

This dissertation is submitted in part fulfilment of the regulations for the BA  
(Hons) Degree in Journalism

**To Identify and Examine the Threats to Press  
Freedom in Modern Democracy**

Matthew Gordon

40530121

Edinburgh Napier University

2024/25

# Abstract

This dissertation investigates the potential threats to press freedom in modern democracies, with particular focus being placed on the United Kingdom. Beginning with an in-depth review into relevant academic literature, the study will seek to establish the theoretical and liberal foundations of press freedom, before presenting and analysing qualitative data gathered through interviews with professional journalists.

The focus lays on three research objectives and three research questions:

## Research objectives

- Evaluate the theoretical foundations of the free press and its relationship with democratic principles
- To analyse the extent to which corporate ownership and media concentration in the United Kingdom influence editorial independence and journalistic integrity.
- To investigate the influence of social media and citizen journalism on traditional news reporting

## Research questions

- To what extent does media concentration and corporate ownership impact journalistic independence and diversity of viewpoints within the United Kingdom?
- How has the rise of social media and citizen journalism impacted press freedom in modern democracies, and what challenges does it pose in terms of credibility and misinformation?
- How has the credibility of legitimate news and media outlets changed in recent years, and what factors have played a role in this?

# Table of Contents

1 – Introduction.....pg.4

2 – Literature Review.....pg.6

- 2.1 | *Theoretical Foundations of the Free Press*.....pg.6
- 2.2 | *Media Concentration and Corporate Media Ownership*.....pg.10
- 2.3 | *The Rise of Social Media News and Citizen Journalism*.....pg.14

3 – Research Methodology.....pg.17

- 3.1 | *Research Approach*.....pg.17
- 3.2 | *Primary Research Method*.....pg.18
- 3.3 | *Sampling and Recruitment*.....pg.19
- 3.4 | *Rational Against use of Alternative Methods*.....pg.20
- 3.5 | *Ethical Considerations*.....pg.20

4 – Research Findings.....pg.21

- 4.1 | *General Understanding of Press Freedom in the UK*.....pg.22
- 4.2 | *Ownership and Media Concentration*.....pg.25
- 4.3 | *Social Media News and Citizen Journalism*.....pg.28
- 4.4 | *Misinformation and Credibility*.....pg.32
- 4.5 | *Potential Solutions*.....pg.34

5 – Research Analysis.....pg.37

- 5.1 | *General Understanding of Press Freedom in the UK*.....pg.37

- 5.2 | *Ownership and Media Concentration*.....pg.38
- 5.3 | *Social Media News and Citizen Journalism*.....pg.40
- 5.4 | *Misinformation and Credibility*.....pg.41
- 5.5 | *Potential Solutions*.....pg.43

6 – Conclusion.....pg.45

7 – References/Bibliography.....pg.47

8 – Appendices.....pg.59

- 8.1 | *Appendix A*.....pg.49
- 8.2 | *Appendix B*.....pg.50
- 8.3 | *Appendix C*.....pg.53
- 8.4 | *Appendix D*.....pg.57

## 1. Introduction

This dissertation aims to identify and examine the potential threats and challenges facing press freedom in modern democracies, with a specific focus on the United Kingdom. Drawing on a combination of in-depth theoretical analysis and qualitative primary research.

The research for this study is based around three key areas: The influence of elite media ownership and media concentration on editorial independence; the rise of social media news and citizen journalism, and the impact this has had on the traditional media; and the growing concern posed by misinformation and decreasing public trust in traditional media outlets. These areas will

be explored through a critical review of existing academic literature, followed by interviews carried out with professional journalists.

By grounding the investigation in both theory and practice, this study will attempt to contribute to the discourse around the ever-evolving nature of press freedom, and identify the main challenges posed by various factors.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of press freedom is rooted in liberal democratic theory, which emphasises the idea of equality, and that the government is in place to serve its people, rather than *vies versa*; that the laws which the powerful make should also apply to the powerful. The theoretical framework for press freedom is deeply rooted in liberal democratic ideals, which positions the free exchange of information as vital for an informed public and a functioning, liberated democracy. Historically, thinkers such as John Milton and John Stuart Mill laid the groundwork for the idea that press

freedom is not just a civil liberty, but a structural necessity for public accountability and social progress.

## 2.1 | Theoretical Foundations of the Free Press

John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644) remains one of the earliest and most influential defences of free expression. Written as a polemic against the Licensing Order of 1643, which imposed pre-publication censorship in England, Milton argued that the truth could only emerge through the open contest of ideas. He declared: "Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties" (Milton, 1644).

Despite being written centuries ago, Milton's advocacy for unlicensed printing established an intellectual foundation for the definition of press freedom and set the tone for later liberal thinking. It could be said that works such as this were key in the establishment of the freedom of the press in Great Britain which came about in 1695 under the lapse of licensing act.

These early struggles illustrate that the concept of press freedom has always been intertwined with the continuous efforts to balance power and uphold transparency. Another piece of historic work that was immensely influential in helping the free press become commonplace in modern democracies was John Stuart Mills' *On Liberty* (1859). Mills work argued insistently that free speech and as an extension, the freedom of the press, were a necessary cornerstone towards the building of a functioning and healthy democracy. He introduced the concept of the "marketplace of ideas." According to Mill, all opinions - even those considered false, offensive, or

controversial - should be allowed space in public discourse, as the confrontation between differing viewpoints ultimately strengthens the pursuit of truth. Mills argued that censoring any opinion, no matter how said opinion may be perceived, undermines the collective intellectual and moral development of society.

*If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind. (Mills 1859).*

While Mills' "marketplace of ideas" remains a foundational concept in liberal democratic thought, it could be argued that in light of more recent concerns regarding misinformation and so called "fake news", these ideas may begin to come under some level of scrutiny. The principle that even false or unpopular ideas should be freely expressed on the grounds that the truth will prevail through open debate, now appears more problematic in an era where misinformation can be rapidly spread to large audiences and widely believed. Despite this, Mill's broader message - that intellectual debate is essential for the discovery of truth and the creation of an informed society - remains a key reference point in ongoing debates about press freedom and media responsibility.

Jürgen Habermas further developed these ideas, particularly through his work on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). According to Habermas (1962) the public sphere is the arena in which private individuals come together to discuss and shape public opinion,

facilitated by an independent, free press. This space allows citizens to engage in well informed, rational debates and discussions, which then creates a foundation for democratic decision making, Much like John Stuart Mills theory of “the marketplace of ideas” (1859).

Habermas argued that the free press allows individuals to engage in deliberation, challenge authority, and participate meaningfully in democratic life. However, he also warned of the erosion of this space due to the growing commercialisation of media. As media organisations prioritise spectacle and entertainment over public service journalism, the democratic function of the press is diminished, opening up the opportunity for media owners to shape public opinion in a way that benefits themselves, rather than benefitting the democratic foundations of a free society.

Another significant contribution to the understanding of the role of the media and press freedom is the work, *Four Theories of the press* by Seibert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956), which classified media systems according to political ideology and governmental structure. This book outlines the 4 distinct models of the press and media, each one corresponding to specific political and societal contexts; The Authoritarian model, the Soviet Communist model, the social responsibility model, and the Libertarian Model, the latter closely aligning with the previous works mentioned, envisioning a media system free from governmental interference and driven by individual liberty. The social responsibility model, developed later, retains the commitment to press freedom but incorporates the need for ethical and accountable journalism that serves the public good, closer to what can be observed in most democratic states today. However, this text fails to mention the ways in which such models are threatened, challenged, and altered due to the nuances of the various societies in which they exist. Despite this, these frameworks have been

widely used to assess how different societies manage the relationship between media and state power.

Where previous texts discussed in this section have effectively showcased the concepts behind press freedom, they have, for the most part, failed to acknowledge the fact that in a nuanced and complex society, these ideals are not entirely protected from certain threats and challenges. As later critics have noted, press freedom in liberal democracies does not necessarily mean the absence of structural influence. Herman and Chomsky (1988), in their *propaganda model*, identify five “filters” that shape the news agenda even within ostensibly free societies:

ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and anti-communism (later updated to include ideological bias more broadly). They argue that these “filters” help shape the content of the news in ways that align with the dominant political and economic elites, benefiting them, whether by spreading their views, or by prioritising profit, and that these motives constrain journalistic autonomy and align news production with elite interests as opposed to the public’s best interest. These frameworks have been widely used to assess how different societies manage the relationship between media and state power, an issue that is often brought up today. The idea that if the elites of society who own the media will tailor coverage to suit their best interests ultimately strips the information space of a varied, unbiased news coverage, which is a direct threat to press freedom and democratic media as we know it. This critique offers a necessary counterpoint to the idealism of earlier liberal theorists and provides a more critical way of examining modern media systems.

These theoretical perspectives establish a strong conceptual foundation for understanding the role of the press in democratic society. They also highlight the tension between the press as a tool for public empowerment and the transparency of power, and as a mechanism to be used for commercial and elitist benefit. These frameworks will help to assess whether the current state of UK media lives up to its democratic ideals, or if structural pressures and challenges have harmed editorial independence and diversity of opinion.

## 2.2 | Media Concentration and Corporate Media Ownership

One of the most widely acknowledged threats to the free press in contemporary democracies is the corporate ownership of mainstream media outlets. In the UK, a handful of powerful media corporations dominate the national news market, raising questions about the editorial independence and varying viewpoints and narratives of different publications and broadcasting outlets.

The Media Reform Coalition's 2023 report found that this problem is more relevant than ever in the current UK media landscape.

*Just three companies – DMG Media (publishers of the Daily Mail, Metro and i), News UK (the Sun and The Times) and Reach (Daily Mirror, Daily Express, Daily Star) – dominate 90% of national newspaper circulation. These same three companies account for more than 40% of the total audience reach of the UK's top 50 online newsbrands, giving a handful of dominant publishers an unrivalled position for setting the news agenda across print, broadcast and online formats. (2023)*

This level of control allows the corporate elite to exert significant influence over the public discourse and to portray their own views and opinions at the forefront of public agenda, potentially limiting the range of political and social perspectives represented in mainstream media. The implications of this are particularly concerning in a democratic society such as the UK, where the press is expected to act as a check on power, not an amplifier of corporate interests.

Academic literature further backs these ideas. Works from writers such as Freedman (2014) uses the context of historical works to highlight how corporate ownership structures create environments where journalistic autonomy is often more subtly constrained, hinting that while many owners may not directly impose censorship, they will push their agendas in more subtle

ways such as hiring practices and budget allocations – an idea which will appear in more detail later.

Edwin Bakers work, *Media Concentration and Democracy Why Ownership Matters* (2006) echoes the work of previous scholars such as Habermas and Mills, illustrating how the concept of the public sphere is fundamentally built upon free public discourse, the free press acting as the necessary tool for this to take place. Baker argues that media concentration undermines this concept.

*Concentrated media ownership creates the possibility of an individual decision maker exercising enormous, unequal and hence undemocratic, largely unchecked, potentially irresponsible power.* Baker (2006).

His concern lies not only with overt political manipulation, but also with the consequences of allowing a small number of elite individuals to control the flow of information in society. In the UK, we can see this kind of unchecked power taking place. Referring to the figures found in the Media Reform Coalition report (2023), it's clear to see that this level of media ownership is prevalent here in the UK, which holds potentially dangerous implications for the democratic foundations of a truly free press. The UK media landscape provides numerous examples of how this influence operates in practice. The political leanings of Rupert Murdoch's *News UK* publications are well-documented, with his various publications over time overtly showcasing a specific news agenda (McKnight, 2010). McKnight highlights how from 1997-2007, Murdoch's publications consistently denied scientific arguments that supported the existence of climate change, dismissing those who were publicly concerned about it. Such alignment raises questions

about whether these outlets serve the public interest or merely reinforce their owners' ideological opinions.

The consequences of such concentration go beyond the ideological concepts of maintaining a free, democratic press. As Curran (2012) notes, newspaper organisations have increasingly become more geared towards producing a profit, as opposed to serving the public's best interests.

The consequences of this mean that some organisations may begin to prioritise sensationalism and cost-effective content at the benefit of their owners, constraining more complex journalism such as investigative reporting. However, he also discusses the reasons behind this;

*It was only with the growth of newspaper profits, largely from advertising, that newspapers were supposedly able to free themselves from state and party subsidies and develop an independent organization for gathering news. (Curran, 2012).*

Curran suggests that it was only with the growth of newspaper profits that the media began to shift away from direct state influence. In this context, profitability became associated with press freedom, suggesting that financial autonomy could serve as a protection against direct political control. However, while the decline of state subsidies may have reduced overt governmental influence, it also made media organisations increasingly dependent on market forces, particularly advertising revenue and audience engagement, which could be seen as a catalyst behind the prioritising of sensationalism in media coverage.

The concentration of media ownership in the UK potentially poses huge challenges for the state of press freedom and editorial independence. While financial independence through advertising has historically allowed news organisations to operate beyond the direct control of the state, it has also exposed them to economic pressures that can shape editorial priorities and narrow the diversity of viewpoints represented. As shown by the dominance of a few major corporations, such as News UK, Reach, and DMG Media (Media Reform Coalition report 2023), the UK media landscape is increasingly controlled by powerful elites with the ability to influence public discourse in ways that may not always align with the public interest, threatening the democratic foundations of a free, independent press.

### 2.3 | The Rise of Social Media News and Citizen Journalism

The emergence of social media and citizen journalism has fundamentally changed the way in which news is produced, distributed, and consumed. While these developments have introduced new opportunities for free expression and public participation, they have also challenged traditional notions of journalistic authority, editorial standards, and press freedom.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, X, YouTube, and TikTok have allowed individuals with no professional affiliations or training in the field of journalism to freely report, comment on, and share news to vast, worldwide audiences. Such platforms have also become a huge way in which people consume news and other information.

*In 2024, seven in ten (71%) UK adults are consuming news via online sources; this is now on a par with television (70%). Social media is a significant component of online news consumption, with more than half of UK over-16s (52%) now using it as a news source. (Ofcom, 2024).*

While these figures may hold some positive implications in relation to the uptake in media consumption - ultimately reinforcing the idea of a free press for the people – they also reinforce concerns around misinformation. Social media platforms are largely ungoverned in comparison to traditional media platforms, meaning that anyone, anywhere can voice their thoughts, opinions and perspectives to an audience of people with little consequence or regulatory resistance. This has given rise to the so called “citizen journalist”.

Allan (2013) argues that the rise of citizen journalism has redefined the boundaries of the industry. He highlights how real-time reporting from bystanders recording on camera phones has in some ways become its own form of journalism and could be forcing more traditional reporting methods out the door.

It could be said that this poses some challenges in relation to the public's reliance on traditional news sources. If one no longer requires professional affiliations and training to report on issues via social media, and the number of people consuming their news via social media continues to rise, then traditional news organisations - who ostensibly follow strict legal guidelines through their reporting - are now competing with a new wave of largely ungoverned information.

*Social Media and Democracy (2020)*, edited by Persily and Tucker, addresses the longstanding presence of misinformation in the media, highlighting how technological advancements have intensified its reach and impact. Wittenberg and Berinsky argue that although misinformation is not unique to the digital age, the rise of online news and social media has made its spread far more pervasive.

*As the internet and, particularly, social media become an increasingly common source for political information, citizens receive more and more of their news in an uncontrolled and minimally regulated setting where misinformation may easily spread. (Wittenburg, Berinsky 2020).*

In such a setting, the traditional workings of newsroom editing are often absent, allowing falsehoods to circulate rapidly and largely unchecked. The scale and speed in which misinformation can now travel present significant challenges for democratic societies. This lack of regulation not only undermines trust in news sources but also blurs the line between legitimate journalism and unverified content, further complicating the role of the press in the digital era

While vulnerable, the concept and practice of a free press is indispensable in modern democracies, and identifying, examining, and analysing the possible threats to this is completely necessary in order to maintain democratic values.

### 3. Research Methodology

This section will attempt to outline the methodological approach adopted for conducting primary research towards this dissertation. Due to the nuanced nature of my research objectives and questions, a qualitative research design was chosen. This section will aim to justify and explain the decision to carry out structured interviews in the form of an open-ended questionnaire with several journalists.

### 3.1 | Research Approach

*An underlying premiss of many qualitative researchers is that the subject matter of the social sciences (that is, people and their social world) does differ from the subject matter of the natural sciences. A key difference is that the objects of analysis of the natural sciences (atoms, molecules, gases, chemicals, metals, and so on) cannot attribute meaning to events and to their environment. (Bryman 2016).*

Unlike quantitative research methods, which focus on measurable data in the form of numbers, percentages, and stats, qualitative research allows for a more in-depth exploration of real experiences. For this dissertation, a qualitative research approach allows for a discussion with experienced journalists who are working in the digital era, potentially operating within the constraints of media ownership and concentration.

Qualitative research facilitates an interpretive approach, which allows for the consideration of context, perspective and meaning in participant responses. In the case of my research, this is far more useful than quantitative research, as the threats to press freedom is not something that can be numerically measured, but rather a topic that will carry differing opinions based on personal experiences, subjective to a specific participant. “Realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic” (Lincoln 1985).

This highlights the importance of exploring subjective, personal experiences within a specific context. This thought process is particularly important when researching a topic like this study,

as journalists own experiences are complex, often shaped by various threats and restrictions within the media landscape.

### 3.2 | Primary Research Method

The primary research method chosen for this study was a structured interview in the form of an open-ended questionnaire with three journalists. This approach was chosen due to its flexibility, allowing the respondents to articulate their own experiences, giving an insight into the current media landscape. Structured interviews provide a healthy balance between consistency, and adaptability. I compiled a long list of open-ended questions, allowing the interviewees to go into detail about their own experiences, and to avoid pushing a narrative or agenda, but rather to give the participants some freedom to express their own viewpoints.

Email interviews, though lacking the benefit of observing non-verbal cues, allowed participants the time they needed to provide thoughtful, detailed answers. This format also gave respondents flexibility and reduced time pressure - an important consideration when interviewing busy professionals. However, this did mean that follow up questions were not possible, eliminating the potential for any form of semi-structured interview to take place.

### 3.3 | Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were selected for this study with the aim of targeting professional journalists with experience in UK-based media organisations, aiming to attain a diverse range of perspectives. This included journalists from both National and Local news outlets, as well as journalists from more specialised fields such as a sports editor. By incorporating viewpoints from different sectors of the industry, the research was aimed at exploring how structural and external challenges to press freedom are perceived and navigated across differing journalistic contexts.

After contacting multiple potential participants, these journalists agreed to take part:

Nichola Kane – Editor, *STV news*

Phil Bowen – Editor, *Midlothian View*

Graham Bean – Sports Editor and writer, *Scotsman*

The diversity between national and local journalistic roles enabled the collection of varied insights into the state of current press freedom in the UK, allowing me to observe how widespread the potential threats to press freedom are. This allowed me to observe how journalistic constraints can manifest depending on the scale and reach of a specific media outlet. By including subjects from different ends of the media spectrum, the study aimed to build a more nuanced understanding of the threats that face the free press.

Despite operating in slightly different areas of journalism, all interviewees responded to the same structured, open-ended questions, allowing for consistency in data collection while capturing a varying range of professional experiences.

### 3.4 | Rationale Against use of Alternative Methods

The use of close-ended surveys was avoided as part of the research process, seeing as they primarily yield quantitative data, which would have failed to capture the depth and subjectivity of more qualitative research methods, necessary for a study such as this.

anonymous surveys are often a useful tool when gathering data from a large group of participants. However, general public knowledge on the free press and media landscape may not be of a high enough quality to provide the study with relevant information and would have failed to gather personal accounts and experiences from trained journalists.

The use of a close-ended questionnaire was also avoided as it would not have provided the respondents with the opportunity to go into detail with their answers, which is vital when researching a nuanced and subjective topic such as the threats to press freedom.

### 3.5 | Ethical Considerations

When conducting an interview with a professional journalist, it is important to consider the ethics of your research methods. Consent to conduct the interview was obtained from each respondent via email, and permission to use the participants names and job titles was also granted via email. The interview questions were also carefully designed to maximise freedom on the participants behalf, avoiding leading questions. I was also sure to inform the participants of their ability to decline certain questions, which they did for some. This ensured the ethical security of my primary research.

## 4. Research Findings

This chapter will present the findings from the interviews conducted with three journalists. The purpose of this section is to outline the major themes identified throughout the primary research process, aiming to offer an insight into the participants personal, journalistic experiences of media concentration, editorial autonomy, social media interference, and public trust in traditional media.

Three journalists agreed to take part in this study – Graham Bean of *The Scotsman*, Phil Bowen of the *Midlothian View*, and Nichola Kane, Editor of *STV News*. These participants were deemed to be valuable towards the research due to their differing roles within the same media landscape. The contrast of Phil Bowen, a local reporter and newspaper editor, Nichola Kane, a News editor on a national level, and Graham Bean, primarily a sports journalist and a experienced professional, offers the study a range of viewpoints from differing perspectives.

The interviews were carried out using a structured interview, emailed to participants as an open-ended questionnaire, allowing the respondents freedom to answer questions honestly and in as much or little detail as they felt necessary.

Following transcription, the interview responses were analysed thematically. This approach allowed me to identify five key themes within the interview data: (1) the general understanding of press freedom in the UK; (2) the influence of ownership and media concentration on editorial autonomy; (3) the challenges raised by social media news and citizen journalism; (4) experiences with misinformation and public trust in traditional media; (5) possible solutions to prevent any potential threats to press freedom in the UK.

By identifying the key themes within the responses, it will become clearer to observe the core issues raised, supported by direct quotes from professional journalists.

## 4.1 | General Understanding of Press Freedom in the UK

A key starting point for the research was to gain a general understanding of how the participants perceive press freedom in the UK today. The data showed that the journalists still believe press freedom to be largely intact, though not without its challenges. Each participant acknowledged that, in theory, they are each free to report and investigate on issues without governmental interference or overt censorship. However, their individual interpretations of what press freedom truly means revealed underlying concerns regarding external influence.

When asked to define what press freedom means in the context of the current media landscape, Nichola Kane stated that, “Press freedom remains the ability to report events and issues without fear or favour.”, elaborating that this remains the case with most UK media outlets; that there is little governmental interference. She also added that “Broadcasters also have the backing Ofcom which helps to ensure that politicians or owners don’t have undue influence over news programming.”

When asked the same question, Phil Bowen highlighted how “From a local perspective in Midlothian and surrounding counties press freedom is not an issue.”

Graham Bean’s view on the same question was that in Scotland and the UK we are very fortunate to have a free press, but he didn’t withhold his concerns, stating that, “The print media is shrinking which makes it less able to hold politicians and institutions to account. That should be a concern for people. Fewer journalists mean a decline in reporting standards.” He also pointed out an international example of concern for a decline in free press, pointing towards “Bill Owens, executive producer of the respected 60 Minutes show on CBS, recently stepped down because he no longer felt he had editorial independence.”

The participants were then asked to express what, in their view, the biggest challenges facing editorial independence are. Nichola Kane expressed the societal pressure that editors are put under when reporting on controversial or divisive issues to a national audience:

“The independence referendum, the Brexit vote and the current ‘gender wars’ have all put editors under pressure to be as fair as possible and give to balance to opinions that some don’t find palatable.”

However, the local news perspective differed slightly from the national viewpoint. Phil Bowen stated that the *Midlothian View* always strives to stay neutral, simply reporting the facts, and that they would “prefer to allow all sides an opportunity to have their ‘View’ and then leave it to readers to make up their own mind.” Where an outlet such as the *STV* feel pressured to be as fair as possible, *Midlothian View*, while sharing some similarities with this, would more often prefer to leave it up to the viewer to either agree or disagree with the framing of stories being reported.

Graham Bean of *The Scotsman* looked at this matter with a slightly different view, stating that he has witnessed challenges facing editorial independence in the sense of those in authority sometimes trying to intimidate younger journalists. He sees this as a problem facing the ability of more inexperienced journalists being able to report freely and believes that it is important to “Be strong to stand up to these people.”

I then asked each participant if they had personally encountered any restrictions or pressures that had affected their reporting. Nichola Kane stated:

“The recent Scottish government consultation proposing a ban on the identification of child homicide victims was a proposal which journalists in Scotland campaigned passionately against.

If the plan had come to fruition, it would have had a serious, negative impact on the ability of our journalists to report stories accurately and to shed light on institutional and societal wrongdoings.”

She added that this ruling would have also impeded the police's ability to investigate crimes, seeing as they often rely on the media to help them identify witnesses. She added that “The Scottish Government decided not to go ahead with this legislation.”

Phil Bowen said that the *Midlothian View* has experienced restrictions on their reporting.

“Because we rely on the council to give us information for articles it can sometimes be awkward to criticize them too much, in case they lessen their co-operation now or in the future.”

However, he added that this is not a frequent occurrence, due to the fact that the *Midlothian View* usually takes a neutral stance on such issues, meaning that they usually wouldn't be prompted to paint the council in a bad light, meaning the council cannot complain about the way in which they are covered too often.

Graham Bean's response highlighted the differences in reporting on hard news and more specialised topics like sport, stating, “I've worked almost exclusively in sports journalism where there are less political pressures.”

While all three participants agreed that the media landscape in the UK still largely operates as a free press, their responses revealed that editorial independence and journalistic autonomy is not

immune from pressure – whether that comes internally from authoritative figures, or externally, from government rulings or public expectations. Nichola Kane’s experience highlighted how reporting to a large audience brings a larger level of public scrutiny to an outlet's coverage, while Phil Bowen noted how subtle tensions with local governing bodies can impact the way in which a news outlet utilises their press freedom.

## 4.2 | Ownership and Media Concentration

A central aim of this research was to explore the extent to which elite media ownership and the concentration of media ownership affect the way news is reported and ultimately affect the way in which a free press can manifest itself in the UK. This is an issue that has long been at the forefront of debates surrounding what constitutes a fully democratic and free media landscape, especially as large corporations and wealthy elites continue to own a significant portion of UK media outlets.

Phil Bowen, local reporter for *Midlothian View*, drew a sharp contrast between ownership interference on a national level and on a local level:

“On a national level you can see that whoever owns a news outlet can very much influence the news outlet, e.g. The Times, Telegraph, Daily Mail. Here at local level we own Midlothian View and so we control the editorial direction. Our editorial direction is to report the facts in a neutral way and let our readers make up their own View.”

This response suggests that ownership can have a significant impact on editorial independence of national level newspapers, while independently owned local outlets, may provide a buffer against such threats. Though as shown earlier, other challenges such as reliance on local authorities still persist.

Graham Bean, sports editor of *The Scotsman*, echoed Bowen’s view on ownership interference on a national level, offering a more direct criticism of how corporate ownership impacts UK newsrooms:

“Newspaper owners drive the political outlook of their titles to a huge extent in the UK, particularly in the big London-based traditional outlets. It is reflected mainly through the leader columns and political columnists but also in the news agendas of certain titles.”

His comment points to editorial direction not being limited to opinion pieces, but seeping into coverage and bulletins, potentially skewing public perceptions. While Bean’s experience

predominantly lies in sports journalism, his experience and awareness of the ongoings of large news outlets allows him to offer insight into how media ownership can affect the way stories are framed, told, and perceived.

Both Bowen and Bean went on to raise concerns about media concentration in the UK, and the dangers of a few powerful players controlling what is consumed by the public. Bowen stated:

“At national level as there are only a few news outlets who have a particular political leaning then there are less diverse viewpoints. To counter this there should be more neutral news outlets at national level. The Independent newspaper used to occupy this space, but it is now sadly a shadow of the paper it used to be.”

He went on to describe active efforts to promote diversity in viewpoints at a local level:

“At a local level we try and ensure all viewpoints are given an opportunity to have their View expressed. That is why we allow anyone to write a View (opinion piece) and we will publish it.”

Meanwhile, Bean framed the issue of media concentration in more political terms, pointing out the ideological imbalance that happens when a handful of powerful elites control most media outlets and all lean to one side of the political spectrum:

“The London-based UK press has always been dominated by right wing leaning news organisations. The Mail, the Sun, Times and the Telegraph have been traditionally pro-Conservative and have tended to have a big voice on political issues.”

However, he did go on to point out some recent counterbalance to this that has come with the digital era:

“The Mirror, Guardian and Independent have been left leaning but the latter two titles have had comparatively low circulations. In the era of online journalism, their reach has been greater, most notably the Guardian, which has helped restore a little more balance.”

In summary, the responses do suggest that corporate ownership and media concentration do exert significant influence over the journalistic autonomy of UK journalists, especially on a national level. Despite this, smaller, possibly independent outlets, such as the *Midlothian View* may offer an important alternative to this on a local level, promoting neutrality.

### 4.3 | Social Media News and Citizen Journalism

The extraordinary rise of social media in the last decade has brought significant changes to how news is consumed, spread, and framed. These developments have brought about what is known as the citizen journalist. To explore these themes, the participants were asked a series of questions about how the use of social media in regards to news has impacted their work and changed their profession.

Phil Bowen of the *Midlothian View* noted how his publication has only ever existed in the digital age, meaning that social media has always been a part of his work, framing the issue in a more positive light:

*“We embrace social media as it does generate discussion, especially on Facebook, which is what we want to do. We want readers to be reading and then discussing what they have read.”*

This local perspective highlights the positive implications of the combination of social media and news reporting.

Graham Bean of *The Scotsman* made a similar point, observing how social media has grown to become a major source of breaking news on platforms such as Instagram and X. He also explained how in his field of sports journalism, social media has caused a shift in how journalists interact with their subjects:

*“In sport, many sportsmen and women use social media to get their message across rather than the traditional media. They will post stuff to Instagram and/or X rather than speak to journalists.”*

Nichola Kane of *STV News* emphasised the benefits of social media in the world mainstream broadcasters. She explained how “The rise of social media has had a mostly positive effect on our journalism.”. She also noted how social media platforms are utilised to widen the reach of *STV* stories:

“We use social media platforms to disseminate our stories more widely and often our reports can stem from a post on social media. We also use videos and photos uploaded to social media on a regular basis.”

These responses showcase a largely positive view to the use of social media in mainstream news, however concerns around the threats to the fundamentals of press freedom were observed as the interview went on as each participant reflected on the growing role of the citizen journalist.

Nichola Kane was wary of the continuous blurring of the lines between traditionally trained journalists, and citizen journalism:

“Often citizen journalists are not aware of the rules and regulations that traditional journalism can be bound by and can overstep the mark. They have been known to break contempt of court orders, and their posts can be lacking in balance and have a lack of fact checking involved.”

However, she also admitted that citizen journalists often provide valuable material for broadcasting:

“Often we use material gathered by citizen journalists to enhance our reports – this is normally in the form of extra footage filmed on mobile phones or photos they send in.”

Graham Bean held a more optimistic view on citizen journalism, stating that:

“On the whole it probably enhances journalism. The more people holding people in authority to account, the better.”

This viewpoint reinforces the foundational theories of what the primary functions of a free press are. Bean’s comments highlight how non-traditional media voices can play a constructive role in public discourse.

Phil Bowen raised a more nuanced standpoint on the term itself:

“I am not really keen on the term Citizen Journalist as it feels slightly patronizing and seems to be used by journalists to dismiss the content written by those who are not professionally trained but have a valid point to make.”

He maintained a positive outlook on citizen journalism, saying, “Citizen Journalism is giving people the opportunity to have their say.”

When it comes to traditional media outlets using citizen-generated content, there are some challenges posed in terms of credibility and fact checking. All three journalists confirmed that they had used citizen-generated content in their reporting.

At *STV*, Kane described a strict process when it comes to verifying the credibility of citizen-generated content:

“We always insist on speaking to the person who has filmed any footage directly, both to verify its authenticity and to ensure we are not breaking any copyright rules. If we don’t speak to the original poster, we do not use the footage even if this means we’re missing out on some great images.”

Bowen explained that at a local level, verification is done by “ensuring we know the author and as with all articles checking that what they are reporting is fair, balanced and correct.”

Bean, working in the sports journalism field, mentioned the use of fan-written opinion pieces that are “Read by senior journalists before publication to ensure it didn’t cross the line in terms of being offensive to supporters of other clubs, or anyone else for that matter.”

When asked about the role of social media platforms in shaping public discourse, the responses consistently highlighted concerns around bias and imbalanced influence. Bowen acknowledged that while social media platforms allow readers and members of the public to have their own say, “Unfortunately there are some who dominate the discussion and they tend to have the least balanced views and polarise the discussion.”

Kane’s response pointed to more specific concerns around certain platforms:

“X/Twitter is becoming more of an echo chamber and only promoting news stories where there is obvious conflict. Many Scottish journalists are leaving X/Twitter for that reason and due to concerns over the undue influence of that platform’s owner.”

Bean's response highlighted how certain voices have garnered a huge influence over the social media news space, particularly in the world of football reporting, pointing out figures such as Fabrizio Romano and examples of YouTubers who are connected to clubs. While recognising their impressive reach, he warned that "Fan-based media tend to skew the debate because they are so biased."

#### 4.4 | Misinformation and Credibility

Misinformation, particularly in the digital era, presents potentially significant challenges for maintaining media accuracy and public trust in traditional media; two foundational cornerstones of a democratic, free press. While all three participants acknowledged the issue, their differing roles in the industry offered varied perspectives.

For Graham Bean, misinformation is deeply tied to politics:

“Donald Trump. I have absolutely no doubt he is the biggest threat to misinformation. He has almost legitimised it. People no longer seem exorcised by his lying which is a concern, and the fear is that style of populist leadership and its attendant misinformation is becoming the political norm.”

This viewpoint highlights how misinformation is no longer confined to fringe sources but is now being normalised by high-profile world leaders, making it harder for the general public to differentiate between fact and fiction.

Phil Bowen identified more practical concerns, stating, “The pace of news can be very quick and so it sometimes hard to take the time to verify facts and explore other viewpoints”, he explained, particularly when working with limited resources at a local level.

Nichola Kane offered a different angle, emphasising a focus on internal standards, as opposed to directly confronting misinformation:

“It’s not really for us as a reputable media organisation to go into with combat other organisations or individuals who are spreading misinformation. We can only ensure that we are fully factual, fair and balance in our own output.”

Kane’s approach highlights the importance of maintaining credible and consistent, high-quality reporting.

Graham Bean emphasised the importance of experience when it comes to distinguishing credible news sources from misinformation, “You get to recognise what is genuine and what is not. It is obviously important to verify rumours on social media with relevant organisations.” He went on to explain the recent rise in social media stories seeping into mainstream traditional media, stating, “You see traditional media outlets now gathering up rumours, often from social media, and repackaging them as ‘Rumour Mill’ style stories.”

Bowen reinforced the need for source verification: “We have to be careful to know who the source is and whether they are qualified to provide the information they do reliably.” This caution links back to the growing concerns around the largely ungoverned online platforms such as Instagram and X, where misinformation can rapidly spread, unchecked.

## 4.5 | Potential Solutions

While identifying and examining possible threats to the free press acts as a foundation for this research, each participant was also prompted to offer any potential solutions to improve the current landscape, further aiding my understanding of the way various threats manifest in today’s media climate.

Graham Bean highlighted how the key lies in reforming ownership models. He said, “I’d like to see a greater diversity in the ownership of media organisations.” While he also praised the UK for its value it places on independent journalism, he also criticised the persistence of “rich press barons”, describing the situation as “archaic”. Bean pointed to the Guardian’s trust-based model as a more ethical alternative: “The Guardian model, where the organisation is run by a trust, is admirable but I’m not sure how economically viable it is. I would certainly be more in favour of it.”

Phil Bowen spoke from a more grassroots perspective pointing out concerns with how “revenue tends to go the traditional ‘big boys’”, as opposed to more independent, local outlets. He explained, “Independent news outlets, need more financial support from Government such as revenue from Government advertising or public notices. Bowen argued that traditional newspapers have a monopoly over these resources, often due to outdated print policies.

Nichola Kane focused on the need for more effective regulation, particularly in relation to the lack of regulation on social media platforms:

“British broadcasters are governed by the rules of accuracy, impartiality and fairness set down by Ofcom, but social media platforms have mostly free reign to post whatever they like without fear of repercussion.”

This suggests that the imbalance between the regulations of traditional journalism, and the regulations of social media journalism, puts the theoretical fundamentals of the free press at risk.

She also spoke about the importance of protecting journalists and their ability to expose wrongdoing; a key fundamental theory of the free press. “Policy makers need to stand up for the rights of journalists to work without fear and to be able to protect their sources from identification.” However, she also hinted at a need for balance, explaining how regulation must not come at the expense of press freedom: “Regulatory bodies must ensure that any regulations they impose don’t infringe on public interest and the journalists’ ability to report wrongdoing.”

Bean agreed that regulatory oversight is essential, citing a specific example: “We saw the impact of the Leveson Inquiry, exposing some horrific practices. Having someone from the outside shedding light on malpractice is vital to a healthy press.”

These responses help to highlight the most obvious threats to the free press in the UK, while also providing a vision for reform, stemming from a place of nuanced, personal experiences.

## 5. Research Analysis

This section will critically analyse the findings and data retrieved from the interviews conducted with professional journalists, as presented in the previous chapter. By linking first-hand journalistic experiences to the academic literature of scholars discussed earlier, the aim is to evaluate how the themes identified during the interviews impact press freedom in the UK.

## 5.1 | General Understanding of Press Freedom in the UK

The interview results highlighted a broadly shared belief in the strength of journalistic freedom in the UK. Graham Bean stated that he felt “privileged to work in a country where journalistic independence is valued”, reflecting a sentiment grounded in liberal democratic theory, as discussed earlier in the literature review. Despite this, some obvious caveats became clear.

Kane and Bowen both identified pressures stemming from the influence of external governing bodies and their involvement with the media, particularly in relation to regulation and financial independence. Kane was keen to criticise the lack of oversight on social media platforms compared to the strict regulatory framework imposed on more traditional outlets by Ofcom. Similarly, Bowen highlighted how government and local council advertisement ultimately benefits larger media outlets as opposed to local, independent newspapers. This links back to the work of Curran (2012), proposing the idea that genuine media independence historically emerged only when newspapers became financially self-sustaining, particularly through advertisement. Bowen’s call for equitable distribution of public notice funding aligns with Curran’s theory, suggesting that financial autonomy is a prerequisite for editorial independence and, ultimately, press freedom.

While legal protections exist, economic and institutional constraints often undermine the fundamental liberal theories behind what truly makes the press free. Bowen’s comment that traditional journalists “are more and more driven to concentrate on click bait articles” mirrors these concerns, highlighting how commercial incentives can end up dictating editorial decisions,

particularly in local journalism, which is an extremely important area of what constitutes a fully free and democratic media landscape.

## 5.2 | Ownership and Media Concentration

The influence of corporate ownership and media concentration was one of the clearest themes identified throughout the review of academic literature and interviews with professional journalists.

Graham Bean's criticism of "rich press barons" and his praise for the Guardian model aligns with the work of Baker (2006), as discussed earlier, who warns of the dangers of concentrated media ownership and effect this can have on the diversity of viewpoints. Bean's position reaffirms this, noting the need for "greater diversity in the ownership of media organisations". This suggests that when the same small group of people own the majority of the media, it becomes harder for a range of differing viewpoints, especially ones that challenge the status quo, to be heard. By pointing to the Guardian's trust-based model, Bean shows that there are other ways of doing things; models that focus more on public interest and high-quality journalism, as opposed to sensationalism and profits.

Bowen's perspective offered a more nuanced insight into how these structures can affect the values of independent journalism on a local level. He described the Midlothian Advertiser's monopoly on public notices, which not only takes crucial revenue away from newer, more independent outlets such as the *Midlothian View*, but also creates an uneven playing field. This backs up the data shown by the Media Reform Coalition report (2023), which shows the unequal contest between certain media outlets with raw figures.

Interestingly, STV's Nichola Kane did not comment on corporate influence, reflecting either a perceived sensitivity around the topic, or a belief that this issue is less relevant within regulated, high-profile broadcast journalism.

When editorial decisions are influenced – directly or indirectly – by commercial interests or corporate agendas, it can undermine journalistic independence. Stories that challenge powerful

institutions, expose uncomfortable truths, and hold authority to account, may be pushed to the back of the stage, or ignored completely. In this way, media concentration does not just affect what gets published and reported on, it also affects what does not, making it harder for the press to hold power to account - one of the primary functions of a fully free press.

### 5.3 | Social Media News and Citizen Journalism

All participants noted the growing importance and significance of social media in shaping both news production and public discourse. While this study is primarily viewing this rise of social media as a threat to the fundamental cornerstones of the free press, Kane highlighted the positive role of social media as a newsgathering tool and source of audience engagement, stating that,

“reports can stem from a post on social media”, and that content from social media users are frequently used in *STV* coverage. These comments further aid the idea of the line between citizen journalists and traditional media becoming ever-more blurred. (Alan, 2013).

This shift presents a potential challenge. When established, traditional media outlets begin to rely on citizen-generated content, the risk of misinformation being spread undoubtedly increases, due to the disparity in regulations over social media posts, and over traditional media. This can potentially undercut the role of trained journalists, who are held to certain editorial and ethical standards that don't necessarily apply to social media users and citizen journalists. In the long run, this can weaken the public's trust in traditional media and further blur the line between professional reporting and opinion, ultimately threatening the press's role in a fully functioning democracy.

Kane also warned that citizen journalists often “overstep the mark”, citing examples of contempt of court breaches and a lack of balanced opinions. This suggests that while citizen journalism comes from a place of democratic fundamentals and can fill the gaps left by under-resourced news outlets, it often lacks the editorial filters necessary for ethical reporting.

Graham Bean also warned of the challenges posed by citizen journalism, particularly in the field of sports journalism. While he cited figures such as Fabrizio Romano as “experts”, he also referenced the potential for bias within fan-based reporting. This further raises concerns around credibility and editorial standards within citizen journalism. If audiences continue to rely on unregulated, opinion-driven sources, then the role of trained journalists could become undermined, weakening the foundations of a free and trusted press.

Bowen's perspective on citizen journalism came from a more positive place. He challenged the term "citizen journalist", labelling it as "slightly patronising", suggesting that rigid professional boundaries can limit the range of views, specifically from a grassroots perspective. While this opens the doors for a wider range of sources to be heard, without the proper checks, regulations, and standards, the risk of flooding the information space with unchecked claims is increased.

## 5.4 | Misinformation and Credibility

The interview results showed a general consensus that misinformation is a major challenge to the fundamentals of a free press, though emphasis varied. Kane focused on internal standards, stressing that STV's role is not to police other outlets or individuals, but to "ensure that we are fully factual, fair, and balanced". This reflects a more inward-facing approach to combating the dangers of misinformation.

Bean held a more politically driven stance, naming Donald Trump as a leading figure in mainstreaming of misinformation. This perspective identifies populist leaders as accelerants in the spread of misinformation, with Bean's concern being that lying is no longer met with outrage, highlighting a deeper societal lack of trust in traditional sources. Recent events further back Bean's comments, with Trump and his team overtly sharing misleading content, such as the clearly doctored image falsely showing an MS-13 gang tattoo on the fingers of Abrego Garcia, who was illegally deported in March 2025. It has also been reported that he has barred certain journalists from entering the White House, which is a clear, factual erosion of basic press freedoms. These actions contribute to a growing societal culture of truth being second priority behind political narrative, ultimately undermining the core values of press freedom.

Bowen pointed to more economic barriers in terms of information verification, noting the *Midlothian View's* limited resources making it difficult to consistently fact-check and explore diverse viewpoints. This showcases the challenges faced when verifying potentially uncredible information sources.

When asked about differentiating between credible sources and misinformation, all participants described professional processes rooted in experience and evaluation. Bean noted that "You get to recognise what is genuine and what is not", highlighting the role of professionally trained journalists in identifying what is fact and should be reported on, and what is unchecked

misinformation that should not be placed on the mainstream. He also raised concerns over traditional media outlets adopting unverified social media rumours and reframing them as “rumour mill” content. This poses challenges in relation to the decline of media standards, particularly in the face of online competition.

## 5.5 | Potential Solutions

After identifying and analysing the various threats to press freedom that exist in the current media landscape, the obvious next step seemed to be finding potential solutions to deter such challenges. By doing this, the research not only reveals what the threats are, but also gives us further insight into the inner workings of the various factors that challenge press freedom, in a reverse engineering type method.

When asked about possible solutions to protect press freedom, the participants offered some interesting thoughts. Bowen advocated for more government support for independent outlets, such as access to public notice revenue and advertising budgets, a theme which has come up several times during the research. He argued that in the modern day, “a small team can produce good quality reporting without the overhead of a large corporation.”, suggesting that local level, independent outlets are most at risk due to these factors, and that a functioning democratic society needs smaller, independent papers.

Bean proposed broader ownership reforms. He often spoke of more financially ethical models. He was keen to highlight the fact that external regulations can have a positive impact on the countries press freedom when properly structured, praising the Leveson inquiry for exposing malpractice.

However, on the contrary, Kane highlighted regulatory bodies as imbalanced, in the sense that traditional media outlets must abide by strict rules and regulations which don't apply to social media pages and online citizen journalism. Her concern that “social media platforms have mostly free reign to post whatever they like without fear of repercussion.” and her call for stricter rules regarding this, highlights a key structural inequality.

## 6. Conclusion

This dissertation was conducted in order to explore the current threats to press freedom in a modern democracy such as the United Kingdom. After conducting an in-depth literature review, structured interviews with professional journalists, and analysing the data found from said interviews, this study has investigated the influence of corporate media ownership and media concentration, the impact of social media news and citizen journalism, and the challenges faced

by a rise in misinformation on the fundamental theories and practices of press freedom in modern democratic societies.

The literature review offered thoughts from academic scholars, both from a historical perspective, and more contemporary voices. Figures such as Habermas, Mills, Herman, Chomsky, etc. Offered significant fundamental theoretical frameworks for assessing how a democracy like the UK lives up to the ideals of a free and independent press system. While liberal theory often presents press freedom as a given in democratic states, this research study has shown a much more nuanced and complex landscape is at place.

Through completing structured interviews with various journalists, it became clear that although industry professionals still view the UK as widely free in a media sense, this freedom is not immune from external pressures and challenges, particularly in recent years. Elite ownership of outlets and the concentration of media were seen to play a major role in both editorial decisions, and in the number of viewpoints exposed to public consumption, particularly at a national level. This study has revealed that this is a direct threat to the initial ideals of press freedom due to the lack of diversity in opinions, and the weakening of journalists ability to hold elite, authoritative powers fully to account.

The growing influence of social media news emerged as another major concern. While there have been positives to come out of platforms like X and Instagram, allowing stories to travel at a never-before-seen pace, and giving citizens a voice, there were some clear caveats to this. The

rise of misinformation in the mainstream media can be largely attributed to this rise in social media, often due to the differing regulations between social media platforms, and traditional media outlets.

To conclude, it has become clear that the UK, even in the digital age, remains largely a free and democratic society, including the media system. However, this landscape is far from perfect in its current state and various threats to this freedom do exist, and at times do constrain journalistic freedom and autonomy.

## 7. References/Bibliography

Allan, S. (2013) *Citizen Witnessing: Revisioning journalism in times of crisis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Baker, E.C. (2006) *Media Concentration and Democracy: Why Ownership Matters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Chomsky, N. and Herman, E.S. (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Curran, J. (2012) *Media and Power*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Freedman, D. (2014) *The Contradictions of Media Power*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Habermas, J. (1962) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press. (Translated 1989)
- McKnight, D. (2010) 'A change in the climate? The journalism of opinion at News Corporation', *Journalism*
- Media Reform Coalition (2023) *Who owns the UK media?* [Online] 3 October. Available at: <https://www.mediareform.org.uk/blog/new-report-who-owns-the-uk-media> (Accessed: 21 April 2025).
- Mill, J.S. (1885) *On Liberty*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- Milton, J. (1644) *Areopagitica: A speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing to the Parliament of England*. London
- Ofcom (2024) *News consumption in the UK: 2024 report*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand-research/tv-research/news/news-consumption-2024/news-consumption-in-the-uk-2024-report.pdf> (Accessed: 20 April 2025).
- Persily, N. and Tucker, J.A. (eds.) (2020) *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field and Prospects for Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Siebert, F.S., Peterson, T. and Schramm, W. (1956) *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

## 8. Appendices

### 8.1| Appendix A – Structured Interview Questions

- How would you define press freedom in the current media landscape?
- In your experience, what are the biggest challenges journalists face in maintaining editorial independence?

- Have you personally encountered any restrictions or pressures that have affected your reporting or editing
- To what extent do you believe corporate ownership influences the editorial direction of news outlets in the UK?
- How do you think media concentration affects the diversity of viewpoints in British journalism?
- How do you think media concentration affects the diversity of viewpoints in British journalism?
- How has the rise of social media changed the way you report news?
- Do you think citizen journalism enhances or threatens traditional journalism? Why?
- Have you ever used citizen-generated content in your reporting? If so, how do you verify its credibility?
- What role do social media platforms play in shaping public discourse, and do they facilitate or hinder press freedom and legitimate media?
- What are the biggest challenges in combating misinformation in today's media landscape?
- How have social media algorithms and platform policies affected the reach of your journalism?
- How do you differentiate credible sources from misinformation when reporting on social media trends?

- What do you think needs to change to better protect journalistic independence in the UK?
- Do you see any viable solutions to counteract media concentration and corporate influence?
- What role should policymakers and regulatory bodies play in ensuring a free and independent press?

## 8.2 | Appendix B – Nichola Kane’s Responses

Q1: How would you define press freedom in the current media landscape?

A: Press freedom remains the ability to report events and issues without fear or favour. In most UK broadcast institutions this remains the case and there is minimal interference from owners or governments. Broadcasters also have the backing Ofcom which helps to ensure that politicians or owners don’t have undue influence over news programming.

Q2: In your experience, what are the biggest challenges journalists face in maintaining editorial independence?

A: In my experience one of the biggest challenges is ensuring editorial independence when dealing with issues that divide society and become heated. The independence referendum, the Brexit vote and the current 'gender wars' have all put editors under pressure to be as fair as possible and give balance to opinions that some don't find palatable.

Q3: Have you personally encountered any restrictions or pressures that have affected your reporting or editing?

A: The recent Scottish government consultation proposing a ban on the identification of child homicide victims was a proposal which journalists in Scotland campaigned passionately against. If the plan had come to fruition, it would have had a serious, negative impact on the ability of our journalists to report stories accurately and to shed light on institutional and societal wrongdoings. It would have also potentially impeded police investigations into the deaths of children as the police use the media to help them identify witnesses and elicit more information on crimes. Last week, after listening to Scottish media representation, the Scottish Government decided not to go ahead with this legislation.

Q4: How has the rise of social media changed the way you report news?

A: The rise of social media has had a mostly positive effect on our journalism. We use social media platforms to disseminate our stories more widely and often our reports can stem from a post on social media. We also use videos and photos uploaded to social media on a regular basis.

Q5: Do you think citizen journalism enhances or threatens traditional journalism? Why?

A: I think it's a bit of both. Often we use material gathered by citizen journalists to enhance our reports – this is normally in the form of extra footage filmed on mobile phones or photos they

send in. However often citizen journalists are not aware of the rules and regulations that traditional journalism can be bound by and can overstep the mark. They have been known to break contempt of court orders and their posts can be lacking in balance and have a lack of fact checking involved.

Q6: Have you ever used citizen-generated content in your reporting? If so, how do you verify its credibility?

A: Yes we do on a regular basis. We always insist on speaking to the person who has filmed any footage directly both to verify its authenticity and to ensure we are not breaking any copyright rules. If we don't speak to the original poster, we do not use the footage even if this means we're missing out on some great images.

Q7: What role do social media platforms play in shaping public discourse, and do they facilitate or hinder press freedom and legitimate media?

A: Each social media platform is different. Facebook still plays a role in public discourse but we are finding that X/Twitter is becoming more of an echo chamber and only promoting news stories where there is obvious conflict. Many Scottish journalists are leaving X/Twitter for that reason and due to concerns over the undue influence of that platform's owner.

Q8: What are the biggest challenges in combating misinformation in today's media landscape?

A: It's not really for us as a reputable media organisation to go into combat with other organisations or individuals who are spreading misinformation. We can only ensure that we are fully factual, fair and balanced in our own output.

Q9: How have social media algorithms and platform policies affected the reach of your journalism?

A: Sorry, not my area.

Q10: How do you differentiate credible sources from misinformation when reporting on social media trends?

A: [No response provided]

Q11: Have you ever faced legal or governmental pressure while reporting on sensitive topics?

A: No, I haven't.

Q12: What do you think needs to change to better protect journalistic independence in the UK?

A: There needs to be better monitoring and regulation around social media. British broadcasters are governed by the rules of accuracy, impartiality and fairness set down by Ofcom but social media platforms have mostly free reign to post whatever they like without fear of repercussion.

Q13: Do you see any viable solutions to counteract media concentration and corporate influence?

A: [No answer provided]

Q14: What role should policymakers and regulatory bodies play in ensuring a free and independent press?

A: Policymakers need to stand up for the rights of journalists to work without fear and to be able to protect their sources from identification. Regulatory bodies must ensure that any regulations they impose don't infringe on public interest and the journalists' ability to report wrongdoing. Both also have a duty to consider the freedom that social media platforms have when compared to traditional media and ensure that the result of that imbalance is more misinformation being spread.

### 8.3 | Appendix C – Graham Bean’s Responses

Q1: How would you define press freedom in the current media landscape?

A: I think in Scotland and the UK we are fortunate to have a free press but the print media is

shrinking which makes it less able to hold politicians and institutions to account. That should be a concern for people. Fewer journalists means a decline in reporting standards.

What is really concerning is what is happening in the United States under the Trump administration where press freedom is under attack. Most notably, Bill Owens, executive producer of the respected 60 Minutes show on CBS, recently stepped down because he no longer felt he had editorial independence. It appears to have been because CBS's parent company, Paramount, has been trying to get federal approval for a big media merger.

Q2: In your experience, what are the biggest challenges journalists face in maintaining editorial independence?

A: I think on a basic level, those in authority can sometimes try to intimidate younger journalists and you have to be strong to stand up to these people.

Q3: Have you personally encountered any restrictions or pressures that have affected your reporting or editing?

A: I've been fortunate to have worked for bosses who haven't tried to restrict what I write. Having said that, I've worked almost exclusively in sports journalism where there are less political pressures.

Q4: To what extent do you believe corporate ownership influences the editorial direction of news outlets in the UK?

A: Newspaper owners drive the political outlook of their titles to a huge extent in the UK, particularly in the big London-based traditional outlets. It is reflected mainly through the leader columns and political columnists but also in the news agendas of certain titles.

Q5: How do you think media concentration affects the diversity of viewpoints in British journalism?

A: Yes, definitely. The London-based UK press has always been dominated by right wing leaning news organisations. The Mail, the Sun, Times and the Telegraph have been traditionally pro-Conservative and have tended to have a big voice on political issues. The Mirror, Guardian and Independent have been left-leaning but the latter two titles have had comparatively low circulations. In the era of online journalism, their reach has been greater, most notably the Guardian, which has helped restore a little more balance.

Q6: How has the rise of social media changed the way you report news?

A: Yes. Most stories now break on X (formerly Twitter). Also, in sport, many sportsmen and women use social media to get their message across rather than the traditional media. They will post stuff to Instagram and/or X rather than speak to journalists.

Q7: Do you think citizen journalism enhances or threatens traditional journalism? Why?

A: On the whole it probably enhances journalism. As noted above, there are less traditional journalists now, certainly working in newspapers. The more people holding people in authority to account, the better.

Q8: Have you ever used citizen-generated content in your reporting? If so, how do you verify its credibility?

A: Again, I work in sport, so we have done stuff with fans' representatives writing stuff for the paper. It tended to be opinion-based stuff and it was read by senior journalists before publication to ensure it didn't cross the line in terms of being offensive to supporters of other clubs, or anyone else for that matter.

Q9: What role do social media platforms play in shaping public discourse, and do they facilitate or hinder press freedom and legitimate media?

A: I think they have a huge role in shaping public discourse. I think we've seen the rise of social media commentators, good and bad. In football, Fabrizio Romano is recognised as one of the foremost experts on transfers through his work on X/Twitter. There are YouTubers associated with the biggest clubs who have carved out influential roles for themselves and fan media is huge in Scotland around Celtic and Rangers through the use of social media platforms. I think the danger with fan-based media is that they tend to skew the debate because they are so biased.

Q10: What are the biggest challenges in combating misinformation in today's media landscape?

A: Donald Trump. I have absolutely no doubt he is the biggest threat to misinformation. He has almost legitimised it. People no longer seem exorcised by his lying which is a concern and the fear is that style of populist leadership and its attendant misinformation is becoming the political norm.

Q11: How have social media algorithms and platform policies affected the reach of your journalism?

A: We are now at the mercy of these algorithms, Google in particular. How your story ranks on Google will determine how many people read it. So all news outlets are now trying to second guess what Google will like, sometimes to the detriment of the story.

Q12: How do you differentiate credible sources from misinformation when reporting on social media trends?

A: I think it comes with experience. You get to recognise what is genuine and what is not. It is obviously important to verify rumours on social media with relevant organisations. Football

transfer gossip is an interesting one because you see traditional media outlets now gathering up these rumours, often from social media, and repackaging them as ‘Rumour Mill’ style stories.

Q13: Have you ever faced legal or governmental pressure while reporting on sensitive topics?

A: There have been reporting restrictions on court stories I have been involved in but again, working in sport, I haven’t come across too many overly sensitive stories.

Q14: What do you think needs to change to better protect journalistic independence in the UK?

A: I’d like to see a greater diversity in the ownership of media organisations. But overall, I feel privileged to work in a country where journalistic independence is valued.

Q15: Do you see any viable solutions to counteract media concentration and corporate influence?

A: As mentioned in the previous answer, I think greater diversity of ownership would be welcome. The UK model of rich press barons seems to hold true in the newspaper world which seems archaic. The Guardian model, where the organisation is run by a trust, is admirable but I’m not sure how economically viable it is. I would certainly be more in favour of it.

Q16: What role should policymakers and regulatory bodies play in ensuring a free and independent press?

A: It's important. We saw the impact of the Leveson Inquiry, exposing some horrific practices. Having someone from the outside shedding light on malpractice is vital to a healthy press.

## 8.4 | Appendix D – Phil Bowen’s Responses

Q1: How would you define press freedom in the current media landscape?

A: From a local perspective in Midlothian and surrounding counties press freedom is not an issue.

Q2: In your experience, what are the biggest challenges journalists face in maintaining editorial independence?

A: As with any news outlet we have to be mindful as to what sways our editorial independence. Midlothian View has always sought to be politically neutral. We rarely express an opinion on a subject but prefer to allow all sides an opportunity to have their 'View' and then leave it to readers to make up their own mind.

Q3: Have you personally encountered any restrictions or pressures that have affected your reporting or editing?

A: From time to time because we rely on the council to give us information for articles it can sometimes be awkward to criticise them too much in case they lessen their co-operation now or in the future. That said we still try and take a neutral view and report the facts so that the council can see that we are being fair and thus they cannot complain too much.

Q4: To what extent do you believe corporate ownership influences the editorial direction of news outlets in the UK?

A: On a national level you can see that whoever owns a news outlet can very much influence the news outlet, e.g. The Times, Telegraph, Daily Mail. Here at local level we own Midlothian View and so we control the editorial direction. Our editorial direction is to report the facts in a neutral way and let our readers make up their own View.

Q5: How do you think media concentration affects the diversity of viewpoints in British journalism?

A: At national level as there are only a few news outlets who have a particular political leaning then there are less diverse viewpoints. To counter this there should be more neutral news outlets

at national level. The Independent newspaper used to occupy this space but it is now sadly a shadow of the paper it used to be.

Again at a local level we try and ensure all viewpoints are given an opportunity to have their View expressed. That is why we allow anyone to write a View (opinion piece) and we will publish it.

Q6: How has the rise of social media changed the way you report news?

A: Midlothian View is 10 years old and as such social media has existed longer than we have. We embrace social media as it does generate discussion, especially on Facebook, which is what we want to do. We want readers to be reading and then discussing what they have read.

Q7: Do you think citizen journalism enhances or threatens traditional journalism? Why?

A: Citizen journalism is giving people the opportunity to have their say. To some extent we are citizen journalists rather than traditional journalists, although over time we have become more professional in approach. We have always welcomed input from our readers.

Note: I am not really keen on the term “citizen journalist” as it feels slightly patronising and seems to be used by journalists to dismiss the content written by those who are not professionally trained, but have a valid point to make.

Q8: Have you ever used citizen-generated content in your reporting? If so, how do you verify its credibility?

A: Yes, and we verify its credibility by ensuring we know the author and as with all articles checking that what they are reporting is fair, balanced and correct.

Q9: What role do social media platforms play in shaping public discourse, and do they facilitate or hinder press freedom and legitimate media?

A: They allow readers to have their say and to discuss the issues of the day. Unfortunately, as ever, there are some who dominate the discussion and they tend to have the least balanced views and polarise the discussion. Again at Midlothian View we want to present the facts so that readers can make up their own mind.

Q10: What are the biggest challenges in combating misinformation in today's media landscape?

A: The pace of news can be very quick and so it is sometimes hard to take the time to verify facts and explore other viewpoints, especially given we do not have the budgets of other news outlets so cannot follow up on everything.

Q11: How have social media algorithms and platform policies affected the reach of your journalism?

A: The algorithms have made it difficult to know who is getting to read our content. We publish links to all of our articles onto Facebook so it is Facebook who drive users to our website, therefore we are at the mercy of Facebook to present our posts into our readers' newsfeeds. To counter this we have developed and launched our MV app. Readers can go straight to the app and read our articles. We also use push notifications to alert them of important articles. In this way we are breaking the reliance on the algorithms.

Q12: How do you differentiate credible sources from misinformation when reporting on social media trends?

A: We have to be careful to know who the source is and whether they are qualified to provide the information they do reliably.

Q13: Have you ever faced legal or governmental pressure while reporting on sensitive topics?

A: Not really.

Q14: What do you think needs to change to better protect journalistic independence in the UK?

A: Independent news outlets, such as Midlothian View, need more financial support from government such as revenue from government advertising or public notices. This revenue tends to go to the traditional 'big boys'. Locally the Midlothian Advertiser is subsidised by council public notices. These notices must appear in print and so the Advertiser has a monopoly on this as there is no alternative printed paper in the area.

Journalists on the traditional local titles are more and more driven to concentrate on clickbait articles that will attract page views for advertisers rather than producing reporting that is in the public interest.

Q15: Do you see any viable solutions to counteract media concentration and corporate influence?

A: As per question above.

Q16: What role should policymakers and regulatory bodies play in ensuring a free and independent press?

A: Ensure smaller news outlets are supported financially. There is no need for large media outlets these days as a small team can produce good quality reporting without the overhead of a large corporation. If these news outlets were better funded then they would be able to produce articles that readers want and society needs.