



Quality control and the publisher's role

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A Demos report highlights how the role of publishers has never been more vital. Dan Conway reports



Just a few months ago - admittedly a very long time in politics - the Publishers Association (PA) marked the publication of *Quality Control: Reading, Publishing and the Modern Attention Economy*, a report by cross-party think-tank Demos. We supported Demos in its work looking at how the digital reading and content environments impact readers.

The report's findings are stark. Demos, using a combination of polling and focus group research, found that the public thinks that moderation in the online space would help combat disinformation or "fake news" (48%), self-harm or suicide (41%), terrorism (35%) and mental health conditions (33%). What's more, the report looks into how publishing's products and services are more relevant today in light of the threats the online world presents.

Guardians of truth

What is clear is that there is a great deal of public anxiety about content online and the impact it is having on society. This is where the book industry has a role to play. Publishers are the guardians of truth because of our rigorous approach to content selection, enhancement and production. But we are also the experts in high-quality edited content, which can prove an antidote to the modern crisis of trust in information online.

Over the past few years, the UK government has been wrestling with the challenges the digital economy poses. These challenges range from making sure there is fair competition and fair tax rules, through to considering how we can all stay safe online. Online infringement has also been a major focus, with the PA representing the book industry and supporting authors in discussions with online platforms and the government on how to limit intellectual property infringement on online marketplaces.

Digital platforms, including Google, Facebook and others, are cross-media providers hosting content across all markets, making this digital landscape highly interconnected and unlike anything we've seen before. Two-thirds of adults now say that the internet is an essential part of their lives, a statistic that would have been unthinkable even 10 years ago, when smartphones were only just beginning to take hold.



Digital dependence

The rise of digital platforms, and our resultant reliance on them, have led to a culture of dependence focused on a small number of companies. This dependence has widespread ramifications for both society and business. We will continue to urge the government to consider the impact of this carefully, and to ensure that the companies involved are required to take due responsibility and care for those using their services.

In business, this dependence manifests itself in how commerce is conducted online and how platforms (such as Amazon) dominate routes to market. In social terms, it is even more apparent. Quality Control found that a significant number of people considered themselves "addicted" to social media, with 42% of 18 to 34-year-olds identifying as such. Of this group, 65% of people say they use social media once a day. The same survey looked into the relative enjoyment of reading books compared with using social media (46% compared to 19%). Books remain an important haven from the online world - whether in print or digital format - and the case for promoting long-form, reliably-edited content has only been strengthened by Demos' work.

In a world where "fake news" and "fake science" pollute our information sources and society is struggling to arm itself with the right tools to decipher what can and can't be trusted, the publishing industry's products and skillsets have never been more topical and should be urgently preserved. Publishers care deeply about the authenticity and appropriateness of the content we commission, produce and bring to market. The PA will continue to work tirelessly to ensure that the UK government promotes measures to support this.

Public service

Demos is a free-thinking organisation, and the PA had no editorial control over the report published or its recommendations. The recommendations to government deserve consideration by the industry. These include that the government should work with and fund the publishing industry to develop a "Citizen Editors" voluntary training scheme to help moderate the online world. Also, that a "public service publishing ethos" should prevail, affecting search engine optimisation of content, and that technology firms should include a "reading mode" on smart devices. The report also recommends zero-rating VAT on digital publications, in line with the Axe the Reading Tax campaign.

The report shows the importance of tackling the potential harms associated with online reading and content environments. It also proves publishing's ongoing role in navigating these challenges for future generations. Bill Gates remarked more than 20 years ago that "content is king". The question for policymakers now is - what kind of kingdom do they want it to be?

Dan Conway is director of external affairs at the Publishers Association. He will speak this evening at a Demos panel event, "Fighting the Tide: Can we turn the attention economy into a force for good?", which will bring together digital leaders, policymakers and the publishing industry to explore how we set the stage for a healthy online content ecosystem. 6:45 - 8pm at the Council Room, One Great George Street, London SW1. Details [here](#).

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