

Culture Secretary speech at Society of Editors conference 2026

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Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy's speech at the Society of Editors 2026 'The Future of News' conference, held at the Leonardo Royal Hotel, City of London.

There is a character in Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* who, in the aftermath of war, finds himself lost, adrift and eventually bankrupt. How did it happen, he is asked. Two ways, he replies. Gradually, then all of a sudden.

The word bankrupt is derived from broken benches. The legend is that this word originates from the moneylenders of renaissance Florence who used to meet on benches in the civic square to transact. When one of those parties defaulted, the bench would be broken to symbolise the end of trust, connection, of the relationship – a rupture of that meeting point in the civic realm.

The media is a central part of that civic realm today and today I'm going to describe how we protect it from such a rupture. How it can anchor our civic life in an age of profound turbulence and provide us with the basis of a cohesive country and a healthy democracy. For people to trust one another there has to be shared understanding, shared facts, shared moments and experiences. This is the meeting point, the common ground, the ability to understand one another on which a country is built.

We have lost so many of our civic spaces in recent years. Town centres, pubs, youth and football clubs, churches and high streets have all suffered from violent indifference from those in power, and I believe they must be protected, nurtured and defended. The same is true for our media.

So, whether it is independent news, free and fearless journalism or great entertainment and storytelling which helps to shape and define us as a nation, - it is my belief that the media is an essential part of that civic space and that we have to nurture and support it.

But in recent decades, as we have lived through a revolution in media, we have not risen to the moment. There has been an explosion in the range of sources of news and entertainment, a great democratisation that has removed the power of the gatekeepers and allowed all of us to be heard.

I want to be clear that I believe that is a good thing. From the young kids who can make music that is seen and heard from their bedrooms, to the work of the housing campaigner Kwajo Tweneboa, who upended an entire government agenda using just his iPhone, we cannot and should not lament progress.

But just as with the invention of TV, radio and the printing press before this, all of which created waves of mis and disinformation, moral panic and profound societal change, we are navigating a storm and will do so until we work out not how to stop change, but how to find order in the chaos and put the technology in our service, not us in it.

I want to talk to you today about two anchors in that storm. The most trusted of places in the media landscape and key parts of the civic realm. If they didn't exist we would have to invent them. And I am going to start with a part of our civic realm that has been neglected for far too long – local media.

We believe there is a market for local media that is growing. In a world where facts are contested and debate has moved to the extremes, people are seeking out news they can trust and stories that reflect their lives and communities.

But the foundations have been shaken. In the last 20 years, close to 300 local papers have disappeared, 22 have closed in the last four years alone. Local publishers have shut their doors, thousands have lost their jobs, and vital stories have been left untold. It has left millions of people with no dedicated local news provider. Many other titles are so reliant on council funding that journalists who need to speak truth to power and hold it to account report a chilling effect. Algorithms and data scraping have created an imbalance of power. And while there are regional and local titles who are leading the way in the digital transition, there are others who lack the funding to shift to an age where news and sport is more often found on an iPhone than on the doorstep or in the corner shop.

During the riots two summers ago, we saw how much it matters. Those of us who live in the northern towns targeted by racist thugs looked on in despair as misinformation spread like wildfire online. But where I live, it was journalists from the Southport Reporter, the Wigan Observer, the Manchester Evening News and the Liverpool Echo who not only braved the mob to report with accuracy, but almost uniquely in the media told the story of the community response - of the Nans against Nazis and the local people who turned out in much larger numbers to defend our towns and all of the people in them. They told the story of who we really are.

When local journalism declines, trust declines with it. Accountability weakens. And voices across the UK are silenced.

This Government will not allow that to happen.

To choose not to act is to choose decline. So today we are launching the first local media action plan in a generation to amplify the voices of people across every nation and region, to help local media springboard into this digital age, providing a much-needed antidote to the Westminster echo chamber and a safety valve for communities who have not seen themselves and the issues that matter reflected in our "national" conversation for too long.

This strategy will; provide unprecedented funding for local media outlets to invest in new ways of distributing news; we're almost tripling the funding for community radio; we're harnessing the power of local and national government; and giving more young people access to free-high quality journalism, and the opportunity to pursue careers in it.

Because local media was and always has been a ladder of opportunity to help new voices break into journalism. And this is not a nice to have. It is essential to a cohesive country. Our debate is too narrow and it's too small, too often an echo chamber than a thriving civic space.

The strategy we publish today is the start - not the end point - and we recognise that there is more to do. We want people to be able to find good quality local news online and we welcome the Competition and Market Authority's work to implement their new regime, including to designate Google as having strategic market status. We will work closely to ensure this is fit for purpose and we will not hesitate to do more if needed.

So make no mistake, today is the start of a new approach to local media, which nurtures it and places it directly at the heart of our government's support for our country.

And our message to the owners of these public assets is simple.

If you are prepared to act as responsible custodians we will be the active, supportive partners you have been looking for from government for far too long. But if you are not, let somebody else take these vital institutions forward.

Because at the heart of our national malaise is that too many of us have been written off, our contribution disrespected and our lives not reflected in the story we tell ourselves about ourselves as a nation for too long. The fact that our media is one of the most class, geographic and ethnically concentrated industries is a major problem – and this is why.

And in this respect, for all of its recent challenges it is that second anchor in the storm - the BBC – that I want to talk to you about today, because it has been a bright spot on a bleak landscape. It is hard to see another media institution that has created such an important geographic footprint across Salford, Digbeth Loc, Cardiff and Glasgow, while building, at the same time, an apprenticeship scheme in place of the ladder that once existed through local news.

ITV was created to ensure a strong voice for the regions that powered our nation. And Channel 4 was founded later to ensure our media reflected the stories of a changing nation. But in recent decades the BBC, which has always adapted and evolved throughout its history, has reinvented itself as an engine for the whole nation. It is the most trusted source of news, producer of quality children's programming and the enabler of those shared moments, from VE day to Dr Who, that are the civic spaces, the benches that connect us and bring us together.

And it underpins the whole ecosystem. Every streamer, every investor, the BBC is the foundation on which they come to build. It is why I believe it is one of the two most important institutions in our country.

If the NHS is essential to the health of our people the BBC is essential to the health of our democracy.

So while the terms, the structures and the funding for the BBC will continue to be negotiated every several years, we should seek to end the bizarre situation where if the Charter isn't agreed in time, the BBC ceases to exist. We continue to look at the responses to the consultation on the Charter, but the truth is we would not accept this for the NHS and we should not accept it for the BBC. This is about protecting the BBC – and everything that it represents – for the long term for all of us.

We will act to futureproof this vital institution in these stormy times when public debate feels more toxic and polarised than ever and too often the BBC becomes a lightning rod for the ongoing, exhausting culture wars.

But a future-proofed BBC, does not mean an unaccountable BBC. And in return for this, I will demand that the ethos of public service must be at its core at every level, with those at the very top of the organisation expected to answer to the people that they are tasked with representing. No institution has inspired such intense views of debate throughout its 100 year history. And that is why through the Charter Review this year we intend to strengthen the accountability of the leadership of the BBC – not to politicians – but to the people it serves in every nation and region.

This will include commissioning power, not just programming, moving much closer to people, stronger and more streamlined internal accountability, so that staff can hold their leadership to account, with a much clearer expectation that licence fee payers will be able to see how their money is spent and the result of those decisions.

The BBC and our entire media ecosystem exists to hold a mirror up not just to society, but to government – and hold us to account. And so we are careful about how we intervene in this

landscape. But I want to be clear with you that we are not doing enough to empower people in this new era to understand and navigate a much more varied media landscape.

For example, I believe it has been nothing short of negligence that the last government not only did nothing to equip young people to navigate this new terrain, but actively narrowed the curriculum. That is why Bridget Phillipson has broadened our curriculum to ensure that every child leaves school with the media literacy and digital skills needed to thrive in this new landscape, and it is why Liz Kendall has taken unprecedented action to better protect children online, including by clamping down on the creation and sharing of non-consensual intimate images, launching a pilot campaign to help families develop media literacy skills and launching a national conversation on how to ensure children have enriching lives online.

I said last year that we want everyone, including children, who now largely consume media online, to be able to find high quality content on video sharing platforms and I urged you to work together to achieve it. That remains my preference, but if action doesn't accelerate, we will introduce prominence requirements for public service media content on Video Sharing Platforms as we have done on televisions.

I can also confirm today that we are launching a targeted media literacy intervention to help young men better understand how platforms use algorithms to shape what they see and question the online content they are presented with. This is part of our efforts to tackle the appalling misogyny disseminated in the so-called 'manosphere'.

Navigating this media landscape has also been complicated by a dangerous blurring of fact and polemic, and at a minimum we believe it cannot be acceptable for politicians to present news, without it being made clear to viewers that they are not neutral and, as elected politicians, are required to have a point of view. I am exploring action in this space, because people have a right to know what they are seeing and whether it should be treated as opinion or fact.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the importance of good regulation - perhaps the single greatest area in which I am urged by the public to act, both in relation to existing forms of media as well as in the online space. Media regulation in the UK has evolved with care and caution over many years, and this is for good reason - to protect the rare and precious independence of the media landscape and its ability to speak truth to power, whilst empowering and supporting viewers, readers, citizens to have and trust the media they need. It has left us with a system where the press is almost entirely self-regulated, broadcast media is independently-regulated, and an online world which has resembled the wild west but where all governments across the world are now starting to act.

Every government should tread with care when it comes to new regulation but we as a government are closely following the trends in media consumption. I understand that there is a market for clickbait, something that has informed the development of news for more than ten years. However, we are also seeing signs of a much bigger and growing market for trusted news and fact, the enablers of a vibrant debate and a larger, richer conversation.

Around thirty percent of people who don't follow the news identify trust as the key reason why. Trust in news from social media is increasing, while readership and viewership of traditional news media is falling. In this context, high-quality journalism - underpinned by robust standards - is more important than ever.

From infected blood, to the Horizon Scandal and MPs expenses at a national level to the brilliant campaign to Power Up the North amongst Northern Titles, our press has always been essential to our democracy, and the clamour for trusted news is growing louder.

I know from discussing this with many of you in this room, you - the custodians of this industry, that you recognise there are two paths ahead - to follow the very worst excesses of this new age of mis and dis information, or to uphold and champion the very best of the industry - high standards, trust and integrity. I think the future of our democracy relies on you choosing the latter. But increasingly I think your business models do too.

A few years ago a journalist went to interview Elizabeth Eisenstein, the definitive historian of the invention of the printing press. He put it to her that after its invention it took 500 years for things to settle down. She replied: Have they?

In these stormy times we need a media that can tell the story of our whole nation, that connects us and helps us understand one another, that holds power accountable and most of all that we can trust, now more than ever.

Because we lose the things that matter in two ways - gradually and then all of a sudden. We will do our part to maintain the civic realm. Will you?

Thank you.

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