I am Dr Eamonn O’Neill, and I am Associate Professor in Journalism at Edinburgh Napier University. Prior to that I was a Lecturer at the University of Strathclyde, where I took both my undergraduate and PG degrees. I have worked for over three decades in the media at all levels, both nationally and internationally, and across all platforms and mediums. My speciality has been in the field of investigative journalism which I have worked in, researched, and taught over the past decades both here and abroad. Lately, I have contributed to the BBC and currently co-host a popular podcast Talk Media for Scottish digital start-up company The Big Light network – the media show itself reaches listeners in over 50 countries weekly; whilst the network’s other podcasts are downloaded by over 300,000 listeners in over 90 countries globally every week.

A large part of my workload at the university involves research of the modern media landscape. I have watched with interest, and some concern, the current developments in the industry as the Covid 19 pandemic ebbs and flows in our midst. In the remarks I want to make, I hope to give some perspective and depth to the impact, as I see, it is currently having in the newspaper industry and wider media landscape. Of particular note to the committee might be the patterns of media consumption I see amongst the younger generation of Scots (i.e.: 16-22 years) and why this is both an area of concern and opportunity relating to newspapers as a platform. I also provide some potential solutions which we in Scotland could bring to the debate and effectively lead the way in mitigating and addressing the challenges now facing us. I should add that my remarks, although underpinned by my own professional experience, are made in a private capacity and in no way reflect official policy of past or present employers.

Thank you.
Submission:

1. Statistics from the USA have always been a useful indicator of trends in the media, particularly newspapers. Currently we are seeing extremely worrying evidence that dozens, if not hundreds, of newspaper titles are closing down amid the pandemic.

2. Business models which were already fragile because of fundamental shifts in advertising models, de-investment from owners, and varying consumer behaviour, have sometimes tried to shift online at short notice, but they find themselves just as exposed to unstable advertising trends as anywhere else.

3. The worrying anomaly here is that these shutdowns – sometimes with owners claiming they’re temporary – have come as there has been a surge in readership as the pandemic arrived and gathered pace. So, just as readers want more information they can rely on, it seems the publishing industry responds by winding it down or closing it completely.

4. This means in some cases there has been a doubling of readership and what’s been described as a ‘surge’ in cable news viewership. Yet, this demand is not being met across the board.

5. Geographical areas which have been served by a news model stretching back 200 years are now known as ‘news deserts’.

6. Such a dearth of news not only leaves a democratic deficit in the model of public discourse, government by consent, voices for the voiceless, and scrutiny of the powerful – elected and unelected – it also leaves the way open for alleged simple truths to replace complex reality. This has already happened in the USA and all indicators are that the UK will be to same extent next. This is a dangerous and unprecedented development.

7. In just one example, into this vacuum we find the growth of groups like the ‘Q-Anon’ movement in the USA and lately within the UK also. Such groups often fold in old and new racist and conspiracy theories, to Covid-related theories which argue, for example, the virus cannot be transmitted via air and that it’s related to 5G mast testing. These are married to older conspiracies related to anti-Semitic and newer so-called ‘Deep State’ beliefs.

8. Some industry publications have taken it upon themselves to fight back against this so-called ‘Infodemic’ by highlighting deviations from press standards and also publishing examples of work which tackles it directly. The best way to tackle them is, of course, to fortify better journalism in respected publications to provide an alternative to their dangerous offerings.
9. A decline in newspapers plays into this trend since one factor which has been identified in their propagation has been lack of scrutiny and removal by social media platforms which are the very means by which they spread. These are, I can assure you, where most people under 18 access most of their news on a daily basis. They use them either as the source of 'raw' unverifiable 'news' or as a portal for a starting point to explore more material elsewhere, including established news groups and others less well-known. Few have the necessary skills to discern the different kinds of information they are being exposed to. This is concerning and plays a role in current and future trends of consumption and their decision-making faculties as future citizens.

10. Social Media platforms such as YouTube have been identified as running conspiracy theory material including the likes of David Icke which have neither been fact-checked nor given a health warning for inaccuracies they contain. Researchers indicate that the reluctance to remove such material is influenced by the fact the social platforms reap fees running into seven figures from hosting and advertising them. iv

11. These examples are indicative of how the digital media and its offerings – the good, the bad, and the ugly – can take a foothold at a time when traditional media models have been negatively impacted and accelerated by changes which were already happening and new threats which have emerged. We are still in the early days of fully coming to terms with what working from home employment models will mean in terms of employment patterns – be they full-time staff or freelance contracted personnel. What is starting to emerge however, is a growth in unchecked, unverifiable 'information' masquerading as a replacement for the 200 year-old model we have been used to.

12. Additionally, the prevalence of the old concept but new term 'fake news' as espoused from daily Tweets from the Oval Office to the latest comment in a local Facebook page, provides a fertile context for those stuck at home with 24/7 internet access to feel liberated from normal models of verifiable fact and indeed recognised reality. If the decline in Scottish newspapers continues then the concept of 'news deserts' will soon become a reality here. Into that void, the illusion of free online media 'news' emerges with growing power and influence.

13. The decline in circulation of and the acceleration of loss in advertising revenue had already, pre-Covid, forced publishers and owners into difficult decisions to drop titles, consolidate operations, and cut jobs. There is a clear fear that these decisions, whilst often dressed-up as wise decisions with an eye on the bottom line had to be taken because of uncertainty in traumatic digital times. Another analysis could be applied that these were poor decisions taken by owners for more cynical reasons after literally asset-stripping titles down the years. The impact of Covid 19 might be seen cynically as a further means to this end.
14. Even at national titles level, where deeper pockets exist, sales at stables such as the FT – a title recognised for its visionary practices and market-positioning with a competitive market sector - have fallen sharply. Advertising revenue is predicted to return to approximately two-thirds of its pre-lockdown levels in the best models available. Overall during the pandemic some larger titles have benefitted from paywall subscribers – but most have lost out greatly.

15. Research indicates that the large tech platforms are still best positioned to reap the profits during lockdown via advertising and reader-centric models. The news titles are behind in terms of charting a course through this period and devising new ways to produce original and investigative journalism – the twin contents which, ironically, studies consistently indicate readers want most.

16. Some publishers are better placed than others to identify and profitably deliver readers to its products: Within the Murdoch stable for example, The Sun relies heavily on advertising yet across the carpet The Times uses the loyalty of the paywall model instead.

17. Solutions to this state of play could include:

a. State intervention in providing tax cuts for certain digital news organisations. However, these should not include publishers who have had significant profits in previous financial years which was not strategically reinvested for innovation, research, and development and sustained employment and training levels. Diversity of ownership and editorial voices must be encouraged. New media platforms must also be overseen to the highest ethical and professional standards.

b. A windfall tax model on digital platforms in line with the NUJ proposals could also be utilised.

c. Support for a Scottish Digital Media Innovation group to rapidly assist in identifying, charting, and delivering new models to existing and new news delivery platforms. This could be related to delivering the changes recommended by the Cairncross Review.

d. Support for a cross-campus, multi-university group empowered to fuse educational teaching with industry best-practice, seeding the need in new graduates for new approaches to fact-checking and industry-related projects which withstand the online onslaught.

e. Finally, to establish a media-link with schools at both Primary and High School level to engage with local and national media on a daily, weekly etc basis. This could be done in various ways but essentially would involve financial support to establish a strong basis for pupils being given the tools to understand the difference between
journalism and raw information. Subsidised access to established and innovative media outputs would underpin and support this initiative at local and national government level.

Dr Eamonn O’Neill
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1 https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/apr/09/coronavirus-us-newspapers-impact
2 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/20/the-qanon-conspiracy
4 https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/cash-for-conspiracies-how-david-icke-alternative-media-and-tech-giants-make-money-from-misinformation/
5 40% decline month-on-month according to Press Gazette statistics