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# Securing the Future of UK Public-Interest News: Navigating Change With Foresight and Innovation

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## Abstract

This article delves into the factors driving change in the UK’s public-interest news sector, pinpointing key uncertainties that shape its future. Through a participatory action research approach and scenario planning, the study News Futures 2035, seeks to answer the pivotal question: How can the UK ensure the ongoing supply of trustworthy, public-interest news? It stands out for its unique focus, enriching the debate among industry, academia, policymakers, and civil society on safeguarding the sector’s future. The research identified two primary, unpredictable elements with significant influence: the realm of policies, regulations, and governance; and the industry’s capacity for innovation to maintain the relevance of public-interest news for all stakeholders. The study highlights the indispensable role of collaborative action research and continuous dialogue among key stakeholders. It emphasizes the need for structured, cooperative efforts to navigate the complexities of policy, regulation, and consumer relevance, introducing the concept of back-channel deliberations, akin to track 2 diplomacy, as a valuable strategy for engaging diverse stakeholders in informal yet structured discussions. This method promises to foster a platform for innovative solutions and mutual understanding, addressing the challenges to the future supply of public-interest news. The participants’ commitment to advancing this dialogue through a dedicated forum underlines the importance of ongoing stakeholder engagement to ensure the sector’s relevance, sustainability, and societal impact.

## Keywords

action research; foresight; news innovation; public-interest news; track 2 diplomacy; trust in news

## 1. Introduction

UK public-interest news is at a crossroads. Research shows this sector is being reshaped by changing consumer habits and new technology, raising concerns about its future and its role in democracy. While change and innovation are often seen as key to journalism's future, with Peters and Carlson (2019, p. 638) going as far as to say that we are a "change-obsessed discipline," some experts, like Posetti (2018), believe focusing solely on tech innovation can lead to stagnation. They suggest a shift towards meeting audience needs with technology as a tool, not the driver. However, this audience-first approach isn't without risks. Logan and Coddington (2020) express concern that focusing too narrowly on audience preferences can have negative effects. This approach might result in oversimplified, clickbait-type content and create specialised niches with reduced content quality, diversity, and relevance. Such a trend could weaken the news media's role in supporting informed communities, robust markets, and democratic processes, as discussed by Peters & Witschge (2015) and Pickard (2020).

Indeed, academics such as Castells-Fos et al. (2023, p. 2) argue that scholarship tends to define relevance as media reputation, visibility, and audience loyalty, omitting how the media might enable consumers to participate in the democratic process, say. Consequently, the causes of both crises are considered to be technological or economic and, as such, the solutions are also sought in the techno-economic sphere. As Drok argues, "This might work for the financial crisis, but it is not enough to deal with the functional one" (2018, p. 274). What is lacking is "a thorough reflection on the social and personal meaning journalism can have in the context of the 21st century" (Drok, 2018, p. 274). In addition, as pointed out by Drok (2018, p. 274), the challenges journalism is facing, on the one hand, the financial crisis, i.e., diminishing numbers of people willing to pay for news (Newman et al., 2023, p. 11), and on the other, its functional crisis, i.e., diminishing relevance of news to the general public (Castells-Fos et al., 2023), are seen by the industry as one and the same. Scholars such as Creech and Nadler (2018, p. 182) agree, writing that an overfocus on innovation as a way to meet journalism's challenges comes at the expense of "normative concerns about journalism's democratic purpose." To make matters worse, when looking to innovation for solutions to these crises, scholars have found that the industry is "mainly focused on solving contextual companies' problems instead of having a broader perspective on solving the challenges of journalism as a whole," (Nunes & Canavilhas, 2020, p. 53). This is a point also made by Berglez et al. who, citing Goyanes (2014) and Kammer et al. (2015), highlight that research too has been focused on "merely how to transfer the existing business model into a digital world, rather than how to actually transform or renew the business itself" (Berglez et al., 2017, p. xxi). Moreover, what constitutes innovation within journalism is contested. For example, "Schumpeter (1934) takes it that opportunities emerge in times of uncertainty, change and technological upheaval," (Nel et al., 2020, p. 47), while "Kirzner (1973; 1997) posits that individuals secure entrepreneurial profits on the basis of identifying gaps in knowledge and information that arise between people in the market" (Nel et al., 2020, p. 47). In turn, Drok (2018, p. 271) argues that in the news industry "innovation is mainly defined in terms of technology and commerce, and often the cultural component is missed." The issue of shortsightedness is echoed by Creech and Nadler (2018, p. 194), who point out the uncritical discourse of think tanks, which fetishise innovation geared toward market sustainability as an end in itself rather than "identifying what values should guide the design of a sustainable media infrastructure that supports democratic society." This leads us to the pivotal question that forms the crux of our research: How can we ensure the ongoing supply and relevance of trustworthy public-interest news in the UK? This question is not just about survival in a changing landscape but about reimagining and reinforcing the role of public-interest news in a modern democracy.

Many of the anxieties about journalism and public-interest news in particular were expressed formally through government reports and inquiries including the *Cairncross Review* (Cairncross, 2019), the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee's (2020) inquiries into the future of journalism, the funding of the BBC (House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, 2022), the House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport Committee's (2023) *Sustainability of Local Journalism* report, amongst others. As a result, and in answer to previous issues facing the industry, a number of interventions have been ignited by industry, policy, and civil society actors, such as the establishment of the Media Reform Coalition, the independent press regulator IMPRESS, the Independent Community News Network, and the Public Interest News Foundation on the one hand, and, on the other, industry and academic initiatives, often with support from technology companies, such as the Google News Initiative and the Facebook Community News Project. However, despite numerous studies and interventions, a significant gap persists in our understanding of how to effectively adapt to and navigate these changes. The existing responses, while well-intentioned, have not fully addressed the fundamental challenges facing the sector. There is an evident disconnect between the current strategies and the evolving needs of the industry, leading to concerns about the sustainability and relevance of public-interest news.

The April 2022-ignited News Futures 2035 study thus emerged from recent industry and academic debate about the anxieties regarding the future supply of public-interest news as well as reports that have identified a downward path of trust in news both in the UK (Edelman, 2023) and globally (Newman et al., 2023), as well as questions about the accuracy of such reports, which journalist and Nobel peace laureate Maria Ressa claims fail to take into account misinformation campaigns against publishers in countries where governments use their powers to attack free media (Graham-Harrison, 2023).

Our research introduces a novel approach by integrating participatory action research with scenario planning methodology. This unique combination offers a forward-looking perspective, enabling us to explore and prepare for multiple future scenarios rather than being confined to reactive measures. We anticipate that our findings will highlight the importance of policy frameworks, regulation, and governance in shaping the future of public-interest news. Moreover, we expect to uncover insights into how innovation within the industry can be harnessed not just for technological advancement but also for enhancing societal relevance and connection. This research contributes to the broader discourse on the future of journalism by moving beyond conventional problems and focusing on the future we, as an industry, want to create.

## 2. Research Design

### 2.1. Action Research

Action research in journalism studies, and particularly in exploring the future of news, is rare (Bélair-Gagnon & Usher, 2021). Among the three main types of action sciences—action learning, action research (Cook, 2020, p. 95), and other inquiry forms like appreciative inquiry (Watkins et al., 2011)—action research was chosen for this study. This approach combines action and research, involving practitioners as partners in creating knowledge (Bradbury-Huang, 2010, as cited in Wagemans & Witschge, 2019, p. 213). It includes participants who may not be research-trained but represent the interests of the study's focus group (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020, p. 1). The ideal scenario involves academic-community partnerships collaborating to meet the needs of the research and its participants (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020, p. 5).

To our knowledge, this is the first time a participatory action-research approach with scenario planning has been used to study the future of public-interest news in the UK. Previous studies using this methodology focused on journalism and news industry futures in the Netherlands (Deloitte, 2022; Dutch Journalism Fund, 2021). As such, the News Futures 2035 study stands out for its innovative approach, contributing significantly to both practical knowledge and theoretical understanding.

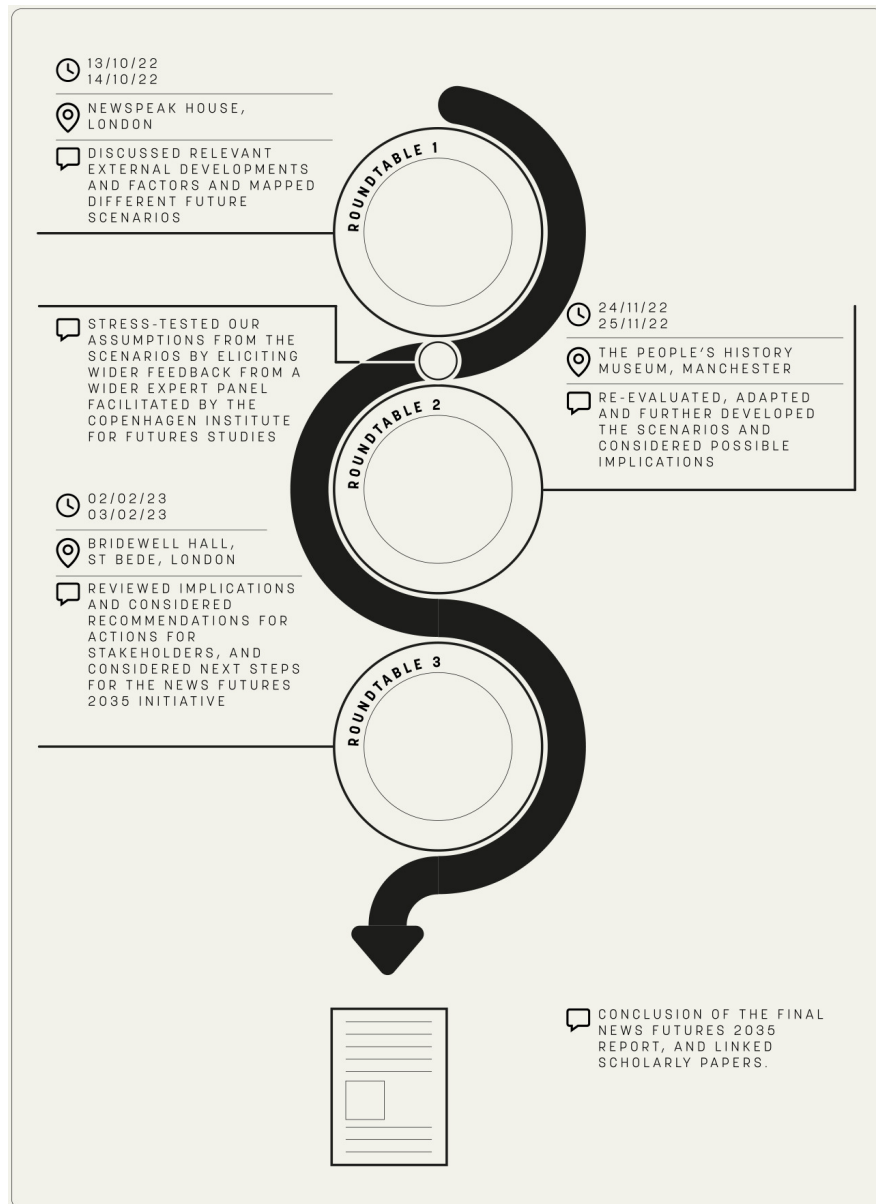
## 2.2. Beneficiaries

Implicit in the design of the study, whose broad aims were defined as: (a) creating shared visions of the futures of public-interest news; (b) considering the implications and opportunities of various scenarios for key stakeholders inside, alongside, and outside the news industry; and (c) fostering and inspiring constructive networks amongst those actors who have agency to shape the news ecosystem, is that its ultimate beneficiaries are the public. However, it was recognised that the immediate beneficiaries would be the news industry and, as such, the first task was to establish a steering board representative of the media ecosystem which included the Society of Editors, the Public Interest News Foundation, the Independent Community News Network, the Digital Editors Network, Bloomberg, Reach Plc, and HBM Advisory. In collaboration with the steering board, we adopted the snowball sampling methodology to recruit further participants, with the steering board first reaching out to civil society groups, such as the Media Reform Coalition, before we went public with a call for participation. This process was repeated throughout the study and in addition to representatives of the industry, technology companies, think tanks, and academia, policymakers also participated in data collection and sensemaking, taking part in consultations, plenary roundtables, and surveys that took place between October 2022 and April 2023 (see Figure 1), with over 300 participants involved in the process.

## 2.3. Definition

The research question was co-designed with the steering board to take into account that notions of trust and trustworthiness are understood differently by different actors and as such, news providers may endeavour to be trustworthy but whether they are trusted depends on the perception of audiences (Rawlins, 2008). They also recognised that what constitutes public-interest news, and how to measure its public value, are also debated. For example, public-interest news is defined differently by organisations such as the Public Interest News Foundation and the National Union of Journalists and can be understood both from a producer and a consumer view. As noted by scholars Murschetz et al. (2023, p. 86), the academic debate about the public value of media is also complex and, at times, confusing. They point out that three schools are fighting out for academic hegemony:

1. Mark Moore's 1995 concept presented public value "as a normative theory of strategic management in the public sector and saw it as the equivalent of shareholder value in the management of private companies" (Murschetz et al., 2023, p. 86);
2. Barry Brozeman's conceptualization of public values as "those that provide a normative consensus about the rights, benefits, and privileges to which citizens should (and should not) be entitled; the duties of citizens to society, the state and each other; and the principles on which governments and policies should be based" (Murschetz et al., 2023, p. 86);



**Figure 1.** News Futures 2035 process roadmap. Source: Nel and Rymajdo (2023).

3. Timo Meynhardt's concept posits that "an organization is valuable to society when it contributes to the common good as perceived by the public" (Murschetz et al., 2023, p. 86).

From debates of these different views, it was agreed that the study's use of the term "public-interest news" would mean news and other information produced according to high standards of ethical conduct and best practice in journalism and made accessible to the public, who are able to recognise its authorship, understand it, and assess for themselves its benefits. In turn, in the use of the term "supply" is implicit the assumption that the news ecosystem is fuelled by an industry that consists of an identifiable group of public and private establishments, large and small, that are all actively and constructively engaged in providing public-interest news. Finally, by using the word "secured" it was agreed that we take this to mean to make certain that the industry supplying trustworthy public-interest news is sustainable and protected from danger or risk.

### 3. Method

The study's preliminary research indicated that the public-interest news space in the UK was characterised by rapid change, growing complexity, and critical uncertainty. Moreover, experts interviewed for the study's initial Discussion Paper (Nel et al., 2022) felt that an appropriate response would require preparing for the unexpected. Foresight, with its "ability to incorporate into the present decisions of organizations (organizational foresight) or specifically into the strategic decisions (strategic foresight), the expectations of future conditions" (Bui et al., 2019, p. 838) was an apt methodology, especially as it "is a unique and highly-valued human capacity that is widely recognized as a major source of competitive advantage and cultural renewal within nations and corporations" (Chia, 2002, as cited in Bui et al., 2019, p. 838). Indeed, as stated by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (n.d.), "Strategic Foresight is required whenever there is a high degree of uncertainty surrounding changes to the relevant future context." Moreover, foresight inspires participants to act, catalysing action in and across companies, building alignment, igniting change, and fostering learning organisations (Bishop et al., 2007).

Foresight uses a range of methodologies, such as scanning the horizon for emerging changes, analysing megatrends and developing multiple scenarios, to reveal and discuss useful ideas about the future. The study chose the foresight methodology "scenario planning" as its chief method of enquiry as it had a proven track record of effectiveness. Attributed to American physicist Herman Kahn (Gosselin & Tindemans, 2016, p. 23), it has been employed in various settings, from business to geopolitics, to help make long-term plans. The horizon of 2035 was chosen as a way to adopt the Three Horizons model of innovation (Baghai et al., 1999) whereby focus on each "horizon" of the future inspires innovation for the short, medium, and long-term.

### 4. Findings

#### 4.1. *The Drivers of Change*

Participants of the study's first plenary roundtable considered the drivers of change that will affect the future supply of trustworthy public-interest news in the UK. Discussions ensued around a number of themes and specific questions, such as the role of the media in a democratic society, the relevance of public-interest news to the public, and who should be setting the public-interest news agenda. Participants also considered specific threats to the future supply of public-interest news, such as increasing news avoidance, especially among young people, lack of funding, and crucially, a lack of innovation within the sector. They considered increasing distrust of the media as a whole and the fact that public-interest news might not be how citizens get their information needs met in the future, which led to fundamental questions about the future role of the journalist. Concerns were raised about the future of local news providers especially, the impact of evolving technology on existing business models, and how the industry might protect the standards and integrity of news gatherers. Participants also considered the role of policymakers in shaping the future of public-interest news providers and what role the BBC will be playing in the supply of public-interest news in the UK.

Through the consolidation of the points made by the participants during the group discussion, key driving forces were identified as likely to shape the future supply of trustworthy public-interest news in the UK. A total of 16 driving forces were agreed upon, as summarised in the Table 1.

**Table 1.** From driver of change to critical uncertainties: Identifying the two factors that have the highest impact on the focal question and are the most difficult to predict.

From driver of change to critical uncertainties: These forces were identified during roundtable discussions and then voted on by all participants to identify priorities and further examined in the Delphi study					
<b>Cross-cutting contextual factors</b>	Technology (21 votes)	Wider economic outlook (10 votes)	Societal resilience (1 vote)		
<b>Critical uncertainty X:</b> body of policy, regulation, and governance at international, national, industry, sector, and organisational levels	Wider role and shape of UK institutions (5 votes)	The role of the BBC (5 votes)	Democratic functions (5 votes)	Regulation (3 votes)	Pressure of environmental sustainability (3 votes)
	Level of freedom of speech (1 vote)	Geopolitics (1 vote)	Role and operation of markets (0 votes)		
<b>Critical uncertainty Y:</b> relevance of public-interest news to audiences, institutional missions, business models, media workers, and society at large	Nature of news (e.g., ownership, formats, relevance, origin, etc.) (8 votes)	Needs of audiences (7 votes)	Business models (7 votes)	Shifting social identities and values of audiences (5 votes)	Capabilities and role of journalists (0 votes)

## 4.2. Critical Uncertainties

The driving forces that were identified during roundtable discussions and prioritised through participant voting were subsequently examined in a Delphi study, a consensus-building process which is often used to consider complex and uncertain issues, leveraging the collective knowledge, insights, and perspectives from an expert panel. A total of 34 participants took part in the Delphi study which was conducted in November 2022.

The trends and drivers that emerged as both highly important for the future of public-interest news in the UK and highly uncertain in the external or macro-environment (such as consumer beliefs, government policies, or plays made by other actors in the space) were termed “critical uncertainties.”

Seven critical uncertainties were thus identified. They were: The wider economic framework; nature of news provision (e.g., ownership, formats, origin, etc.); the relevance of public-interest news to the public; the role of the BBC; the role of technology; the wider role and shape of UK institutions (e.g., breakdown of trust, authority); and the public’s changing information ecosystem.

Participants assessed the influence of various uncertainties on the UK’s future supply of trustworthy public-interest news through 2035. Seven key uncertainties were explored in greater depth by contrasting two fundamentally different potential outcomes for each, enhancing understanding of their unpredictability.



This analysis aided in selecting the axes for scenario development in the study's second roundtable in November 2022.

Among the uncertainties, technology and the broader economic environment were identified as overarching contextual elements. The remaining factors were categorized into two groups: (a) the body of policy and regulation; and (b) the relevance of public interest news to audiences, media workers, organisational objectives, business strategies, and the broader society.

In choosing two pivotal uncertainties for further exploration, discussions included insights from the Institute for Government's 2022 *Better Policy Making* report on policy challenges within the government, such as short-term focus, inadequate policy expertise, subpar policy execution, insufficient interdepartmental collaboration, and a narrow Whitehall perspective (Sasse & Thomas, 2022, p. 6).

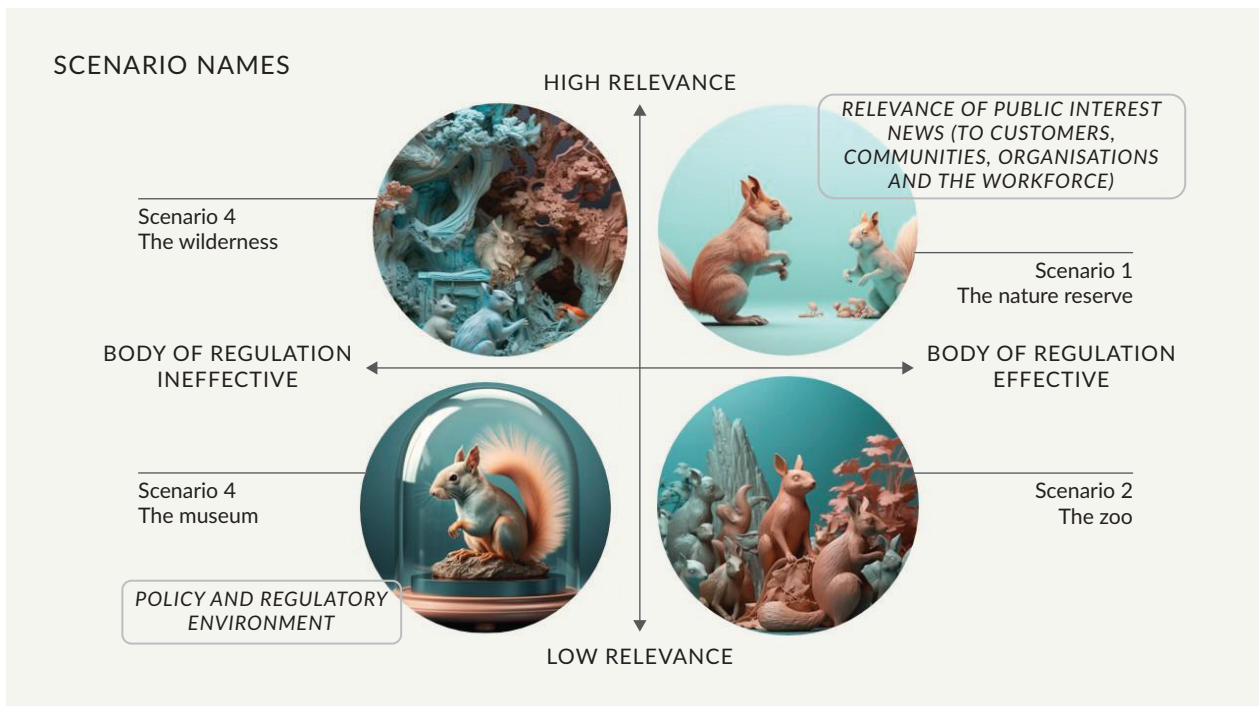
Regarding regulation, the contentious history of press regulation in the UK, notably post-2012 Leveson Inquiry and media misrepresentations following the News of the World scandal, were highlighted (Ogbebor, 2020). Political instability's impact on media policy, including frequent changes in the Culture Secretary position, delays to the Online Safety Bill, and dilution of its provisions due to lobbying and free speech concerns, was also examined (Newman et al., 2023, p. 58).

A consensus emerged on viewing policies and regulation across various levels—supra-national (EU, UN, etc.), national (UK or its component nations), industry, and organisational levels. These policies may directly affect public-interest news content (e.g., Section 4 of the Defamation Act 2001) and operations (e.g., the Broadcasting Act 1990, subsidies for local democracy reporting, Press Complaints Commission, etc.), or have indirect impacts (e.g., General Data Protection Regulation, UK competition policy, Online Safety Bill, etc.). Furthermore, the relevance of public-interest news was seen through four lenses: relevance to the audience (meeting needs, content framing, product fit, etc.); relevance to the organisations that supply it (i.e., vision, mission, business model); relevance to the aspirations and values of media workers; and relevance to society at large (to the democratic functioning, social cohesion, wellbeing).

### 4.3. Scenarios

Using these factors as X and Y axis (i.e., the “scenarios framework,” see Figure 2), the participants developed four scenarios with a 2035 horizon. To enable a better understanding of the methodology for wider stakeholders, they also came up with an analogy that connected the different scenarios, with the environments of a nature reserve, a zoo, a museum, and the wilderness chosen as analogies for frameworks where public-interest news was either of low or high relevance and operating in a highly enabling or highly constraining policy and regulatory environment.

The wilderness scenario was where there was no or little effective regulation and where the public-interest news providers were left to fight it out in the marketplace with a variety of mis-, dis- and malinformation actors. In turn, the zoo was characterised by highly supportive and protective policies and regulations that had the unintended consequence of stifling the innovation needed in the industry to ensure that public-interest news is not only produced but is also highly relevant to audiences and society. The museum was characterised by highly constraining policies and regulations that both stifle innovation and impede the supply of relevant



**Figure 2.** News Futures 2035 scenario framework.

public-interest news whereas the nature reserve was characterised by policy and regulation that seeks to protect, preserve, and promote healthy information ecosystems that encourage and promote the ongoing innovations that are essential to the supply of highly-relevant trustworthy public-interest news.

In the most accommodating scenario, the nature reserve, innovation was understood as both the adoption of new technology by legacy media companies that leads to positive change such as decreased costs, new audiences, and the flourishing of independent, local, and niche publishers and the diversification of revenue streams. It was also understood as new thinking in terms of the information ecosystem and journalism's role within it which results in positive initiatives such as local communities coming together to create their own platforms (e.g., for the London Borough of Hackney), with the data owned by its users and serving these local communities. The most important innovation in the scenario, however, is a cultural change to enable equitable access to public-interest news which leads to increased trust in the media, higher media literacy which leads to better engagement with the democratic process, and a public willing to pay for news. To achieve it, actors such as publishers and policymakers come together and negotiate which leads to a change in competition law resulting in news being widely available in different formats and users paying one fair price for all news content. In turn, in scenarios such as the museum and the zoo, where developments lead to the collapse of the ecosystem, a lack of innovation within the business models of publishers as well as a lack of new thinking in the distribution of public subsidies is what is cited as key reasons for the downward spiral, characterised either by oversupply or news becoming too expensive leading to diminishing trust in the media, the public turning to alternative sources of information, and an increase in mis- and disinformation. Lack of foresight about the effect that changing laws pertaining to climate change and the sustainability of existing formats for news are also cited as leading to the collapse of business models.

#### 4.4. Key Recommendation

During the plenary sessions, participants delved into the ramifications of the devised scenarios and pathways to actualize a preferred information system, recognising the urgent need to foster greater understanding and cooperation among stakeholders. Reflecting on the complexity of the challenges, it was recognised that peacebuilders and diplomats increasingly rely on so-called “track 2” dialogues—often termed as “back channel” diplomacy—to navigate difficult policy landscapes (Diamond & McDonald, 1996). This perspective was reflected in the consensus that leaders from industry, government, technology, academia, and the broader community should unite to bolster the information ecosystem through similar collaborative and indirect approaches. Consequently, it was suggested that the study evolve into a News Futures Forum, a multi-stakeholder initiative aiming to:

- Cultivate a shared systemic insight and vernacular concerning the evolving ecosystem and its backdrop, especially for pinpointing pertinent and efficacious intervention points, such as regulatory measures. This approach mirrors the strategic and nuanced engagements found in track 2 diplomacy, leveraging indirect and informal dialogues to foster mutual understanding and cooperation.
- Encourage a diverse representation from the stakeholder spectrum, increasing public engagement and inclusivity, for instance, by involving groups like the Media Reform Coalition and the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity, to ensure comprehensive participation. The inclusion of such a wide array of stakeholders reflects the inclusive nature of back-channel diplomacy, where varied perspectives contribute to a more robust and inclusive solution.
- Adopt a demand-driven methodology for producing reliable public-interest news, akin to how track 2 dialogues address specific policy challenges by engaging directly with the needs and concerns of involved parties.
- Establish the agenda through collective analysis and identification of gaps, a method that resonates with the preparatory phases of track 2 dialogues, where understanding the terrain is crucial for effective engagement.
- Commit to ongoing efforts that encourage news providers to persistently offer reliable public-interest news, ensuring it is well-supported and aimed at informing, educating, and interacting with all societal segments and communities. This sustained commitment mirrors the long-term engagement often seen in back-channel diplomacy, where trust and relationships are built over time to support lasting solutions.

Mirroring the study’s multi-stakeholder approach, the Forum would engage entities from within and outside the public-interest news ecosystem. The anticipated outcomes of the Forum’s successful execution include shaping the industry’s, policymakers’, technology firms’, and news consumers’ approaches to public-interest news, leveraging the principles of track 2 dialogues to foster a collaborative and comprehensive strategy.

The Forum is advised to concentrate on three pivotal areas:

1. Enhanced knowledge exchange and production, involving cataloguing existing studies and insights for broader accessibility, refining and prioritizing research questions for better coherence, and promoting collaboration among private and public researchers to augment the quality, effectiveness, and value of research outcomes for benefactors. This mirrors the knowledge-sharing and collaborative research efforts typical in back-channel diplomacy.

2. Improved policy and regulation, focusing on elevating expertise and sector-specific knowledge among officials across Westminster and Whitehall. This enhancement would stem from a profound, systemic comprehension of the challenges, facilitated by engaging with accomplished researchers and fostering closer connections with all stakeholders, a principle central to the success of track 2 dialogues.
3. Increased proficiency and capacity within the public-interest news sectors, promoting news literacy broadly—among consumers, creators, policymakers, academia, and civil society—and addressing various critical issues highlighted in governmental reports and inquiries, akin to how back-channel diplomacy seeks to build capabilities and address underlying issues through informal yet focused dialogues.

## 5. Discussion

The study identified several driving forces poised to impact the future supply of trustworthy public-interest news in the UK. Echoing insights from recent research like the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023* (Newman et al., 2023) and Ofcom's *News Consumption in the UK: 2023* (Ofcom, 2023) report, these forces indicate that the challenges facing public-interest news are not only imminent but are compounded by a variety of factors, each potentially exacerbating the others. Among these forces, two critical uncertainties stand out for their likely significant impact on the survival of public-interest news: its relevance and the policy and regulatory environment.

While analysis of the study is ongoing, participants' findings correlate with Drok's (2018, p. 274) argument regarding techno-economic solutions at the expense of a more holistic analysis of journalism's role in the 21st century. For example, they recommended that what is needed is public-interest news that is accessible to all of society, and delivered in a way that makes citizens feel empowered to participate in public life. To achieve this, they argued, journalism needs to become more inclusive of a variety of voices and opinions, to reconceive the public as consisting of "an interpreting, acute audience of citizens, rather than one of informed readers" (Harrison, 2019, p. 1). The industry should also be wary of putting too much emphasis on niche journalism outlets, which as Peters and Witschge (2015, p. 20) point out, are "frequently posited as sites for more robust democratic notions such as civic empowerment and active citizenship," but actually have less reach than established news outlets. Moreover, they recommended that the industry should move on from prioritising audience needs. Rather, it should focus on the audience in a more encompassing way, to conceive of it as society as a whole, that is, both society as represented by government as voted for by citizens but also actors who represent the voices of society beyond legislators. What this refocusing on serving the whole of society and empowering citizens to participate in public life means, however, is making public-interest news accessible to all. But, as the lack of scalable solutions for sustainability from the government-funded Future News Fund that resulted from a recommendation in the *Cairncross Review* (Cairncross, 2019) demonstrates, simply funding a wide range of unrelated ideas for the sustainable provision of public-interest journalism does not result in meaningful insights on innovation for the rest of the industry.

Solutions are also not forthcoming from academia. Scholars have found that the number of academic publications on journalism innovation peaked in 2019 (Lopezosa et al., 2023, p. 821), that "methodological, conceptual and systematic analyses of innovation have also received fragmented attention" (García-Avilés, 2021, as cited in Meier et al., 2022, p. 700), and "there is a research gap on comparative studies about journalism innovation in international systems and markets" (Meier et al., 2022, p. 700). Moreover, scholars

have pointed out that what is lacking is dialogue between researchers engaged in different facets of journalism's difficulties, and what is needed is bringing together those concerned about its environmental, social, and economic challenges, whilst also conducting theoretical and empirical studies to "examine the underlying barriers to a journalism that is better 'prepared for the future'" (Berglez et al., 2017, p. xv). As such, the study participants argued that what is required is ongoing discussion and joined-up action, where industry actors, regulators, policymakers, academics, and other interested parties, including the general public, engage with each other in a non-performative and non-combative way to gain a fuller understanding of how journalism innovation is understood and what purpose it might serve, thus enacting what innovation scholars term the quadruple helix of innovation (Carayannis & Campbell, 2010, p. 206).

The study's findings also correspond with similar initiatives utilising the scenarios methodology, which focus on the future of journalism and the future of news in the Netherlands, conducted by the Dutch Journalism Fund and Deloitte and published in 2021 and 2022 respectively. In the Dutch Journalism Fund's study, the critical uncertainties were regulation of big tech and data and trust between citizens (Dutch Journalism Fund, 2021), while Deloitte's critical uncertainties focused on tech platforms' role in the news and the level of trust between citizens and journalists (Deloitte, 2022, p. 13). While the critical uncertainties of the News Futures 2035 study were different to those of the two Dutch studies, with News Futures 2035 participants deciding that technology was not a critical uncertainty, but rather a cross-cutting issue that is certain to have an effect on the industry in the future, many of the findings that emerged from News Futures 2035 find relation in conclusions of the Dutch studies (Deloitte, 2022; Dutch Journalism Fund, 2021).

There were crossover findings around issues such as the plurality of the media landscape, critical thinking and media literacy, the need for diversity and inclusivity within the news media, funding, transparency about sources, as well as the data used to build algorithms. Moreover, both the Dutch studies and News Futures 2035 concluded that there is a need for a multi-stakeholder coalition or forum to continue working on solutions to the challenges on the horizon. While the Deloitte study recommended "an industry-wide coalition of various stakeholders, such as news generating and distributing companies, journalists, scientists, and government" (Deloitte, 2022, p. 25) to "safeguard and increase the value of news, making it truly independent from any other interests, and any single stakeholder's interest" (Deloitte, 2022, p. 25), the Dutch Journalism Fund advocated for "joint strategising" in a permanent place "where journalists, educational institutions and governments can remove themselves from the everyday humdrum and forget conflicting short-term interests in order to set a mutual agenda to influence the future of journalism in the Netherlands" (Dutch Journalism Fund, 2021). In turn, News Futures 2035 participants called for a multi-stakeholder forum that would, like proposals within the Dutch studies, include both news-generating and distributing companies, academia, researchers, and government, but also regulators and civil society actors. Moreover, they suggested that the Forum should go further than the initiatives envisaged by the Dutch studies, by supporting ongoing cycles of participatory action research, which would be neither a space for collusion nor necessarily consensus-building, but rather boundary learning that enables more effective and responsible action in all areas that are needed for the supply of trustworthy public-interest news.

## 6. Conclusion

The looming threats to public-interest news in the UK underscore the critical need for structured, collaborative efforts to navigate the complex landscape of policies, regulations, and consumer relevance.

The foresight methodology, utilised throughout the participatory action research study, revealed a multitude of drivers of change anticipated to impact its future provision. Among these, two critical factors stood out as both highly influential and challenging to predict. Firstly, the encompassing domain of policies, regulations, and governance can either enable or constrict the future of public-interest news. Secondly, the crux lies in whether the present and forthcoming industry can innovate sufficiently to ensure that public-interest news remains highly relevant to consumers, suppliers, and society at large.

The foresight methodology employed in this participatory action research study highlights the necessity for a united approach among stakeholders to cultivate shared understanding and collective action. The potential for back-channel deliberations, reminiscent of track 2 dialogues in diplomacy, emerges as a valuable strategy in this context. By facilitating informal, yet structured engagements among diverse stakeholders, such approaches can provide a platform for exploring innovative solutions, sharing insights, and fostering mutual understanding beyond conventional policy-making channels. This collaborative framework offers a promising pathway to addressing the multifaceted challenges facing the future supply of public-interest news, ensuring its relevance, sustainability, and impact on society.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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