made in and about their communities. 'Big Tech' monoliths like Facebook, Google and Amazon, which once promised to revive local journalism, make billions in profits off their UK users, while throttling funding for independent news and helping spread misinformation and conspiracy theories around the world.

**These problems in our media are not unfortunate accidents; they are the direct result of decades of broken and ineffective policies that have consistently put private gain over the public good.**

Successive governments have ignored the widespread abuses of power that now epitomise our broken media. Elected decision-makers are cowed or cajoled into not acting by the unassailable power of unelected media elites. Most media regulators prioritise the freedom of a few corporations to dominate media markets over protecting the public's right to a diversity

of opinion in our national conversations. Local councils, the courts and other public authorities are kept in the dark about unethical, harmful and illegal practices perpetrated by the same institutions that should bring those practices to light.

Above all, the UK's media system has shown it is incapable of reforming itself. Without new models of funding, ownership and accountability, the failures in our media institutions will only worsen – with severe consequences for the public and our democracy.

**At a time of looming climate disaster, economic insecurity and geopolitical crises, we need a radically new approach to media policy that's fit for the challenges of the 21st Century.**

The problems we face are all made worse by the failings in our media, but fixing decades of failed policy is not just about reforming our current institutions. It requires new, democratic, non-commercial media institutions, as well as a total redefinition of our understanding of media's place and purpose in society.

To do this we have to build a media commons, a system for organising media that emphasises the public interest, community empowerment and collective participatory governance at the local, regional and national levels. While a media commons cannot on its own fix all the deficits and inequalities in our society, equally we cannot begin to address these wider failures without a genuinely democratic and alternative media policy.

**This is a manifesto for reclaiming media's place at the heart of our democracy; breaking with the failures of the past, building a media commons that serves the public interest, and ensuring that our media thrives into the future.**

The media reforms detailed in this manifesto will revitalise our sense of democratic citizenship, and create the structures and practices for a public sphere where everyone has an equal part in the debate about what kind of society we want to live in.



## Five priorities for media reform:

**1. A More Democratic, Diverse and Independent Public Service Media**

**2. Ending the Abuses and Concentrations of Media Power**

**3. A Free and Open Public Service Internet**

**4. A New Deal For Local Media**

**5. A Public Commission on Media and Democracy**

**While these proposals all address different parts of the media landscape or specific kinds of structural failures, every reform is grounded in four essential principles:**

## **+ Independence**

Our media must be genuinely independent, able to scrutinise the actions of the powerful and operate without fear or favour. Media institutions must be free from external controls by state or political actors, as well as free from commercial or proprietorial capture by private media owners.

## **+ Accountability**

Our media must be held to high ethical and professional standards through effective, independent and trustworthy systems of accountability. Accountability is not defined just by laws and regulations, but is also practiced through more collaborative and transparent relationships between media outlets, media workers (and their unions) and the public.

## **+ Democratic control**

Our media cannot fully support a democratic society unless media institutions themselves are organised democratically and conceived as public goods. This requires new models of public ownership, public funding and direct public participation in media governance.

## **+ Universality**

Our media must work for everybody. From broadcasters and national newspapers to online platforms and community outlets, the media system as a whole must serve the needs and desires of all, and be accessible to everyone regardless of their wealth, identity or locale.

**If the next government seeks to deliver any kind of progressive social change, it cannot afford to ignore the overwhelming case for radical media reform.**

**We need a more fair, free and democratic media system; one that informs inclusive public debate, represents and empowers citizens as equals, and nourishes our democracy by speaking truth to power.**

# 1. A More Democratic, Diverse and Independent Public Service Media

**The BBC's role as a universal, independent and publicly-funded national broadcaster has been undermined by pervasive political interference, debilitating funding cuts, commercialisation and market-based regulation.**

The government holds excessive and unaccountable powers to shape the BBC's Royal Charter, while a series of government appointees has made a mockery of claims of the BBC's political independence.

The TV licence fee – while offering a direct link between the public and the BBC – is outdated and unfair for many, and governments have persistently exploited their control over funding decisions to pressurise and diminish the BBC.

The BBC has also been pushed deeper into market-based management and external regulation, more focussed on the commercial interests of competitors than upholding the social and cultural needs of licence fee payers.

**The UK's wider public service broadcasting ecology has also been weakened by commercialisation and deregulation, ineffective oversight and a total absence of democratic decision-making.**

Channel 4's founding mission for innovative, risk-taking programming has been diminished by market pressures, and the national language broadcasters – S4C and BBC Alba – have lacked the support to sustain effective services for their respective communities.

Ofcom has failed to protect the provision of vital public service genres like children's programming, allowing the commercial public broadcasters – ITV and Channel 5 – to renege on their obligations without considering the long-term harm to audiences.

Over the last four decades, the core ideals and values of public service broadcasting have been steadily eroded.

We need radical reforms to transform the old models of public service broadcasting into a progressive system of **public service media**.

These reforms would empower our valued broadcasting institutions to adapt to the emerging media landscape, enshrining universal provision as a public good and creating new democratic mechanisms for funding, regulating and governing our public media:

- ✦ Establish an independent Public Media Monitor with statutory duties for regulating all PSBs in the public interest, supporting the public provision of a wide range of genres and formats, and devolving key decisions about public media to participatory audience councils in the nations and regions.
- ✦ Abolish the government's control over appointments to the BBC, and in its place establish an independent appointments process with the BBC Board directly elected by its audiences.
- ✦ Replace the BBC's Royal Charter with a statutory constitution built on a regulatory framework that prioritises the needs of the public rather than commercial interests.
- ✦ Reform the TV licence fee as a universal household levy collected through council tax with the new Public Media Monitor responsible for setting the value of the levy. The independent Monitor would be tasked with evaluating the financial needs of the BBC to fulfil its public service obligations, determining a secure long-term funding settlement, and providing concessionary rates for households with relevant exemptions.

## 2. Ending the Abuses and Concentrations of Media Power

### The UK is suffering a severe crisis in concentrated media ownership.

Just three companies – Lord Rothermere’s DMG Media, the Murdoch family’s News UK and Reach – control 90% of national newspaper circulation. These same companies account for more than two-fifths of the online reach of the UK’s top 50 news websites, while 71% of the UK’s local press is owned by just six publishing companies.

These dominant media moguls have recently been joined by a new generation of unaccountable Big Tech tycoons: 10 of the top 15 websites used to access news online are controlled by Meta, Alphabet and X Corp, giving these tech giants unparalleled power over how online news is found and funded.

The growing market dominance and political influence of this small cadre of media giants has exposed the woeful inadequacies of the UK’s media plurality regulations. Ofcom’s light-touch approach to addressing media mergers and rapid consolidation in the news industry has allowed control of our media to fall into fewer and fewer hands.

### Current regulations have utterly failed to tackle the systemic abuses of media power that are destroying our democracy.

Our press is dominated by a handful of news outlets that reflect only a tiny portion of this country’s political spectrum. This lack of diversity has amplified the spread of misinformation, extremism and hate, as evidenced by the rise of new ‘anti-establishment’, conspiracy-promoting outlets like GB News and TalkTV.

The corporate press continues to operate a completely ineffective model of ‘self-regulation’ under the industry-run body IPSO. IPSO lets the press set its own rules and mark its own homework, and has shown little interest in preventing

the serious public harms caused by persistent inaccuracies, harassment and unethical practices done by its member publishers.

A decade on from the Leveson Inquiry, even as new revelations of widespread illegal practices and corruption at Britain’s biggest newspapers come to light, the corporate press still lobbies furiously against any attempts at independent or democratic reform – ensuring they and their billionaire owners continue to wield power without responsibility.

Unaccountable concentrations of media power are amongst the greatest threats to a free and open democratic society. We need a **proactive, future-proof framework for media plurality** that supports a greater diversity of media owners, and public interest **reforms to promote and uphold the highest standards in journalism**:

- + Create clear legislative thresholds for triggering interventions on media plurality, and set out explicit guidance on remedies to break down concentrations in media ownership – such as public interest obligations and forced divestment of assets.
- + Update how Ofcom measures media plurality to better account for the role of online intermediaries like Facebook, Google and X in expanding and entrenching the market reach of dominant news outlets.
- + Introduce new legislation to support fair, effective and independent self-regulation of the press, providing open access to justice for victims of press abuse alongside new incentives for publishers to join a regulator recognised by the Royal Charter on self-regulation of the press.
- + Revise broadcasting law to define impartiality and the range of programmes it applies to, instead of leaving these judgements up to Ofcom’s discretion.

## 3. A Free and Open Public Service Internet

**The internet is essential to modern life, but our digital freedoms and shared online spaces are dominated by a few Big Tech companies.**

These companies' control over vast swathes of the internet has significantly diminished its potential for supporting freedom of expression and inclusive public debate. Our ability to enjoy media content, to find diverse news and information sources, or even to communicate with one another is hampered by the profit-making, monopolising demands of unaccountable platforms and manipulative digital infrastructure.

Our personal data is tracked, packaged and sold to benefit advertisers and platform owners, commercialising our common media spaces. Opaque algorithms and built-in technological biases funnel users into paid-for content and 'ranked' websites, rather than opening a path to a plural and diverse online landscape. Social media platforms encourage interactions and mass engagement at the expense of deliberation and communality, fuelling the growth of disinformation and polarisation across the internet.

The global Big Tech corporations that dominate the internet – Alphabet, Microsoft, Amazon and Meta – do not work in the public interest. These companies suppress independent journalism at the behest of authoritarian states and litigious businesses; they control how online content is found, funded and accessed; and they quash any democratic attempts to regulate the harms created by their platforms.

**We need public alternatives to the dominant platforms and technologies that are restricting our freedoms in the online world.**

Central to this should be the creation of a publicly-owned **British Digital Corporation**, with a mission to develop public internet infrastructure,

operate alternative democratically-operated digital platforms, and serve as a non-commercial counterbalance to the power of Big Tech. The British Digital Corporation would provide a democratic platform for the public to devise a more open, collaborative internet that serves the public interest, whether through regulations on existing services, alternative funding and governance mechanisms for digital media, or new public media. The Corporation would also support developing models that give the public more transparency and control over how their data is used, such as through personal data stores.

Developing open-source platforms for supporting not-for-profit journalism, a digital rights framework for protecting media workers, and a public service search engine are just a few examples of the kinds of interventions a British Digital Corporation could achieve.

The next government can and must safeguard our digital freedoms, rein in the unaccountable power of Big Tech and create alternative structures to build an internet that works in the public interest.

- ✦ Establish a British Digital Corporation, a democratic and non-commercial alternative to the Big Tech platforms, tasked with developing innovative technological solutions and digital public services.
- ✦ Create public interest obligations for the largest tech platforms, including promoting a plurality of viewpoints on their platforms and transparent reporting on the function of algorithms – with fines for noncompliance.
- ✦ Reinforce the principle of 'net neutrality' in UK legislation, to moderate the gatekeeping power of network operators and online platforms for promoting or demoting different kinds of content and services.

## 4. A New Deal For Local Media

### **Across our local newspapers, radio and television stations, the UK's local media are in a perilous state.**

Decades of takeovers, closures and cuts have decimated the local newspaper industry. Towns and cities across the country have been deprived of dedicated journalism that reflects their local communities and holds local government to account. Corporate consolidation and clickbait have replaced locally-grounded titles and robust reporting, with the largest regional publishers putting their own profits over the needs of their audiences.

Local radio is increasingly detached from the communities it claims to serve, with the UK's dominant commercial companies – Global and Bauer – homogenising their stations into syndicated national services with limited local content.

The UK's local TV network is similarly controlled by a tiny number of providers, and many local TV stations are achieving nothing close to their potential for providing innovative and relevant content to local communities.

There is a growing community of independent local outlets – built on new models of funding, ownership and public interest journalism – but these alone will not be enough to reverse the decades of decline in our local media. Current interventions aimed at reviving local journalism, such as the BBC's Local Democracy Reporter Scheme, have lacked sustained financial support and in many cases have only served to prop up the same commercial operators that helped to create the current crisis.

**Revitalising our local media is not just about finding new funding models, but also means embracing new ways of supporting public interest journalism and democratising local media ownership.**

The future of the UK's local media should be grounded in local communities, with new independent titles organised on non-commercial structures (such as cooperative ownership) and focussed on producing public interest news, and especially investigative and local reporting.

Our local media should be supported by a network of local media 'hubs' around the UK, fostering partnerships between local institutions and independent content producers to work with local communities, train media producers, and share locally-produced news and cultural content.

Local news monopolies may generate great profits for a few commercial conglomerates, but these will never fulfil the needs of communities for local media that reflect their own lives and empower local democracy. The failure of the existing market-based model to sustain an independent, rigorous and plural local press shows that **we need a new deal for local media**.

- Introduce a 2% 'Big Tech levy' to fund independent public interest local media, raised on the UK revenues of companies with more than a 50% market share in digital advertising, online search, social media or online content distribution.
- Establish Independent Media Councils in the nations and regions, empowered to distribute the 'Big Tech levy' and other sources of public funding to independent, non-profit public interest media using participatory methods of community decision-making.
- Empower community buyouts of local commercial newspapers, radio and TV stations, giving local communities the financial and regulatory support to take common ownership of titles that are under threat of closure or failing to promote the public interest.



# 5. A Public Commission on Media and Democracy

Without the reforms detailed above, our media is certain to become ever more concentrated, more distorted by market pressures, and at risk of even deeper abuses of power. However, tackling the issues we have now and creating progressive structures for the future should not be the end of our public conversation about the media's place and purpose in British society, culture and democracy.

**The problems highlighted in this manifesto are not technical oversights or passing mistakes; these failures in our media arose from the failures of UK politics to recognise media policy as essential to the functioning of our democracy.**

For too long governments have taken an inconsistent and intermittent interest in media policy, acting only when there is a perception of political opportunity or (more frequently) not acting to tackle the harms and abuses of powerful media interests.

The most significant policy choices made over the last few decades have prioritised the needs of media markets over the needs of the public. These policies have rarely taken a long-term view of developments in media habits, technologies or economics, and have instead focussed on short-term priorities that treat the public as individualised consumers – rather than as citizens with diverse needs and collective interests.

**In order to understand how these systemic failures happened, to identify the mistakes in politics and policies that enabled them, and to develop a more democratic relationship between our media and the public, we need a Public Commission on Media and Democracy.**

The next government should establish a public commission to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the relationship between the media, the public and British democracy. Informed by research, expert testimony and extensive public engagement, a Public Commission on Media and Democracy would be able to examine a wide range of topics relating to the media, from intricate questions of regulation

and policy intervention to deeper considerations about media's role in facilitating cultural self-expression, social cohesion and democratic citizenship. The UK has a long history of reviews and inquiries into broadcasting and the press. With the rapid changes across our media system, and the ineffectiveness of many recent policy interventions, an in-depth, detailed Commission on the future of our media is needed now more than ever.

## Core tasks for the Public Commission on Media and Democracy should include:

- + Analysing the impact of new media technologies (including AI) and production practices on how the public access, engage with and create media content, alongside the impact of these developments on the media industries.
- + Investigating the role of different media institutions' structures and cultures in shaping standards in public life, as well as promoting or undermining trust, political polarisation and the integrity of wider democratic processes.
- + Better understanding the likely futures of the news and information ecology, including the causes and effects of disinformation and 'fake news'; the consequences of different kinds of media ownership in shaping news values, and how essential democratic values such as free expression, independent journalism and media plurality can be protected.
- + Recommending new policy approaches for supporting the sustainability of public interest journalism, protecting the independence of media workers and public media institutions, and preventing abuses of media power.

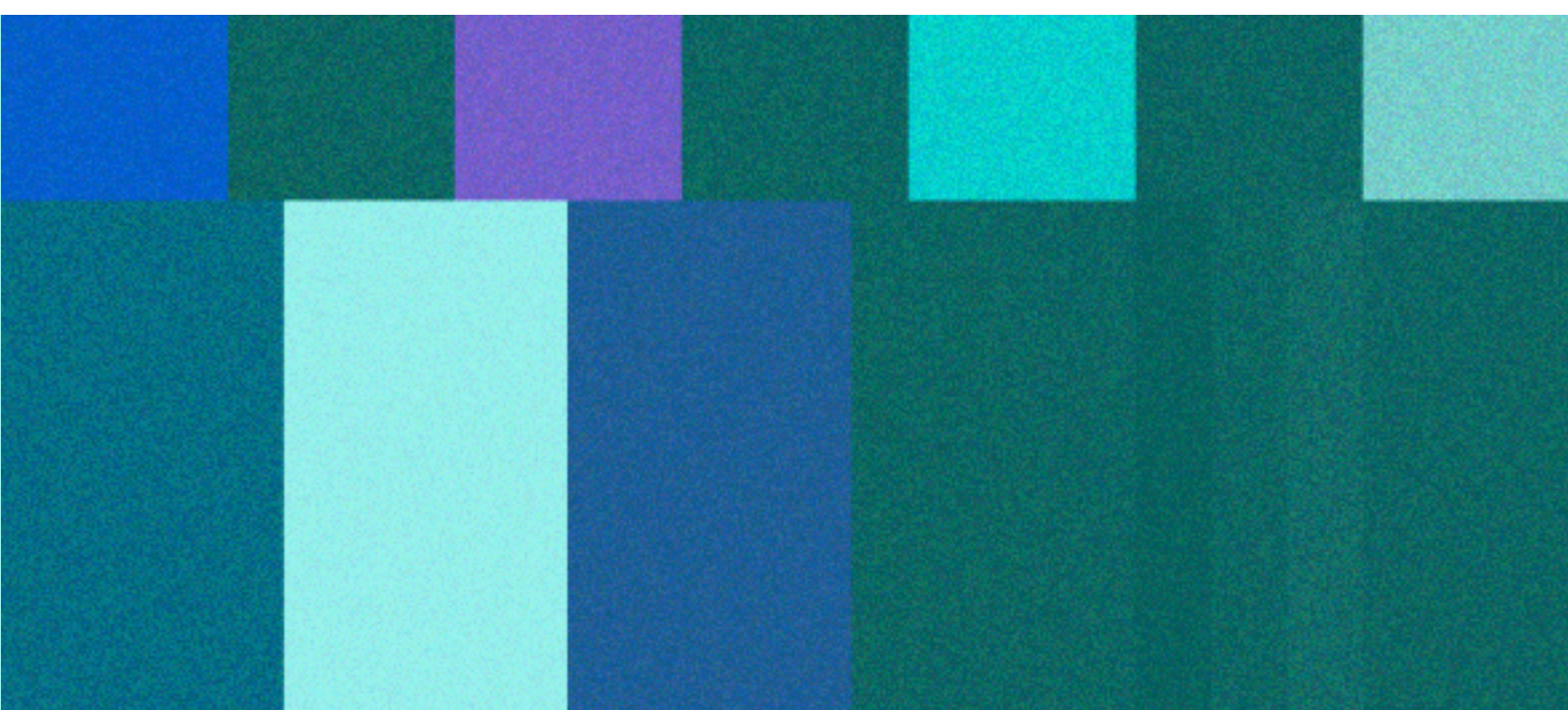
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# MEDIA REFORM COALITION

## Our media are failing democracy.

The UK's national newspapers are controlled by a handful of billionaire owners who wield excessive power over public life. Our public service broadcasters have been weakened by decades of cuts, commercialisation and political interference. Millions across the country are deprived of reliable local journalism made in and about their communities. Unaccountable 'Big Tech' giants dominate our shared online spaces, fuelling disinformation and polarisation while making billions in profits off their UK users.

Successive governments have ignored the widespread abuses of power that epitomise our broken media. Politicians have been cowed into not acting, while regulators have prioritised private gain over the public interest.

**We need a radically new approach to media policy that's fit for the 21st Century. This is a manifesto for reclaiming media's place at the heart of our democracy.**

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