

# Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation

Oral evidence: Misinformation and trusted voices,  
HC 597

Tuesday 24 January 2023

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Members present: Damian Green (in the Chair); Kevin Brennan; Clive Efford; Julie Elliott; Dr Rupa Huq; Simon Jupp; John Nicolson; Jane Stevenson; Giles Watling.

In the absence of the Chair, Damian Green was called to the Chair.

Questions 169 - 258

## Witnesses

**I:** Fiona Fox OBE, Chief Executive, Science Media Centre; Georgina Lee, Channel 4 News FactCheck, ITN; Will Moy, Chief Executive, Full Fact; and Rebecca Skippage, Disinformation Editor, BBC.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Fiona Fox OBE, Georgina Lee, Will Moy and Rebecca Skippage.

Q169 **Chair:** This is a meeting of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee. It is another session in our investigation into trusted voices and misinformation. Welcome to our four witnesses this morning, who are Will Moy, the chief executive of Full Fact, Fiona Fox, the chief executive of the Science Media Centre, Georgina Lee, senior journalist at FactCheck on Channel 4 News, and Rebecca Skippage, BBC News senior editor and disinformation lead, which is a great title. Welcome to all our witnesses. Thank you for coming before us this morning.

Starting with a slightly obvious question, which we are asking all the experts that come before us, for each of you in turn—I will go left to right, it is probably easier—which organisations or individuals do you, as an individual, trust to give you authoritative information?

**Will Moy:** It depends on what and in what context. There is no one I trust on anything. The people I trust to give me recipes are not the same people I trust to tell me about health information. There are organisations that we respect as experts in their field and those organisations are typically ones that will give you information and then will tell you the caveats and the context you need to understand that information. Good examples of that are the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Office for National Statistics and the Migration Observatory at Oxford University, but if I want health information I will go and see a doctor. It is very context specific.

**Fiona Fox:** To invert the question very slightly, I asked around the office yesterday and said, “What is it about scientists?” We trust scientists; they are the people that we recommend people listen to during a pandemic or about climate change. We quickly said that they are impartial; they are open and honest about the limitations of research and the uncertainties; they are research active, so we trust the ones who are actually researching and have been doing so for some years at a senior level; we trust the ones who stick to the facts and evidence when speaking to the public and don’t share their opinions and their difficulties and become campaigners; they change their view when the evidence changes; and they avoid being advocates for particular policies and instead ensure that policymakers and the public are well informed about where the evidence lies. It is more about which kinds of scientists we think are trustworthy.

**Chair:** You have absolute criteria that you apply to it?

**Fiona Fox:** We have, yes.

**Georgina Lee:** It is very difficult to add to what has been said already. I think the general approach is that a source is considered more trustworthy if it tells you the limits of what it is saying. If something is overstating its findings or the findings are not supported by the evidence



that it provided, I would be inherently suspicious of it. There is no hard-and-fast rule as to what counts as a singularly authoritative source. It is often just a composite of the findings and how they have been presented with the appropriate caveats.

**Rebecca Skippage:** A lot of what I was going to say has been said. I will add that for us, alongside reputational excellence and understanding, it is an organisation or person in the field who has been peer reviewed and is not a wild outlier. For us, it is incredibly important that we can scrutinise whatever methodology has been used and that checks out. It needs to be open and transparent. We need to know how they came to the conclusions that they have. My organisation—the team I run—is a global outfit, so we have people who work in the UK, in Nigeria and in India. That regional knowledge and regional expertise is also incredibly important for us.

Q170 **Chair:** I sensed from you all that process and checkability and use of sources has to be important. Presumably, the other option is to rely on past authority, which would make it difficult for somebody new but right to break in. Is that what you are all saying?

**Will Moy:** I think so. Onora O'Neill coined the term "assessability". She gave the famous Reith lectures on trust and I think her term "assessability" is quite a useful one. You are either left with the "take my word for it" crowd or you have the crowd that make themselves checkable and tell you the limits of their expertise. By and large, anybody who wants to provide trusted information to other people wants to know the limits of the information they are being given to start with.

**Georgina Lee:** To add to that, it is always important for us that we can reverse engineer any finding, as Rebecca was getting at. You can trace back exactly how something has been concluded, see each stage in the process and, therefore, you can interrogate each of the different elements on its merits.

**Will Moy:** You find that pattern consistently in different sectors. You see it in academia; you quote your sources. You see it in the law; you cite the cases that you are referring to. You see it in polling; the British Polling Council rules say that reputable pollsters have to publish detail of their methodology. I think that the idea of assessability is not just restricted to fact-checkers or journalism but is pretty widely held in practice.

**Rebecca Skippage:** We absolutely do this in disinformation journalism and fact checking. For us, it is a lot about transparency, explaining the tools that we use to make the decisions that we do, which plays into the fact that we are trustworthy, that people can see how we come to the conclusions that we do. Although across journalism people are increasingly saying, "This is why and how we do it," I think that disinformation and fact checking is at the forefront of that.

Q171 **Chair:** You are all obviously experts and devote your lives to thinking



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about issues like this. How good do you think the public is at distinguishing true information from misinformation? I will do this in the other order, to be fair, so Rebecca first.

**Rebecca Skippage:** According to the latest Ofcom survey, a third of people who are online don't recognise that there is any potential misinformation out there but something like two thirds of them think that they are great at spotting these things. There is obviously a disconnect between what people are seeing online and their ability to spot it. Some of the work that we all do is not just about saying to people, "We have checked this out and this is right, this is wrong." As I was saying, it is about giving people the tools, saying to them, "If something makes you feel angry, it makes you feel particularly emotional, if you get a particular reaction to it, a red flag should go up and this is how you can check it out." We do a lot of work particularly focused on young people to explain to them how they should check sources and be alert to anything that they think might be slightly suspect.

**Georgina Lee:** It is very difficult to quantify to what extent people are truly good or bad, or in reality probably on a spectrum of skilled or unskilled, at determining what is and is not false or misleading information, but I think it is entirely right to say that all we can do really is a harm reduction approach. We try to provide the tools, show our working, show how we have reached conclusions and hopefully bring people along. This is happening across journalism. We will show behind the story, behind the scenes, and with fact checking in particular viewers and readers seem to engage with that a lot. Of course, those are the sorts of viewers and readers who are likely to contact us and say that they are enjoying it, but we do get a lot of positive feedback from that.

**Fiona Fox:** I think possibly better than we think sometimes. We underestimate it and get ourselves into a state about it because there is a lot of misinformation and everyone sees it, they have access to it and, therefore, they believe it. I am not sure about the evidence on that. Ninety-one per cent. of the public trust scientists. That is a very sensible view: I think they deserve that trust.

**Chair:** All scientists?

**Fiona Fox:** Well, it is very interesting. I want to make the point that they trust independent scientists. It goes down to 76% or something when they are Government scientists—sorry to politicians—and it goes right down when they are industry scientists. The independence is an important thing. The Royal Society did a poll for its misinformation report, which you may have seen, that showed that the vast majority of people think that covid vaccines are safe, that hygiene does not do harm, that climate change is man-made. Something is going right here.

These fact-checkers are part of the media but also let's give credit to the science, health and environment journalists who work for *The Sun*, *The Mirror*, *The Daily Mail*, "Sky News", "5 Live" and the mass media, which



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our surveys show is where the public still go to for a lot of their information. Those science journalists are very trustworthy. They are good journalists, they try to get it right and they are conveying a lot of information from trusted sources just in the way you said. We look for the trusted sources but if you work for the BBC you convey that to a mass audience.

**Will Moy:** I think it depends how much attention we are paying. Everyone in this room has to suss out the claims other people make all day long and all of us can be misled and all of us can suss them out, but the reality is that even an experienced fact-checker cannot look at something at a glance and know whether it is true or not. You have to do the work. I think that most people are pretty smart when we are paying attention, when it is a topic we care about and when we are trying to figure out whether it is true or not. We are more likely to be misled when we don't care so much or when we have strong emotions about the topic or when we are busy or in a hurry. I think that is a truth about human nature.

There is what is your background knowledge, your background set of beliefs about the world. Bobby Duffy, ex-Ipsos and now at King's College London, has done a fascinating series of polls called the Perils of Perception, asking people factual questions about the world and finding the contrast between what people believe about the world and what is actually going on. For example, people believe that there are far more teenage mothers than there actually are, far more immigrants than there actually are, far more older people than there actually are, and so on. We have very distorted views of what the world is actually like and that distorts how we understand the new information we receive.

I am not saying that can be changed necessarily. We are always going to be wrong about lots of things. We are humans and the question about how we make decisions is how we deal with the fact that we are wrong about things when we make decisions. There is good evidence that all of us are wrong some of the time, lots of us are wrong about some very important things, but almost all of us are perfectly capable of checking things out when we have the time and the energy and the information we need to do that.

Q172 **Chair:** Did the level of attention go up during covid?

**Will Moy:** Hugely. Covid is interesting in the data because it was the first year for ages when the proportion of people watching traditional TV went up instead of down. People started watching those press conferences and did a flight to trusted sources of information, which were scientists and trusted news.

As well as the deliberateness about where people were getting information from, we saw people with open minds making their minds up. If you looked at the polling—this is from memory; we can check it out and come back to you with footnotes—in September about two thirds of



people said that they would definitely get the vaccine, which meant that one in three people had an open mind or had already decided they would not have the vaccine. In the end, most of the third of people who had not decided they would definitely get the vaccine went on to get the vaccine, presumably having gone through a process of considering the evidence, looking at the press conferences and the scientific evidence in the press and TV and making up their own minds.

**Q173 Dr Rupa Huq:** Thanks to all of you; it is good to have you making sense. There is so much information out there. We are the most informed ever but the quality is variable and it is astonishing that so many adults believe everything they see on the internet. I guess if you have the veneer of a nice website it can make things look respectable. Given the sheer quantity of volumes of stuff out there, how do you all decide what gets fact checked?

**Rebecca Skippage:** The rule of thumb I always use is scale and severity: is something very widespread; are huge numbers of people seeing it; is it hopping across lots of different platforms; for our purposes, because I work for World Service, is it going into lots of different languages? Then it is how severe it is: is there risk to life, risk to democracy, a risk to social unrest or people's health if we don't come at it and address it?

One of the things that we get asked about a lot and I consider daily is amplification. Particularly having such a huge platform as the BBC does, we have to be incredibly careful about the things that we choose to investigate and also how we portray them. I am sure that my colleagues here will say this: that we have developed, as a nascent industry, a way of doing things whereby you don't put in live links to things that are untrue, you don't put in images that are false without treating them or putting "misleading" on them.

From a journalistic perspective, I think that some of our headlines can be a bit clunky because we know that most people, sadly, as much as I would love them to read everything that we write, tend to look at the headline or the first paragraph, so it needs to stand by itself. We sometimes write things like, "No, lemon juice can't cure covid" and things like that. There is a way of reporting it once you have decided that something is worthy and necessary to report on.

**Q174 Dr Rupa Huq:** Was the tally higher for covid—because as you said people were hungry for scientific information—than it was for Brexit? There were subjective opinions being thrown around for both of them.

**Rebecca Skippage:** I didn't work on disinformation during Brexit, but certainly during the pandemic we were doing a global round-up daily on bad information. In the UK we did a weekly round-up saying, "This is some bad stuff, lots of bad information that has come out this week, and this is what the experts are saying about it." Particularly in the beginning there was an information vacuum for perfectly good reasons.



Disinformation loves a vacuum and that is when bad information was prevalent. People were desperate to know what was going on, so it was incredibly important to us to in some way not raise the bar but be very reactive to things that people were genuinely concerned about.

Q175 **Dr Rupa Huq:** The same to Georgina: how do you prioritise what is fact checked and whether the information or argument is prejudiced?

**Georgina Lee:** We are part of a newsroom within Channel 4 News, so we apply much the same tests that we would apply to any story, which is basically newsworthiness. Often it will coincide with what Rebecca said about severity and scope of the spread of the information and misinformation: is it something that is being widely discussed and talked about; is it a watercooler moment; is it zeitgeisty; is it something that people in your personal life are asking about, relatives, friends and whatever? As we would approach any story in the running order of the programme or on our digital app in a general part of the news, that is how we should prioritise it. It is not a perfect science—it is not exact. There is always a subjective quality to what you do and don't choose to dedicate resource to, but so far it seems to be working.

Q176 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Economists can all have so many different views. With Brexit there were different economists saying all sorts of things. Do you give a health warning with those kinds of things?

**Georgina Lee:** Again, it comes back to what we were all talking about at the beginning. Whether it is science, economy, social sciences, if someone can lay out to you what they are saying, how they have reached that conclusion and what the limits are of their argument, and where the gaps in their logic and evidence base are, that is the sort of thing that we would start to consider to be slightly more trustworthy or at least intellectually honest. There will always be things that we might have fact checked—that perhaps in an alternate universe would have been a good thing to interrogate further—but we are a team of a fixed size, so it can sometimes just be a trade-off and you have to make those choices.

**Fiona Fox:** We are not fact-checkers at the Science Media Centre. We are a slightly different model. We are an independent press office for the science that hits the headlines and our criteria are very similar to Georgina's. We are media driven. If it is in the media, if it is cutting through and everyone is talking about it, we will get those 3,000 very good scientists off our database and persuade and cajole them to engage in it. Today, for example, I recommend an excellent article by Professor Susan Jebb in *The Times*. She is the professor who suggested that eating cake every day in the office might not be the best deal for the NHS. That got a massive Twitter storm and was shouted down by everybody. I placed an article by her in today's *Times*.

That is the kind of thing: if everybody is talking about it, if it is a watercooler moment and it is all over the press, we will say to the scientists, "This is an opportunity." I think it is worth remembering that





misinformation is also an opportunity. It is a platform and there were a couple of people saying, "Susan, don't fan the flames, don't wade into this," but you will see if you read it that it is a very well explained, intelligent, reasoned argument, even if you disagree with it. That is what we need to meet disinformation or misinformation or big Twitter rows with: great scientists engaging with them.

Q177 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Did you get involved in Brexit? There was the Galileo programme that was certainly—

**Fiona Fox:** We were on the periphery and I think science and health and environment journalists were not leading on that story, but there was absolutely a science angle and there still is with the exclusion from the Horizon scheme. Science was definitely affected but that was more scientists advocating for inclusion in European funding.

**Will Moy:** I recognise everything my peers have said about the judgments we make about what to check. It starts with the monitoring process. I have my colleagues who are reading the news, reading what you are saying in Parliament, monitoring what is trending online and looking for what we summarise as important, interesting and influential, so very much the same tests. We also have automated monitoring. We have technology that is automatically monitoring what is said in Parliament, most major media publications and selected social media, automatically identifying factual claims that are made and flagging those so we can understand new factual claims emerging, people repeating factual claims we have previously fact checked, and so on. It is having balanced monitoring at the start of the process.

Then there is a judgment about what you fact check, based on the criteria that have already been described but also based on the best evidence we have on what the public cares about. One of the best sources of evidence we have is the Ipsos Issues Index, which asks people once a month, "What do you think are the biggest issues facing Britain today?" It is a free response question: it is not pick from a list; it is "Say whatever you like." That has been published since 1983, I think. That gives us a reference point for objectively what people think is important that we can respond to. Depressingly, in the last year trust in politics and politicians has been one of the top 10 issues of concern to the public unprompted. It is worth saying that there is a lot of work to do there.

What is different about Full Fact as an independent charity working in this space compared to fact-checking units in media organisations is that we are not here to just report on misinformation and disinformation. We are here to understand the causes and identify solutions. We don't just fact check things because an audience wants to know whether they are true or not, and that is important. We also fact check things that tell us something about what systems allow misinformation to spread and what could be done differently. For example, we have gone to the Procedure Committee recently, saying that the fact that MPs cannot correct the record in *Hansard* is a problem. Ministers can; Members of Parliament,





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Back Benchers, even Front Benchers in the Opposition cannot. The Procedure Committee currently has an inquiry about that.

We prioritise in our fact-checking cases where Members of Parliament have got something wrong in the House of Commons where they don't have a means of correcting it for the record and may well want to when they realise that they have got something wrong. That is an example of using fact checking to understand how evidence is used in public life and how those systems can be strengthened.

Q178 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I wanted to ask you on that: why does Full Fact insist on official corrections? Do you want to have the last word?

**Will Moy:** What was the question, sorry?

**Dr Rupa Huq:** Why is it that you, as opposed to the media representatives we have here, insist on official corrections?

**Will Moy:** It is the best way of undoing the damage done by the original mistake. It is exactly the same reason we correct our own mistakes publicly and through the channels where we have made a mistake. I don't think it is us insisting on that. I think everybody thinks that being honest doesn't mean never making a mistake. It means making mistakes sometimes and correcting them. The House of Commons has very clear expectations that a Member who inadvertently misleads the House will correct the record. It just does not provide a mechanism for you to do it.

Q179 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I want to give an example. When we had the changeover of Government to the Liz Truss Government, in between there was what I think were called the "work experience Cabinet"—the people after the 60 resignations who took positions for a short length of time. On 7 July I asked a question and said, "*The Independent* reports that the PM and Tory Ministers resigning are entitled to £420,000 of severance pay"—blah blah blah—"cost of living crisis", and I asked whether they could pay it back. I think the answer was that it is for them to do what they want, and then I kept having emails from you saying, "That figure is wrong. Can you correct it?" It was *The Independent* that said that, so I didn't lie. I said, "*The Independent* said," so maybe *The Independent* was who you should have asked. It was not that I was misleading Parliament. I factually said that: "Today's paper said this." It just felt like bullying in the end and you said, "X, Y and Z this" but I didn't feel I said anything incorrect and now I am down on the blacklist. I wondered how much luck you have with getting MPs to retract what in my case was not anything wrong.

**Will Moy:** Sure. Okay, so let me start by saying that we would have gone to *The Independent* and asked it to correct the record. From memory—again, I would have to look this up—this was an estimate generated by one of the Opposition parties and they—

**Dr Rupa Huq:** It was apparently the Lib Dem reference department that came up with that figure.



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**Will Moy:** Yes, they got some of their calculations wrong. With due respect to the Lib Dem Members, they got some of their calculations wrong. We went back to the party and asked them to correct their original research and we came to you. I understand that you will say, "I just quoted the paper" but that is why we went to the paper to correct the record as well.

Q180 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I don't think I should be now named and shamed as someone who lied in Parliament.

**Will Moy:** I understand that. Let me suggest why I think it is important. If you have an error that is on the official record in Parliament, it will be repeated as a statement on the official record as an authoritative source. We all see online that snippets of what is said in Parliament are taken out of the context, spread around as, "This was said in Parliament; therefore, it must be true." What we are saying to you is not that you did anything wrong by accurately saying that you reported *The Independent* but that you have inadvertently spread misinformation, which if it stays on the record uncorrected can continue to spread. The only way to stop misinformation spreading is to try to tackle it all down the line.

The other side of this and the reason why I suggest and hope that you care about it as well is that politicians are routinely attacked and abused by being misrepresented about how money is spent on the political system, politicians' expenses, how much you spend on staff, how much the bar costs, whether or not you turn up for debates and so on. We spend an awful lot of our time pointing out where MPs get things wrong, where MPs have not taken care to do their research properly and so on. We are very happy to challenge MPs of all parties, but we are also deeply concerned about the level of abuse and misrepresentation of our politicians and our political system and the damage that does to democracy. The reason I suggest that that claim being wrong is important is it is fuel to the fire for people who misrepresent the cost of politics and attack politicians that way.

I understand if you don't agree, but we are not saying you did something terrible by turning up in the House of Commons and saying, "*The Independent* reports this"; we are saying that the best way to undo the damage done by misreporting of, in this case, the cost of politics is to try to undo that at every stage and we are asking for your co-operation on that.

Q181 **Dr Rupa Huq:** I would be happy to correct the Lib Dem thing but on your site when you say, "We've fact checked Rupa Huq", you don't have the words "*The Independent*", so that is misleading as well.

**Will Moy:** Okay. I am very happy to look at that and to follow up with you. Hopefully we can agree something where we both end up in a better position.

**Dr Rupa Huq:** Yes. We won't know the actual figures until HM Treasury



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publishes the annual accounts for 2022-23. At least you guys are here doing this in real time, unlike the 30-year rule where we have to wait until 30 years later.

**Will Moy:** Believe me, you are singing from our hymn sheet. Thank you.

**Dr Rupa Huq:** Thanks.

Q182 **Kevin Brennan:** I think any source of information from the Lib Dem research department, Chair, ought to immediately disqualify itself from being a trusted source.

Leaving that aside, Rebecca, you said something interesting earlier about headlines and how boring the headlines are at the BBC—that is a paraphrase of what you said. I will give you an opportunity to respond to that. Is clickbait a problem in all this for what people think about stories and the need for trying to get attention for stories through the headlines, which in many instances are very misleading and people often don't get past that? Is that an issue?

**Rebecca Skippage:** When I started in journalism 25 years ago, we were always told about headlines that you sell, not tell, but at the same time, certainly in the BBC, it is incredibly important that you are not selling or not mis-selling the story that you are encouraging people to look at. We work within a media environment that is incredibly cluttered and incredibly busy and we are trying to encourage people to read what we have written. Of course, we want to lead with a strong headline but we don't want to indulge in clickbait, certainly on the BBC.

Q183 **Kevin Brennan:** Do you think it is an issue more broadly in what people end up believing, given the way that the stories are consumed online these days? Will, do you have any thoughts on that?

**Will Moy:** When you think about the unlikely journey of good information and what it takes for anyone to be well informed about anything, I can give a very simple example. Say you want to know what the time is. You look at the clock and the clock is broken and you get the wrong answer. You ask somebody else the time and they tell you the wrong answer and you get the wrong answer. You ask someone else the time and they tell you the answer, you mishear them and you have the wrong answer. If all this is going on and someone shouts in your ear, "It's midnight," you get the wrong answer.

For people to be well informed, we need to take reliable information in the first place. That information needs to be well communicated by the researchers. People who have mass audiences, like journalists, need to be able to understand it and communicate it to their audiences. Then people need to be prepared to listen and capable of understanding it. Every single one of those things has to go right for good information to prevail and clickbait and distracting nonsense is a challenge in that process, but I think there is a tendency to try to find one cause of people



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being misinformed. I have seen a lot in the policy around online misinformation, for example.

We have to look at every point in this process and how we can nudge them to be better at supporting evidence, what has recently been called the evidence-support system. The reality is in a free society there will be lots of noise, lots of people being wrong about lots of important things and lots of distracting rubbish published. The burden is on those of us who want to help people make decisions with the information they want to communicate to more effectively cut through.

**Q184 Kevin Brennan:** Fiona, from a scientific perspective we tend to think there is an answer—there is a right answer; there is a wrong answer—but in fact very often there could be a lack of complete evidence on the subject or it could be a contested area and a lack of consensus. How do you deal with that in your field?

**Fiona Fox:** Yes, that is true. We saw that in the early stages of the pandemic where we knew nothing about this virus.

**Q185 Kevin Brennan:** We had an interesting debate last week about the virus—well, I thought it was interesting anyway—where it seemed to me that that difficult moment to navigate where no one was absolutely certain about how the virus was transmitted led to a lengthy period where the public were being given information about the best way to protect themselves that was not necessarily in line with what scientists knew but the behavioural scientists were too afraid to put out a different message in case it undermined trust in what was being said. How do you manage all that?

**Fiona Fox:** I think one of the problems is between Government communications and scientists. The scientists were very open about the fact that they didn't understand this virus, they didn't understand the immunology of it—

**Kevin Brennan:** You can't blame the politicians because they were being advised by behavioural scientists as well as natural scientists.

**Fiona Fox:** A lot of the scientists were commissioned by Government to do pieces of research or to advise and they were placed on SAGE. I think you had this tension between Government communications that like simple, clear public health messages for very good reason—"Stay at home, face, space", whatever—whereas scientists, of course—I actually had Government comms people coming to me and saying, "Can't you get them all to agree?", at which I laughed out loud. Chance would be a fine thing, but it would also be wrong. They don't agree because the data are not there.

I think we can cope with this. The public can cope with Government communications people whose job it is to put out clear, consistent messaging versus the scientific community, who are different. They are not politicians, they are not Government communications people; they



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are scientists trying their best to gather the data, do the research and trials, look overseas, talk to their colleagues and tell us what they know.

I listened to the evidence session last week where Bob Ward, my good friend, was saying that we have to get all these scientists to be better skilled at arguing and go on TV news and win arguments, and I don't think that. That is for politicians and you do that very well. I want scientists to be trustworthy, and I think they are trustworthy because they are open about the uncertainties. That data came in; slowly but surely we understood the immunology better, that it was airborne and not on surfaces, and about the evidence on face masks, which still is not perfect. But when it came in, all the global polls I have seen show public trust in scientists going up from the late 80s to 90s during the pandemic. For all the difficulties, something was going right there. I think it was that the scientists were disagreeing with each other when the evidence was not in and then slowly we saw that scientific consensus and a bit of a sense of the weight of evidence.

**Q186 Kevin Brennan:** Will, can I ask you about Full Fact's submission to us, which referred to engagement deficits? Can you explain that to us and how it could be addressed?

**Will Moy:** Sure. Obviously, having all the evidence in the world does you no good if no one is paying attention or if it is not being communicated effectively. I suppose that there are two sides to that. One is the effective communication existing in the first place and the second is the different communities who might engage with evidence differently or be less well engaged with it.

On the first side, there are real problems with academic research in particular not being well communicated, and there are pretty big challenges with government information and research not being well communicated. That has not been prioritised by, for example, the Government Statistical Service in the way it should. In academia, frankly, obfuscated, overcomplicated language is actively rewarded and the taxpayers' money paying for academic research is in some ways wasted because it is then communicated in such an unhelpful way.

An engagement deficit is created by almost deliberate obscuring of research evidence, but then there is the community we need to engage with. We see internationally, and Rebecca will see as well, misinformation spreading from country to country, particularly through communities that are first-generation immigrant communities and who, therefore, have global information networks that they plug into and may be less plugged into information networks in this country. There was a challenge in getting reliable vaccine information to those communities in that there were not people with trusted relationships with those communities and trusted relationships with public health information, for example. I think it is challenging in engagement to start from where your audience is, understand where people get their information from and then follow that through.



As the work to provide reliable public health information about the pandemic advanced, you got local councils being given money to support people in specific communities, to talk to people in their own place in their own language in their own way, and that became very powerful. One of the things about this notion of trusted intermediaries is that you don't get to pick who the trusted intermediary is. Sometimes your job is to find trust with the trusted intermediary rather than to create one institution that can be the trusted intermediary for everybody.

**Q187 Kevin Brennan:** I know that some of our colleagues, including Rupa, were asked to do that for their communities during the pandemic. Rebecca, what are the most effective ways of preventing the spread of disinformation on social media?

**Rebecca Skippage:** I think, as Will was saying, it is not one solution. It is a combination. There is a huge amount to be done around media literacy, particularly with children. The work that is done in Finland is exemplary. Children there are taught right from the word go, in the same way that they are taught to add up or cross the road or something like that, about the fact that you cannot trust what you see on social media. That is incredibly important.

The other thing that we need to do as broadcasters is to be in those spaces. Very often the people who are most affected by disinformation are not necessarily the people who seek out the answers, who come to the BBC website, or go to Full Fact and ask the question about what is right and what is wrong. We need to be in those spaces—on TikTok, Telegram, Instagram—giving good information. I said before that we need to learn from the disinformation merchants, because they are extremely good at getting people's attention. They are really good communicators, so we need to be using the same techniques as far as engagement, using great—

**Q188 Kevin Brennan:** What sort of things do they do?

**Rebecca Skippage:** It is very human centred. It is people who are directly affected by certain situations. They use fantastic graphics. It is very simple, very eye-catching, so when you are scrolling through that is what you go to. With the best will in the world, a 2,000-word article on a publisher's website, which contravenes something that you are going to be drawn to, is not a brilliant corrector. I think we need to be continuing our efforts in that area, particularly as far as young people are concerned, on things like TikTok and Instagram.

**Q189 Kevin Brennan:** I will come to you, Georgina. The other thing I wanted to ask about was artificial intelligence. Is it a threat or is it a solution—I assume it is a bit of both, actually—to the sheer quantity of misinformation and disinformation out there?

**Georgina Lee:** I should start by saying that this is not something that we have looked at in FactCheck at all, so it is not my area of expertise, but I am someone who works in the field of fact checking and being





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aware of the emerging technology. There are definitely ways in which AI or automation can help with things, like the research that goes into debunking information or interrogating the claims of a public figure.

Where I would be cautious is thinking that we could somehow automate the entire process using AI as it currently exists. A lot of what is misleading or false about, say, a claim from a politician might not be the literal underlying facts of the situation but rather the nuance and the shading of the language that they have brought to the situation. For example, most fact-check articles or output is rarely a situation of, "So and so has said X and X is untrue." It is almost always, "So and so has said X. X is technically true but it ignores this enormously important context." You might have a situation where a politician, for example, has said something that is strictly true in a legalistic way but not meaningfully describing the world as it is.

It is the sort of thing where the nuance of the human ear and eye is important. In that sense I would be wary about deputising too much to AI, not least because at the end of it you would probably still want to be checking it anyway for a considerable time until you are completely confident. The AI says this answer is correct or incorrect; as the journalist I will have to go and check that myself so I might as well have done it.

**Q190 Kevin Brennan:** To a certain extent, we trade on the back of ideas and words are our weapons in arguments and so on, so all that would get reversed back to the days when they used to teach rhetoric. I recently delivered a speech in the House of Commons, Chair, using Chatbot to write the speech for me, and I did declare it. It was much better than my usual act.

I have a final question for you, Georgina. I noticed from your CV that you used to work for the Treasury. Is it to be trusted?

**Georgina Lee:** Well, like any large organisation there will be people who make mistakes in it, but there are also plenty of very intelligent people there. As long as they show us their workings and they acknowledge the limits of what they are putting out into the world, they are to be trusted or interrogated, critiqued as any other major organisation.

**Kevin Brennan:** A very balanced answer—a very politician's answer.

**Q191 Chair:** Fiona, I will pick up on something you said, which is that you didn't think that scientists should go on and argue the toss in certain circumstances. However, you also said that independent scientists are massively trusted, and we all know that, regrettably, for various reasons, politicians are less trusted. To say to politicians, "You go out and make the argument" when it is a scientific argument seems to me to be almost self-defeating. If you have a pseudoscientist there and I, as a politician, am saying the right science, he can always say, "Well, you're not a scientist. What do you know about it? You're just a politician." I am



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puzzled that you don't think scientists should enter that arena.

**Fiona Fox:** I absolutely think that scientists should. That is what we do all day, every day for the last 20 years: put scientists into the national news media, on "Newsnight", on the "Today" programme, on "5 Live", to talk about the science. We see that you have different actors in society: politicians, campaigners, journalists, pundits, the public and scientists. They could have been a politician or a commentator. They chose to pick a subject area and spend 20, 30, 40 years designing experiments to test their hypotheses and come up with evidence. We wanted them all over the media during covid to talk about their evidence from their position of expertise, not to argue—to make a political argument. You saw Chris Whitty and Patrick Vallance doing this.

**Chair:** I am sorry, I am just puzzled. Where do you disagree with Bob Ward then?

**Fiona Fox:** Bob Ward thinks that they should be making arguments and winning arguments and being more persuasive. I am saying it is not for scientists to win arguments. It is for scientists to be everywhere, informing the debate so that members of the public or politicians—and scientists are also members of the public—when we are having these arguments, these debates, these battles of ideas, are well informed and underpinned by the best evidence. The vast majority of scientists are doing that.

We run press briefings every day and they are four or five scientists who conducted the trial. We just did that horrible incident with the crab death. We ran—with Gideon Henderson, the chief scientific adviser to DEFRA—the press briefing to say what its scientific assessment of what went wrong was. DEFRA was asked political questions by the journalists—policy questions. It refused to answer. "What the politicians now do about this, where the debate goes between fishermen and others in the north-east, is one thing, but we are going to make sure that you know that this is the most likely cause of that crab death."

That is really the role I see and I am convinced—we have some evidence to show this—that that is why the public trust scientists: because they do not go that next step and become part of a political debate. They inform those debates, and we need to hear from them all the time, all over the place. I am not arguing that they should be absent, but it is a distinct role. Does that make sense?

Q192 **Chair:** Yes, it makes sense. I am not sure it makes sense in terms of a current affairs show producer who will say, "I've got a scientist promoting fake news."

**Fiona Fox:** Have you ever heard David Spiegelhalter on the "Today" programme with Nick Robinson?

**Chair:** Yes, he is brilliant.



**Fiona Fox:** Brilliant, but he repeatedly says, “I’m not answering that question” to Nick Robinson live on air. “I’m going to tell you what I know, which is about the statistics, but I’m not going that step further.”

By the way, this is not about letting the pseudoscientist or misinformation—with your colleague Bridgen and all the stuff that came out in the last few weeks about the side effects of mRNA vaccines, which was really seriously misleading people and could stop people taking the vaccine, we were putting up scientists all over the show. They were going on TV and radio programmes, talking to print journalists, to make sure that they know where the weight of evidence lies on the safety of these vaccines. Of course, it is countering misinformation but with very good information, not with a political argument. I just worry about what that training looks like if we start training scientists to be more like politicians and win debates in TV studios. What does that look like?

Q193 **Clive Efford:** I will start with you three fact-checkers, then come to you, Rebecca. How can the public know that they can trust fact-checkers?

**Rebecca Skippage:** I think I can speak from the perspective of why people can trust the BBC. I should also say that I run the disinformation team, which is slightly different from fact checking. Very briefly, as well as doing the what, we do the who, the how and the why: who is it who wants you to believe this? How are they persuading you to believe this and why do they want you to believe this, so who benefits from it? Our colleagues in Reality Check do the hard core fact checking but we work very closely with them.

They should believe what it is that we say, I would suggest, because as you will know, as with all journalists within the BBC, everything that we do is based on these twin pillars of impartiality and accuracy. They are underpinned by the editorial guidelines, which—to refer back to what Georgina was saying as far as how we decide whether sources are accurate—are transparent. People can see how we operate. People can interrogate us. People can question and there is a simple process to go through if they feel that we have not done something correctly.

We also show our workings out so people can understand how we have come to the conclusions that we have. Therefore, as far as the BBC is concerned, I would say that that is the way that people can trust us.

**Georgina Lee:** Effectively, what Rebecca has said: the public can trust us as fact-checkers because they can fact check us themselves. If you read a fact-check article on our website, in virtually every case—I cannot think of one that would be the exception to this rule—you should be able to reverse engineer what we have done to reach the conclusions that we have. We link to all the relevant sources. We show you what mathematical equations we might have used to reach an analytical finding, and then we situate the evidence in the context that it exists in, which might be, “We don’t know something about this,” or, “This is a patchy, imperfect dataset that we are using to approximate something.”



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We will not oversell our findings. We will tell you the limits of the information and, as the reader, you should be able to retrace our footsteps and reconstitute the workings. Although we primarily operate online, because Channel 4 news is generally governed by Ofcom, we choose to be governed by those principles as well, so we hold ourselves to those standards.

**Will Moy:** You do not need to. As Rebecca and Georgina said, all the sources are there and you can make your own mind up about it. I would say that that is a representation of what high-quality fact checking looks like, and we should not assume that everybody saying they are doing fact checking is doing high-quality fact checking. If you see trustworthy fact checking it will link to all its sources. It will provide context. It will help you make up your own mind. Untrustworthy so-called fact checking can often be political parties just making an argument.

What we are also seeing is you have the major media organisations here, you have the charitable organisation here, and we are seeing a new breed of fact-checkers that are commercial organisations that are providing fact-checking services largely for the internet companies. They are in a very difficult market because you have a few powerful buyers and many essentially treated as interchangeable suppliers. The only way that is going to go is lower quality, lower price, so we are concerned that there will be an emerging breed of fact checking online that is high volume, low quality, and actually drags down the reputation of fact checking.

That is just one of the reasons why Full Fact has supported the emergence of something called the European fact-Checking Standards Network, which is a new code of practice across Council of Europe countries trying to agree high quality standards for fact checking, including the methodology and transparency. It has major companies like Agence France-Presse in it, which is signing up to an unprecedented level of financial transparency. It has commitments around methodology, like linking to all your sources. That is how I think fact-checkers that want to be considered trustworthy are trying to be clearer, and clearer about the difference between high-quality, high-trust fact checking and other things that may use the same name and appear the same way.

Q194 **Clive Efford:** At Full Fact do you have complete editorial freedom? Are you influenced at all by your backers?

**Will Moy:** All our funding is declared, so you can make your own mind up about that as well, but ironically everybody who—

**Clive Efford:** A politician could give that answer.

**Will Moy:** Yes, but politicians are inconsistent about declaring all their funding, but that is another conversation. The point I would make is, first, I do not expect anyone to take my word for that, but the funders who fund us have consistently done it because they believe we are



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independent. We have a track record of fact checking people who give us money, and I think we have 2,500 people giving us money every month who want to support our work for the sake of it.

No funder gives us more than, roughly speaking, 15% of our funding. We can walk away from any funder we have. No funder has ever tried to interfere with our editorial choices. If they did, we would tell them where to go, and they all know that. More and more of our funding is coming in small amounts from large numbers of individuals, which is the best possible form of funding. However, the reality is that there is no untainted truly independent form of funding, so we have always tried to have the widest range of funding we possibly can, which ranges from the Trades Union Congress to FTSE 100 companies, lots of individuals, internet companies and so on.

**Clive Efford:** Do I take it from that your answer is no?

**Will Moy:** Nobody interferes with our editorial independence, ever.

Q195 **Clive Efford:** You just made a comment about MPs.

**Will Moy:** Sorry, yes, that was a sideswipe. I should not have done it.

**Clive Efford:** Is that your general starting point: that we are all scoundrels and—

**Will Moy:** No, not at all. My starting point is that politics and journalism are important and they deserve to be done well. I think that is the starting point of most serious people in politics and journalism. Full Fact was set up by serious people in politics and journalism. We have a cross-party board of trustees, people who have been at the top of journalism, people who have been at the top of political parties. Not because we think that politics is systematically untrustworthy and deserves to be treated as a bunch of scoundrels, but because we think politics and journalism is important and those high standards need to be upheld and that people who do not live up to those standards need to be called out on it.

The thing that people in politics do not realise is that you don't have to be untrustworthy nine times out of 10 to be considered untrustworthy. You have to be untrustworthy one time out of 10 to be considered untrustworthy, and it is the classic "bad apple in the barrel" problem in politics. Politicians, perfectly reasonably, tend to think of themselves as generally trustworthy, and from years of fact checking I think that is actually fair. What you do not tend to think of is from the public's point of view they are still being lied to regularly so the rational response is to distrust politicians. That is where I think the disconnect is in the trustworthiness of politics.

Q196 **Clive Efford:** I popped on to the witnesses' websites, not just yours, but I was particularly struck by the front page first thing on your website, "MPs owe us the truth"—if you agree that your MP should stand up for



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honesty, add your name today. You are running a campaign to change the rules about correcting, which you have spoken about in your exchange. Then you go on to say, "As our elected representatives, MPs owe us the truth." I agree with all that, of course we do, but the implication of what you are saying there and the way you are saying—it is more the way you are saying it actually says that the opposite is the truth.

**Will Moy:** Yes, and that is exactly right and it is demonstrable in Parliament over the last few years. We have a case of Ministers repeatedly misleading the House of Commons with no meaningful sanctions attached to that.

Let's take, for example, Boris Johnson saying that employment is going up when in fact it was going down, a claim he made repeatedly on the record in the House of Commons at least, I think, 10 times. This was raised by the UK Statistics Authority, a statutory body created by Parliament and accountable to Parliament. He kept saying it. It was raised by the Liaison Committee. He kept saying it. It has been raised repeatedly with him and it has never formally been corrected. The rules of the House of Commons are perfectly clear that he should have been required to correct the record but he has not. The rules of the House of Commons do not work. MPs collectively had a responsibility to hold him to account and force him to correct the record. That is your job as MPs who uphold honesty in Parliament. You fail to do it, so I am sorry but no, you cannot claim that honesty is well upheld in Parliament.

By the way, a Parliament that does not even provide a mechanism for its Members to correct the record when they make mistakes is not a Parliament that is seriously committed to honesty in public life.

Q197 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Can you correct that then, because it is sensationalist? It just says I said this figure. It does not mention *The Independent* at all.

**Will Moy:** Are you talking about the thing we talked about earlier?

**Dr Rupa Huq:** Yes.

**Will Moy:** Sorry, yes, of course, I will talk to you about it afterwards, but we have discussed that.

Q198 **Clive Efford:** That is an incredible statement.

**Will Moy:** Which bit of it?

**Clive Efford:** Are you actually saying that no one challenged those figures?

**Will Moy:** No, I am not saying no one challenged those figures. I am saying the Liaison Committee challenged those figures. I am saying MPs repeatedly challenged those figures, but I am saying that the House of Commons collectively—you collectively—have the power to hold the Government to account and you failed to exercise it. I think a reasonable





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Member of Parliament would say that honesty is not being upheld in Parliament.

Q199 **Clive Efford:** The rules as they are at the moment give powers to the Government. The Government have a majority. The reason I am asking you these questions is that you are making—and you keep slipping into it—a generalised attack on the whole of Parliament, not just the Government who are responsible for the things that you are complaining about. Can I just go back—

**Will Moy:** Hold on. Hold on, I am sorry but—

**Clive Efford:** No, you hold on. I am asking the questions, not you.

**Will Moy:** Well, you are making a statement and I disagree with it but—

**Clive Efford:** Let me just ask you: on how many occasions has your organisation asked MPs—not Government Ministers but MPs—to correct the facts in the way that you did Rupa? Because you are suggesting it is a widespread problem and I would just like to know how much of a problem you have identified.

**Will Moy:** I cannot tell you off the top of my head. I can come back to you. I would say roughly it doubled in the past year.

Q200 **Clive Efford:** Well, you make these outrageous statements here and you are saying it is a widespread problem on this website of yours. If it is, surely you should know how widespread that problem is.

**Will Moy:** Yes, but I have not memorised the figures and I am not going to make them up off the top of my head. I am more than happy to come back to you with the exact numbers, and we have those numbers and all that information is published on our website. All our fact checking is public.

My point is that I am not suggesting—and I have repeatedly said this publicly—that the cynicism about politics is unjustified and that people who believe that all politicians are lying to them all the time are wrong and that we have to do better than blind cynicism. I make that argument all the time, but the way we do better than blind cynicism is creating systems that uphold honesty in public life. We cannot just leave it to the individual discretion and the individual behaviour of 650 Members of the House of Commons, many of whom are personally committed to the highest standards of behaviour. We have experience of going to MPs saying, “You got something wrong,” and they are only too eager to correct the record. That is a completely normal experience we have. I speak about it publicly. I challenge the cynics.

We also have experience of Members of Parliament, including the most senior, repeatedly misleading the House and not doing anything about it, and I say that an honest Parliament is one that creates systems that uphold honesty in Parliament. What Parliament has actually done is it has



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put honesty in its code of conduct. It has signed up to the Nolan principles and it has failed to create the systems that are necessary to uphold them. You have the situation where an MP who gets something wrong in the House of Commons cannot formally correct the record, which is very strange. It is easier to get corrections in tabloid newspapers than in Parliament. It is a very strange and incongruous situation and we are saying that ought to be fixed. I hope that the Procedure Committee will act on that.

You also have this more profound problem, which is not just procedural but behavioural, which is that when senior MPs, Ministers, mislead the House of Commons, there is not an effective response from the House of Commons. I say that an institution committed to honesty would see that as a fundamental problem for the institution, one to be addressed cross-party by all MPs. We do not see that urgency.

**Q201 Clive Efford:** That may well be the case but my argument with you is that the way you have gone about seeking that change is actually doing what you have just said you do not agree with, which is you are attacking the entire political community, and Parliament in general and its Members, and tarring them all with the same brush when the majority privately would probably agree with you—certainly the Opposition would agree with you—that the rules need to be changed, with some of the examples we have seen recently. However, the way you have gone about it is just about attacking the whole of politics as if it is corrupt.

**Will Moy:** I disagree with that, to be honest, and I think if anyone reads Full Fact's output that is not the impression you get.

**Q202 Clive Efford:** "MPs owe us the truth"—what an earth are you seeking to achieve there?

**Will Moy:** I am seeking to achieve a change in the rules of the House of Commons so that MPs who repeatedly mislead the House of Commons are adequately and effectively challenged, but the context for this is that if you ask the public what should be done about MPs who lie, they say it should be a criminal offence. We are suggesting some fairly minor changes to the procedures of the House of Commons so that there is an effective mechanism to uphold the rules that already exist in this House. I think that is reasonable.

**Clive Efford:** It is perfectly reasonable but—

**Will Moy:** Your argument, Sir, if I may, suggests that if MPs and Ministers are repeatedly misleading the House of Commons that is not a problem for the House of Commons as a whole. I do not accept that. Ultimately, the House of Commons as a whole is the representative body of UK citizens, is the body that has to uphold honesty in Parliament and is currently failing to do so.

**Clive Efford:** I have not said that. I have not expressed an opinion at all. I think most MPs and the vast majority of MPs seek to tell the truth—



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**Will Moy:** Well, why do you let those who don't get away with it?

**Clive Efford:** We do not. That is the point.

**Will Moy:** Yes, you do. I just gave you an example of when that was exactly what happened.

Q203 **Clive Efford:** The way the rules are set allows them to get away with it. They abuse the rules, those people who get away with it, and you know that they abuse the rules.

**Will Moy:** Who sets the rules, if it is not the House of Commons?

**Clive Efford:** The Government set the rules. That is the way this place operates, and that is the point that you are not actually making.

**Will Moy:** A majority in the House of Commons can change those rules.

Q204 **Clive Efford:** You are suggesting that everyone is in on this corruption and you are doing a great deal of damage to our democratic process, and I object to the way that you go about it. I am not objecting to what you are seeking to achieve but it is the way you are going about it. Do you not accept that?

**Will Moy:** Then why not let's get to what we want to achieve and then we can stop having this argument, because I do not want to be pointing out the flaws in Parliament. I do not want to be sitting here saying that Ministers are able to repeatedly mislead the House of Commons and get away with it. I am saying that the majority of the House of Commons is capable of changing the rules of the House of Commons, which is a fact.

Q205 **Clive Efford:** However, you do not accept that the way you have gone about it here is open to question at all. You do not want to reconsider—

**Will Moy:** It is absolutely open to question and I take seriously your feedback, but I look at it in the context of 30 years of nothing happening.

**Clive Efford:** I give up.

**Chair:** I sense this exchange has exhausted itself.

**Clive Efford:** It has gone as far as it can go.

Q206 **Chair:** Yes. I will make three quick points about Commons procedure. It is perfectly possible, of course, for MPs to correct the record. You stand up and make a point of order saying, "I made a mistake."

**Will Moy:** No, I am sorry, it is perfectly possible for MPs to stand up and refer back to a statement they previously made and say that it was wrong. What I mean by correct the record is what Ministers can do, which is actually have *Hansard* marked saying, "A correction was later made to this." The problem with the way that—

**Clive Efford:** But you gave the impression that—



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**Chair:** Yes, that is not what you said.

**Will Moy:** I am sorry, I can only hear one of you at once.

**Chair:** Sorry, that wasn't what you said. You said that MPs had no way of correcting the record.

**Will Moy:** To correct the record means that the original record needs to be marked to show that it was wrong. If you do not do that the problem I alluded to earlier comes into play, which is that people quote the original error without seeing that there was a correction attached to it. That is the position that Back Benchers are currently in at the moment. As well as factual policy issues, there have been very upsetting personal issues where an MP has made a mistake about a constituent and had not had the ability to have it marked in *Hansard* that this has later been corrected.

Q207 **Chair:** The other point I was going to make was about Ministers misleading the House. Of course, it is always open to the Speaker to stop a Minister or indeed any Member saying anything, and I have heard Speakers do it.

**Will Moy:** I think the Speaker has been quite clear that he does not feel that it is his role to intervene in the content of debate, but this is why it is in front of the Procedure Committee at the moment.

Q208 **Chair:** Yes, that was not about the thing that you have said is in front of the Procedure Committee but correcting Ministers during exchanges. We all know that to some extent it is actually a spectrum, where a Minister will say something that is disagreed with and people say he is misleading the House and actually he is just saying something that people disagree with, so there is often a grey area there.

The more fundamental point I would make is that if the Liaison Committee, which is a cross-party Committee chaired by a Government MP, is saying publicly that a Prime Minister has misled the House of Commons, that in itself is the House of Commons having redress because in the end we all operate in a public sea. Therefore, if there is a debate about an individual's honesty that in itself is—transparency is the best policy on things—very transparently holding that individual to account.

**Will Moy:** I agree with that and I respect the Liaison Committee, and it was cross-party, for the way it acted in that position. However, my point is that the rules of the House of Commons—your rules—say that a Minister who inadvertently misleads the House must correct the record. Those rules are not effective at the moment.

Q209 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Chair, could I just slip in a very quick one that I did not ask when I should have, which is related to this? What percentage of success do you have with politicians that you demand correct the record?

**Will Moy:** I would not like to use the word "demand" but I think from memory—so sense of scale; correct me if I am wrong—we asked for



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corrections about 40 times last year and two or three MPs corrected the record. That may well be wrong and I am very happy to come back to you. All that information is public, so I will come back to you with the actual numbers.

**Dr Rupa Huq:** If it was an attempt, as Clive Efford says, to sensationalise, then that is little wonder.

**Will Moy:** In 2022 we sent around 70 to 80 correction requests to Members of Parliament, but that includes Government Ministers, and that is for claims made inside and outside of Parliament, so that gives you a sense of scale. I can break that down as to—

**Dr Rupa Huq:** How many, 70—

**Will Moy:** Seventy to 80 correction requests.

Q210 **Dr Rupa Huq:** How many agreed to it? Because I didn't when you—

**Will Moy:** Of Members of Parliament who have corrected the record in Parliament, as I say, I do not know how many of those 70 to 80 related to claims made in Parliament. I remember two or three who corrected the record in Parliament but I am very happy to come back with supplementary written evidence with all those numbers.

**Chair:** Let's move on.

Q211 **John Nicolson:** I am going to give Will a little break for a moment. I would like to put on the record that I was commissioned by Channel 4 to write an internal report for it about disinformation, which I was paid to do in 2017.

Can I start with you, Fiona? I think a lot of people are confused about the difference between disinformation and misinformation. Can you tell us what the difference is? People often use the words interchangeably and that is wrong, isn't it?

**Fiona Fox:** Yes. I don't know that I am an expert on this, but I understand that misinformation is what we were talking about earlier where the wrong information gets out there, but not maliciously, because it has been put out of context and the intent was not to mislead but it is misleading information because it is wrong. It is not scientifically accurate. For disinformation the motivation is more, "I know this to be wrong but I am going to put it out there on Twitter. Hopefully everyone will read it and stop taking the vaccine because I already was anti-vaccination" or whatever.

Q212 **John Nicolson:** That is the reason I asked you about this because obviously, when it comes to the vaccine, there were some people who said down at the pub, "I'm not sure about this vaccine business. I'm not sure it really works. My friend told me that they don't work." That is misinformation, but if somebody goes on to a TV or a radio programme and deliberately spreads anti-vax propaganda to hurt people, or if the



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President of the United States does so, that is deliberate disinformation because they have access to facts.

**Fiona Fox:** Yes, that sounds fair enough.

Q213 **John Nicolson:** Good. I am glad we cleared that up. Rebecca, I notice that we seem to be very low on press freedom rankings. Lots of press freedom rankings are published. Do you think that has a bearing on people's opinions of the press and their inability to decide what is trustworthy and what is not trustworthy as news sources?

**Rebecca Skippage:** Yes, that is a very interesting question and not perhaps one that I have considered, but I am happy to explore it now. As far as the UK is concerned, we do have a huge plurality of media. We do have—

**John Nicolson:** With a very small ownership.

**Rebecca Skippage:** I was talking from a broadcast perspective, but yes. Certainly, from the BBC's perspective as an organisation that is regulated by Ofcom, it is absolutely right and proper, and indeed part of our guidelines, that we reflect diversity of views right across the UK. You see that from across our coverage with our colleagues at Nations and Regions. As far as press freedom is concerned, it does surprise me a little that we are so far down the rankings, as you say.

Q214 **John Nicolson:** Do you think the BBC has traditionally had a problem with balance? Because you quite often choose in your own terms to balance discussions by having somebody who is saying something that is perfectly reasonable and factual and somebody who is saying something that is often disinformation or misinformation—more disinformation—simply to create a balanced discussion. I am thinking, for instance, of climate change where repeatedly you would choose to have a scientist who is being completely rational talking about the facts, and some outlying person who would say that they did not believe that. I know you have addressed that now but for many years you would do that habitually.

**Rebecca Skippage:** I can only speak of what is happening at the moment, and you are absolutely right to say that it was recognised that the BBC got that wrong and the emphasis certainly now is within due impartiality. It is not just about balance. It is not just one side and the other side. It is about what the scientific consensus is. It is not about reflecting outliers.

What it is about, though, is also the difference between people purporting to be from a scientific or medical community and saying things are fact, and reflecting the fact that—particularly with relevance to covid—people are sceptical and people are nervous and people are cautious. I think it is right and proper that the BBC reflects those viewpoints and gives answers to them because, frankly, if we do not give answers to them they will find those answers where they are going to be given less expert





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opinion on the internet. They go down the rabbit hole of social media algorithms. Therefore, we reflect a diversity of opinion and we reflect a diversity of people across the country, but as far as that undue balance I think that does not happen.

Q215 **John Nicolson:** A lot of people do not trust the BBC. A lot of people do trust the BBC but a lot of people do not, so I tweeted before I started this discussion that I was going to talk to experts in disinformation—what would they like me to ask them? I also asked people who they trusted. It is not scientific because it is a self-selecting group who responded to me. Clearly, ahead of anyone else is Channel 4. People trust Channel 4. A lot of people do not trust the BBC. What do you think are the major reasons why those who do not trust the BBC do not trust the BBC?

**Rebecca Skippage:** If I may slightly come back against your basically non-scientific poll, the BBC is the most trusted UK brand: 63% of people say that they trust the BBC.

**John Nicolson:** But not in Scotland.

**Rebecca Skippage:** I do not have the regional breakdown but I am happy to get that.

**John Nicolson:** The BBC itself acknowledges that it is less trusted in Scotland than in any other part of the UK. I just put that out there.

**Rebecca Skippage:** I would have to check that. I do not have that data, I am afraid. Sorry, could you repeat your question?

**John Nicolson:** Yes, I was asking you why the people who do not trust the BBC do not trust the BBC, in your opinion? What do you think the significant problems of trust are that you have?

**Rebecca Skippage:** I think that across the board trust is waning in the news media. We all know it. I think that there is a real concern across the industry, if you look at the latest Reuters report into media trends, about news avoidance.

**John Nicolson:** What does that mean?

**Rebecca Skippage:** People are exhausted at the last couple of years' worth of news and the fact that it has been relentlessly depressing. As well as the pandemic, we are, of course, experiencing a war and climate change and so on. I think people feel a barrage of depressing news when they log on or open a paper or whatever.

What we need to do is to recognise, for the people who are choosing to disengage with the news, what it is that we can do to make what we are offering to them more appealing, so more relevant, more engaging.

Q216 **John Nicolson:** Some people want angrier views, don't they? Those are the people who go to GB News. And some people want happier news.



**Rebecca Skippage:** This is very interesting because one of the things—if you have not read it the Reuters report is excellent on this—is that as well as feeling rather depressed people also feel frustrated and want a sense of agency in what they are able to see. People are increasingly attracted to things where they are given an explanation as to why things are happening, into question and answers so that they can grill people on things.

**John Nicolson:** Explainers.

**Rebecca Skippage:** Explainers, exactly.

Q217 **John Nicolson:** Which the BBC is doing a lot of. Do you think it is helpful for members of the public, when it comes to trust, to know the political opinions of senior executives at the BBC?

**Rebecca Skippage:** I don't have a particular opinion on that.

Q218 **John Nicolson:** As you know, currently in the news is the fact that the BBC Chair has given a huge amount of money to the Conservative Party and the BBC Chair arranged a loan for Boris Johnson. I have had a number of direct messages from BBC staff asking me to pursue this because they are deeply unhappy about it. Again, it is an unscientific sample; none the less, a lot have. It cannot help overall trust in the BBC for the BBC to be headed up by a political appointee who was appointed by the Prime Minister, who arranged a loan for the Prime Minister, and that surely must lessen public trust in the BBC as an institution.

**Rebecca Skippage:** I am sorry, this is not a matter for me. I am happy to talk about disinformation but this isn't something I am able to answer.

**John Nicolson:** I understand why—

**Chair:** Mr Sharp denies arranging the loan, which is what you just said.

Q219 **John Nicolson:** Let's see, shall we: facilitated, helped with, engaged with the process of.

Can I move on to you, Georgina? What do you think makes certain people vulnerable to disinformation? Are some people more vulnerable than others? If so, who are they?

**Georgina Lee:** That is an interesting question. I am not sure there is necessarily anything innate about any given person that would make them more or less vulnerable. I think there are potentially risk factors but we are all human beings. We all have cognitive biases. We all have our pre-existing views of the world. Some of us might be more or less open minded to having those views challenged or changed, but I am not sure that there is an inherent personality type.

I am a fact-checker. You might assume that I am more capable than the average person of discerning fact from fiction, but it is just practice. It is a skill that you learn like any other and I am not sure there is anything



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inherent about someone who, as it were, falls for fake news or false information that would make them like that. What we try to do with FactCheck is we always take a blank slate approach, which is, in theory, anyone can develop the tools and the skills to detect and question false information. If we can provide them with those skills and help them practise it, we are doing our jobs right.

**Q220 John Nicolson:** A question I asked Rebecca: why do you think it is that we are so far down the rankings for press freedom? What do you think that is about and what effect do you think that has on levels of public trust in the news that they read, listen to and watch?

**Georgina Lee:** I am not sure that I am equipped to answer that question, to be honest. It is a matter for social scientists to study. I am not well versed in the report you are citing, so I probably cannot offer you much of an insight there.

**Q221 John Nicolson:** Thank you. Will, can I turn to you? You talked about those employment figures several times. Sometimes people refer to this as a post-truth era. It is an American expression. I have heard it used here. A lot of people thought that President Trump, for instance, wanted to skew disinformation so that people just had such a low level of trust in anything at all that they read that they would stop believing anybody and everybody, and that he would flourish in that putrid climate. Are you concerned that we have an element of that here? Once upon a time people would resign over saying things that were untrue but now they just brass-neck it out, don't they? It begins to wash over the public so they think they are all the same. I think the point that Clive was making, that there is a danger that people think, "Politicians, they are all the same, you cannot believe any of them," is a very corrosive atmosphere.

**Will Moy:** It is a hugely corrosive atmosphere and is part of the reason why we fact check false claims about politicians, as well as false claims and indeed true claims by politicians. We try to give people a better choice than either blind faith or blind cynicism.

I think your question joins up a couple of the other themes that have come up, because if that is a risk now it will be a much greater risk through artificial intelligence. The ability to flood public debate with automatically generated text, images, video and datasets that provide apparently credible evidence for almost any proposition is a game changer in terms of what trustworthy public debate looks like, and the ease of kicking up so much dust that no one can see what is going on. That is a very well-established disinformation tactic.

For example, in the national security realm one of the well-known tactics of Russian disinformation is to just put out lots of different confusing explanations for the same thing, not to try to sell one answer. We saw that, for example, around the Salisbury poisonings and BBC monitoring. We see that on a global scale. If you imagine that becoming much easier, then part of the answer has to be, as we talked about earlier, the flight to



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trusted sources of information of the sort that we saw during the pandemic.

This is why, although I think it is extremely important to hold the BBC to account, when I talk to our peers all around the world, including in countries that are far from stable democracies and countries much more like ours, people talk with envy about the BBC. I think it is worth remembering that the BBC at its best is a shining city on a hill, and those of us who want to hold it to account and see it be better should do so from the point of view that, at its best, it is something of extraordinary value in keeping our debate trustworthy.

Q222 **John Nicolson:** Talking about the press, however, you said earlier on—and I think we all know this as politicians—that people often have a very distorted view of facts and believe things that are not the case because of the repeated nature of the disinformation they are being told. Immigration is one that you cited. People frequently tell you that 50% of the people in the country are immigrants. It is wildly inaccurate, but if you look at the front pages of the *Daily Express*, for example, or the *Daily Mail*, but especially the *Express* over years, its constant propaganda about this flood of foreigners who are “invading” us is a word they like to use. What could we do about that because that is not misinformation, that is disinformation, because the journalists writing that story know it is false?

**Will Moy:** Sometimes. We have to remember there is an element of the selection of true stories is also part of building a narrative. We have seen cases where the press have published things where it is impossible to imagine that there was a credible belief that that story was true when it was published; we have seen cases where it is a clear misunderstanding of underlying sources; and we have seen cases where it is impossible to say with any credibility what the motivation behind the story was.

**John Nicolson:** Except that there are 100 front covers over two years. That is—

**Will Moy:** Exactly. The Leveson inquiry, which obviously had all the major media groups represented by QCs, had an unchallenged factual finding that sections of the media routinely put their political perspectives over accuracy in certain topics, and one that was mentioned was immigration. I think Brexit and benefits were two others that were mentioned. That is a very accurate finding and one that I think our evidence contributed to, so there is a problem with the press distorting public debate. We can learn two things from that. One is that has been going on for decades. We have lived in a distorted information environment for decades and, although that has consequences, we survived.

I will give you an example of what I mean by “has consequences”, by the way. Those Perils of Perception surveys that I talked about earlier asked people, “Out of every 100 people in the UK how many of them do you



think came from the rest of the EU?" The average guess was 15%. The average guess among people who were going to vote Leave was 20%, and the average guess among people who were going to vote Remain was 10%. I think from memory the correct answer was 5%. Therefore, it is clear to see sometimes that people's factual beliefs about the world correlate with political choices they make, and sometimes those factual beliefs about the world are wrong. That is an important challenge.

I do not think the answer is to try to control what is in the media. I do think part of the answer is to hold the media to account when they get things wrong, and that is why we routinely ask every national newspaper to correct the record. It is why our work led to *The Sun* and the *Mail* setting up correction columns around the time of the Leveson inquiry and with that backdrop. We should hold everybody in public debate to account for the standards they themselves have signed up for.

Q223 **John Nicolson:** When the papers make a mistake, if they do apologise it is in microscopic print on—

**Will Moy:** On page 2.

**John Nicolson:** On page 173.

**Will Moy:** Some of them can definitely do better than that. I would say that you also need those trusted voices in debate, and this comes back to the theme of your inquiry and that unlikely journey of good information. It is not enough just to pick up one point of that journey of the press and say, "You are reporting this wrong; therefore, it is all on you." We have to say, "Who is doing that research in the first place?" The quality of data about migration in this country was wildly poor for years and years, and it still needs some good work.

Q224 **John Nicolson:** Can I finish with one quote from you on Leveson? You told the Leveson inquiry, "Enough journalism by enough journalists is untrustworthy" and that it does not make sense for the ordinary member of the public to trust journalism. Do you still believe that to be the case? Because it is not journalism that people should distrust, is it? Journalism is a good thing. It is bad journalism, like bad science, that is a problem.

**Will Moy:** Journalism is a good thing and so is politics, but it is exactly the same point I made earlier. You do not have to be untrustworthy nine times out of 10 for it to be reasonable not to trust you. You have to be untrustworthy one time out of 10 for it to be reasonable not to trust you. Michael Blastland, who created the BBC's "More or Less", had a very good illustration of this. Imagine you all go away on some gruesome Committee team-building exercise and you are asked to fall back into each other's arms on that exercise. If you do that 99 times in a row and you are successful you will be happy. If they drop you one time out of 100 you will never fall back into your colleagues' arms again. It doesn't take a lot to lose trust, and that was my point.

Q225 **John Nicolson:** I would trust all my colleagues to catch me when I fell.



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If that happened, I would be reluctant to trust the person who dropped me. I wouldn't collectively punish all my colleagues.

**Will Moy:** I would say that the point of doing fact checking—at least the way we do it from outside of the media—is to help people place trust reasonably and withhold trust reasonably. Some of the fact checking I am most proud of is telling people things are true when it surprises them.

Q226 **Jane Stevenson:** Fiona, I want to go back to science. Do you think the media is presenting scientific arguments to people better than when the Science Media Centre was set up in 2002?

**Fiona Fox:** I really do. We were 20 years old last year and I wrote a book for the anniversary. It started with GM and MMR and animal rights extremists and BSE. It was a miserable time. Generally, the scientists did not like the journalists and the journalists did not like the scientists. It was a very bad relationship. I finished writing the book as the pandemic came to an end. In fact, when we were allowed we had a party. We brought all the journalists who had covered the pandemic together with the key scientists who had been involved. They were all mingling. There was a mutual respect. There was a huge regard.

I am not saying it is going to stay that way. I think there was—Will mentioned it—a real sense of responsibility in the news media during the pandemic to get this right. This wasn't a good little scare story that might get clickbait. This was something that affected everybody but, yes, the relationship is so much better.

The status of the science, health and environment journalists within the newsroom has grown and grown. I think some of the editors I have spoken to in the past said that they accept they got it wrong on MMR. Putting political reporters on MMR, putting consumer affairs and news journalists on GM and getting the science wrong had a real impact. Now they do defer a lot more to Fergus Walsh at the BBC or Martin Bagot at the *Daily Mirror*. The editor now comes over to his desk and talks to him about stuff in a way he didn't before, so I think the status of the science specialists has risen.

Q227 **Jane Stevenson:** Are you confident that newspapers are now looking at someone's scientific credentials before they do an opinion piece? Has that improved, as well, the choices they are making around who they go to for the science?

**Fiona Fox:** Yes, I think when it is the science specialists. If you think about this—and I am sure this is true with all specialists—the science specialists do not want to annoy the whole scientific community, so they do make it their business to understand who the good scientists are, form relationships with them, look at the weight of evidence and what is being published in the good journals, and they generally know.

That is not to say that we do not end up seeing a terrible piece of research on the front page and overhyped and all that stuff, but on the





whole I think there is a lot of discussion about the individual lapse in judgment and the collective. I think, honestly, on the whole, most scientists would say that the media are doing science well at the moment but with lapses on things like vaping, for example. A lot of the stories are coming from the States. I recently read a poll that was saying that half of the public think that vaping is as dangerous as smoking, which is just not true. That is not disinformation, I don't think. However, the overall impact of these tiny little surveys, coming from the States and published in not very good journals, is giving the public the wrong impression that these two things are the same and they are not.

**Q228 Jane Stevenson:** Thank you. I am a massive fan of very plain English and I think a lot of Government communication to my constituents is often a little bit complicated. I get emails saying, "I don't understand the word 'grant'. Does that mean I pay it back?" I don't think you can be too simple in a lot of messaging. When arguments are so complicated on things like covid or global warming, who should be the person deciding where to pitch these arguments? I will come around the fact-checkers after Fiona—there were a lot of "Fs" in that sentence. Who should be making the decisions about where that language is pitched and how people can get the right level of science so that they can understand it and it is in manageable pieces?

**Fiona Fox:** There was a debate with Ben Goldacre, who was the scourge of news journalists for a while as the bad science reporter on *The Guardian*. He was adamant that all the newspapers and all the media ought to put a link to the original research at the bottom of every article with new findings. I was in a debate once and I was interested in the extent to which the really good science journalists, who I really liked and respected, did not like that because they saw their job as an intermediary. I do not think they wanted to close it down and deny the public the opportunity to read that full paper and find out where it was. It was this sense of, "Why did I become a journalist and why did I particularly choose to be a science, health and environment journalist? It was to read these scientific papers and translate them to a public audience."

We run press briefings on new research papers every day and it is a thing to be seen. Unfortunately, we don't livestream them, but *The Sun* journalists, the *Mirror* journalists and the BBC are saying, "Say that to me again, because I didn't understand any of it and my readers won't understand it." The scientists try again and they get it wrong. By the end of the briefing, which is why they are really important to do, they have it thrashed out between them. I don't want the scientists to write their papers in 300 words, like *The Sun* science journalists do. I like that intermediary and, as long as the journalists are getting it right, I think that is a brilliant way for the public to get to that science. I have said this before: I don't want all our scientists to be training in simple English. I do not think that is the answer there.



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**Will Moy:** One of the things we saw during the pandemic was pre-print academic papers—ones that had not even got through to published journals—being accessed by large numbers of the public. I think it is just a reality now that scientific outlets that are conceived as for a tiny audience of specialists are actually public documents in a way they just were not before. I am not entirely sure how we adapt to that reality but I think it does include a measure of scientists being more conscious of having that public audience and how you have to communicate to avoid misunderstandings in that context.

Q229 **Jane Stevenson:** How do you decide where to pitch the level of your explanations and your fact checking?

**Will Moy:** If I am honest I worry about this. I think in Full Facts' output—again not to do down my colleagues or to echo Rebecca saying about the headlines—we talk about complex things and we read very complex sources. You know the old expression, "Garbage in, garbage out". It is very hard to read complexity all day long and then produce something beautifully simple that somebody else can explain to somebody else. When we do that it is a wonderful thing but sometimes the complexity can creep in unless you are constantly pushing back against it.

Outfits like the BBC have a different opportunity in that they have different outlets for different audiences, so Rebecca might have a different point of view on how you can customise the same underlying research for different audiences.

**Jane Stevenson:** Rebecca, do you want to come in?

**Rebecca Skippage:** Yes. I adore plain language. I think it is vital, perhaps because—although we work now a lot online—I come from a broadcast background where it was simple words: how do you explain it to somebody? I think that sort of language is incredibly important.

Yes, we have lots of entry points; of course we do. We serve a mass audience, so when we are explaining something—and this is perhaps again showing my age, the fact that we got one of our stories on to "Newsround" was I think one of the highlights of my career. It was wonderful. I have always thought that "Newsround" does a marvellous job. If you can explain something to an eight to 12-year-old you are distilling a story down to its basic essence. If you want to expand it, add some more facts and all the rest of it to extend it to perhaps a more senior audience, then fantastic.

One of the things that we are also increasingly doing, as I was just saying to your colleague, is understanding that we have to reach people on the platforms where they are, speaking literally and metaphorically the languages. My colleagues who work in Nigeria and India are working in the local languages because if we think disinformation is a problem in English you should see what it is like in non-English languages.



Therefore, we need to be able to put the correctives, put the good information, back into the languages where the disinformation is.

We also need to metaphorically speak the language, so be able to authentically use the style, not in a cringe-worthy way, of TikTok, of Instagram. Have young people talking to young people to explain what can be incredibly complex concepts, but in that "Newsround" way you can always distil them down and if people want to know more you give them that option of an onward journey.

**Q230 Jane Stevenson:** A lot of those platforms are in tiny chunks. With something like Twitter or Instagram you want a very small post to get those people.

**Rebecca Skippage:** Absolutely. When I was training we were always taught, "What is the *Radio Times* billing for a story? You should be able to tell every story in two sentences." I think that is a really good way of doing it. You have to be able to distil a story down to its essence and then, as I was saying, say, "If you want to know more here is your onward journey." That is the way that we try to do it.

**Q231 Jane Stevenson:** Thank you. Channel 4, where does it fit in? Where does your fact check try to pitch itself in the science space?

**Georgina Lee:** We are experimenting with different platforms at the moment. We have moved a lot into explainers more broadly across our digital app, but with fact-check content as well. With science it is quite difficult to get to exactly what will make something go viral on TikTok. We are now at the point where we are regularly making videos of under 40 seconds on quite complex issues, sometimes on science but sometimes on some complex policy issue or some constitutional issue, so we are refining that.

One of the things we keep encountering, and I think a lot of people across the industry are encountering, is that with TikTok in particular, but also other social media platforms, things age very quickly, styles age, the vernaculars age. As with anything that teenagers use a lot of, things become passé within weeks, months. A year is a decade virtually, so we are constantly iterating how we approach it. Is it good to start with a question to engage someone? Is it good to come in on a story from a different angle? You might take something that perhaps would be something dry and start out by saying, "We are going to tell you about this." Then you come at it from a much more engaging perspective to hook people in, but it is not a fixed formula. It is constantly under review and iteration.

**Q232 Jane Stevenson:** Rebecca, something that you touched on at the beginning of the session was that you said part of your responsibility was to encourage critical thinking. I think a lot of people read something on the internet; it looks glossy and it looks credible to them. How much do you think you should be focusing more on presenting both sides of an



argument or all sides of an argument and then saying, “On the balance between this, we have to think about X, Y, Z”? Where do you think that education can be boosted?

**Rebecca Skippage:** It is interesting. I was at the Reuters Institute a couple of years ago, and I did a research paper on the role of public service media and the fight against disinformation. One of the things I found out, which was fascinating to me, is that critical thinking isn’t really taught as much in schools, in mainstream education, as it used to be. One of the things that we do within the BBC is that if you look at things like Bitesize and Young Reporter and again “Newsround”, and all these ways in which we connect with young people and children, that critical-thinking element is very much part of what we do. Marianna Spring, who you may well know—I think she has given evidence in front of this Committee before—does a lot of work with them as well, explaining how you can interrogate that. I think it is absolutely critical to what we do, yes.

Q233 **Jane Stevenson:** Georgina, do you do enough of that on that platforms?

**Georgina Lee:** Can you just remind me of your question?

**Jane Stevenson:** Do you encourage more critical thinking and say, “You need to consider X, Y, Z”? Do you think that is the sort of thing that is needed more?

**Georgina Lee:** Yes, because we accept that there is a kind of firehose of false or misleading information. We accept that we cannot do everything. We cannot debunk everything in the world. We can take a step further back in the chronology of disinformation and misinformation and try to help people get the tools, “It is not just reading this one article. At the end of this article, we have discovered that the thing that you thought might be true is actually not true.” That is useful enough, but what is even better for us is the thought that, having read that article and seeing how we approached it—so modelling the example of critical thinking and critical analysis—when you read another false claim somewhere else you might already have in your mind a primer for how you can interrogate that. It is not so much that we are just reporting on an individual story or just debunking an individual myth but, rather, that we are hoping to set people up as more engaged readers, viewers and consumers of news.

Q234 **Jane Stevenson:** Thank you. Will, do you think you do enough?

**Will Moy:** Essentially the same answer. I would add that fact checking is largely about reinserting shades of grey into things that other people have presented as black and white.

Picking up on a question from earlier about Brexit and economics, the thing we published about economic modelling was essentially, “Here are the 10 key questions to ask about economic models,” and explaining how models are just mathematical encoding of assumptions and, “You need to think about what those assumptions are and what the evidence for them



is,” and that kind of thing, in the same way that is true of weather forecasting models or whatever else. Sometimes we step outside of the individual fact check to say, “What is the thing that will help people respond to this class of claims?” We also do work in schools. We provide training and various other educational work.

**Q235 Jane Stevenson:** Thank you. Fiona, do you have anything to say?

**Fiona Fox:** Jim Al-Khalili has written a lovely book—the very media-friendly physicist—about how maybe the whole of society can learn a bit more from scientists and the scientific method in terms of improving the way we debate. I thought it was a very nice approach, referencing evidence, starting with an idea, but then testing that idea and finding the evidence, rather than starting with a strident idea and shouting each other down. I refer you again to that nice article about cakegate in *The Times* today, which I think is injecting that reason and evidence and research base for, “Let’s have this discussion, bring it on, but let’s have it in a good way.”

**Q236 Jane Stevenson:** Finally, I am going to come down the line. Since I was very young, I don’t think a lot has changed in politics in so far as people expect politicians to be incredibly definite and say something absolutely 100%. It is very black and white. I wonder if that expectation creates more problems. Maybe we should be presenting the best evidence we have, “We have option A and option B.” Sometimes—in the pandemic this was especially true—the choice that is open to Government or the suggestion of the Opposition was, “Really bad” or, “Really, really bad”. Do you think political language should alter and change? Do you think that would help or make it worse?

**Will Moy:** Yes. I am also realistic about the extent to which that can be done. I think there are opportunities for Governments and politicians to lead in explaining complexity. I do not think you can do it on every topic all the time. Sometimes you just need to sound certain and sometimes you can only win your argument by sounding certain.

Politicians have to balance the informative public debate with your commitment to achieving your political goals in terms of actual results and getting elected and all the rest of it. I am not suggesting that there is a lovely world over the other side of the rainbow with unicorns in it where we should all go and play, but I think that the starting point for this is that we have so little evidence on so many important topics. We have local authority-level data on who plays golf, but we don’t have police authority-level data on who is the victim of violent crime. That is an astonishing thing, which makes it impossible to have a meaningful conversation about who should be elected as your next police and crime commissioner. Migration stats, as I mentioned earlier—horrible—and during the pandemic we realised we did not have the number of people living in care homes.



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Very basic information is missing from our public debate and until the leaders of our public life demand the information that is necessary for you to do your jobs and stop putting up with the level of ignorance that is currently built into our Government system, it is going to be very hard for you to bring that kind of nuance into the system.

If I may give a short plug, there was a recent commission based in Canada called the Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges. It is a truly global effort, and it came up with this very interesting notion of an evidence support system, that every country has an evidence support system, and it suggests that every country should do a review of what the components are of its evidence support system, the producers of evidence, the intermediaries and the decision makers, where the gaps are and how they can be filled. If there is one recommendation I think this Committee could usefully make, that might step us towards not quite the unicorns but at least step us towards healthier, more nuanced public debate. Perhaps that would be one.

**Fiona Fox:** I thought it was interesting, the interaction between Rupa and Will earlier about Rupa's language about named and shamed and blacklists. It was very strong, the idea that correcting something you had said would be this shameful thing and you would be on a blacklist forever. I am basically just agreeing with you.

I felt during the pandemic the political editors were terrible at this: "Prime Minister—or Minister—you stood here three days ago and said that we should wear face masks. Now you are saying we shouldn't. Shouldn't you resign, and why should anyone believe a single word you say?" In science it is the exact opposite. When the evidence changes, you change what you say. You do follow the evidence as it builds. I honestly think that that relative trust deficit that politicians have would be rectified if they were happy to correct their errors, admit to uncertainties, see different sides and, yes, change their minds when the evidence changes.

**Georgina Lee:** I want to take a composite position of what has already been said. I think there are two use cases that your point might engage with. During the pandemic, castigating Ministers for U-turns or whatever—that kind of language—over what was in fact just, "We have new evidence now, we have new science and the scientific understanding has changed," is not a very helpful way to conduct politics. Trying to hem Ministers in, especially in that era, in as far as some journalists were doing that—I do not think every journalist was, but a couple were—I think that was counterproductive. It was understandable because obviously as journalists we are always looking for U-turns, because often it implies some sort of failure in the past politics.

To go back to your original question, I do think there is something to be said for moderating the language. If you already know that what you are saying is not as definite as you are presenting it, then as the public, as the media, we should reasonably expect our politicians to be able to say,





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"Okay, we don't know the definite answer on this, but my inkling is it's this." Or, "We have strong evidence that suggests this"—those kind of wordings.

**Jane Stevenson:** I was going to say that "inkling" you'd be hounded for—

**Georgina Lee:** Yes, perhaps "inkling" is a bit too watered down, but things that indicate that this is not a done deal. It is perfectly reasonable for the media to ask politicians to just be honest about things. If there is a gap in the knowledge or if there is maybe some contradictory evidence, and they are making the point, "There is also some evidence contrary to that," I think that is perfectly fine.

**Rebecca Skippage:** Just building on that, I think the black-and-white, terribly polarised, entrenched arguments that we find across social media and across many of our institutions we recognise are increasingly unhelpful and create a huge amount of heat and not very much light. One of the things that we are trying to do—and you should see this coming out more in the BBC's output—is to say, "This is the best evidence we have at the moment."

There is a new section at the BBC that my unit is going to be part of called the Forensic News Centre, which is going to be looking at fact checking to a certain extent, but also using open source intelligence technology. If, for example, a plane has crashed, rather than waiting until we know absolutely everything about it, the idea is that somebody is able to say, "This is as much as we know at the moment and it is an evolving situation and things might change."

That is also part of changing from this top-down method of providing the news and broadcasting and making it much more of a peer-to-peer relationship, where we say, "We are bringing you as much as we can tell you and this is why we still have holes in what we know. We have these experts that have said this thing, we have these experts that have said this thing." Again, that sense of transparency I think is beneficial to all of us who are trying to communicate things to people.

Q237 **Giles Watling:** You have given us various examples of how we should improve ourselves in the House of Commons. I am directing this first at Will. I would just like to say that when I first arrived five and a half years ago in the House and I first did that timorous bow to the Speaker and walked into the Chamber and saw the 650 or whatever people there, my overwhelming impression was—with a few egregious examples that get generally called to account—that this was a Chamber full of amazing people from both sides who were there putting themselves in the firing line and standing up and being counted and doing the very best they could, with one general aim, and that was to make Britain better. They may have ideological differences, but that is basically what is going on there. The general public would be amazed how generally we seem to get on in various things—for instance, this Committee, which is a cross-party



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Committee. Is that not a story we should be telling? How should we go about telling that? I am talking about the PR aspect of this.

**Will Moy:** I think that is a very fair description and I am struck that to some extent the public recognises it, because when you ask people, "Do you generally trust politicians to tell the truth?" four out of five people will say, "No," but if you ask people, "Do you generally trust your local MP to tell the truth?", from memory about one in two will say they do. It is a very distinct difference. In a sense, the closer people are to the political process or the closer people are to their own MP, the more trust they are likely to have, which is almost unfamiliarity breeds contempt. I think I have been pretty clear that I have some strong challenges to give, but when people get past the superficial cynicism that we are all used to, there is a much better story to tell.

I think—and this is why I make the case and I make it forcefully—that unless you deal with the people who drag down the reputation of the rest of the House of Commons, that story will, rationally from the public's point of view, drown out the story of the dedicated public service that is—

**Giles Watling:** But I did say there are a few egregious examples that are called out.

**Will Moy:** Exactly, yes, but calling them out effectively and stopping that behaviour is very important in creating the space for the public service that happens in the rest of the place to happen.

The other thing I have often thought is I have given evidence, for example, to this Committee on many occasions on disinformation, online safety—lots of complex, nuanced issues that by and large you are not going to get much thanks for your work on. I have given evidence to a Public Administration Committee on Government accounts and other even less likely-to-be-thanked-for issues. It is how you could tell the story of what an average MP does outside of the firing line of PMQs and understanding that somebody is looking at exactly how Government accounts are written, and nobody thinks it is the most exciting way to spend a Wednesday morning but they are doing it anyway. There is a whole story of public service in Parliament that I admire enormously, which is largely away from the day-to-day of political reporting.

One of the things I would say is that investment in the parliamentary education service and the information service over the last few years, making Parliament a much more open and better understood place, has been a wonderful thing. There is a lot more work to be done in parliamentary digital, and the online presence of Parliament is held back, I think, by internal decision-making processes. I think Rebecca used that interesting phrase—that peer-to-peer thing. MPs are the ultimate citizens with the ability to ask questions of Government and hold it to account. Explaining that perspective is a very powerful and rich story that we could hear more often.



Q238 **Giles Watling:** We are going a little bit off piste here, but I would just like the views of the media people here—Rebecca and Georgina—on how we can improve that image. Rebecca, is the media doing enough in that respect?

**Rebecca Skippage:** As I was saying to John, people are increasingly interested. The people who are avoiding the news at the moment are very interested in positive stories, what is called solution-based or solution-focused journalism. I think telling positive stories, whether it be about Members of Parliament working for the good of people, is appealing to people. I think it is also about being transparent and admitting mistakes when they happen, in the same way that increasingly with the BBC we admit that we have done things wrong. As I say, it is about having that relationship with people that is much more peer to peer rather than top down. Yes, those would be some suggestions.

**Giles Watling:** We will rely on you to pick that up, thank you.

**Georgina Lee:** It is not really for me to comment on the media generally—it is beyond my remit as a fact-checker—but yes, quite obviously there is an appetite for good news stories. Where individual MPs or collectively MPs are working to serve their constituents well and the general public well, I think there will always be an appetite for those stories.

Q239 **Giles Watling:** Thank you very much. I will move on. Fiona, you wrote a book, *Beyond the Hype: The Inside Story of Science's Biggest Media Controversies* and you say that scientific research should be separated from Government communications. Do you think the Government got it wrong at the outset of the pandemic, when we had the image of the Prime Minister standing by the senior health physician and epidemiologist Chris Whitty, so that people began to perhaps get this distrust of Chris Whitty because he was associated very closely with the PM? Do you think that was a wrong projection?

**Fiona Fox:** No, I think it was fantastic. I absolutely loved it. When the Ministers started saying, “We are just following the science,” even to political questions about their policy on closing schools or whatever, “We are just following the science,” I think that was a dangerous moment, but the fact that, as Will was saying earlier, every single day millions of people who were all forced to stay at home because of lockdown were sitting and turning on the television watching Chris Whitty, Patrick Vallance, Angela McLean and Jenny Harries and the succession of scientific advisers was absolutely brilliant. We are all talking about them being poor communicators, but Chris Whitty, Patrick, Jenny, and Susan Hopkins are brilliant communicators.

**Giles Watling:** I thought they were, but it did bring them literally into the firing line that politicians normally occupy.

**Fiona Fox:** It did, but—



**Giles Watling:** Chris Whitty was physically attacked, wasn't he?

**Fiona Fox:** Yes, and I have huge admiration for him, but I think they knew that that was their role at that time. They had a huge sense of purpose. They sat in front of these Select Committees and the public heard from the science. They did not go beyond the science, going back to my earlier point. There was that moment where they were asked, "What is your comment on the Dominic Cummings affair? You must want to answer, you must want to tell us," and both of them said, "We can assure you we don't want to tell you," and I believed them. I do not think they wanted to answer political questions. I think they wanted to show the graphs, say whether the virus was going up or down and display the evidence to the public.

Q240 **Giles Watling:** You are absolutely clear that there was no misinformation there?

**Fiona Fox:** No. Can I make one point that I have been dying to make for the whole thing? I spent the whole weekend reading the previous evidence, which was fascinating, but nobody made this point and I hope the Committee will say something. You talk in your remit about increasing the quantity of trust experts to counter misinformation from misleading information, but that quantity is dramatically restrained by Government sources, so I would like to deal with this. What I am referring to is that all the tens of thousands of scientists who work in Government science bodies, arm's length bodies or non-departmental bodies—the Food Standards Agency, the MHRA, the UKHSA, which was PHE—there are hundreds of thousands of actual research-active scientists in laboratories in these bodies, but they are not free to speak to the media.

I think they are some of the most trustworthy. They do not have an axe to grind, they are not some wild university academic who is trying to get grants and pursue their career. They would never comment on policy because they have been trained not to, but they are not free to speak. It will be Susan Hopkins for UKHSA or their nominated spokespeople from each—from the Food Standards Agency. You talked about it in your evidence: this vacuum, this deficit, when there is a massive scare story about food safety or a massive scare story about the side effects of vaccines, but thousands of scientists, who trained as scientists, are not free to enter that vacuum.

Q241 **Giles Watling:** Isn't the problem with that, Fiona, that it is very difficult for the public—the general public—to discern between what is a research scientist and what is a fake scientist, because they—

**Fiona Fox:** I think the constraints on them are from the Government communications at No. 10 and in the Cabinet Office, trying to manage and control the message. They do not want any of these scientists who have been working at Forest Research or the Animal and Plant Health Agency for 30 years to be out there doing media interviews, but our



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argument needs to be—and I would love this Committee to recommend it—that we need a culture change. As one very senior person in DEFRA comms said to me, “We need the white coats out there.” It is a bit of a stereotype, but that individual did recognise that Government Departments should be allowing the scientists that they fund and commission to be trusted voices.

**Q242 Giles Watling:** I get your point and it is a very good point, but how are the public going to know the difference?

**Fiona Fox:** Between a Government scientist and a Minister?

**Giles Watling:** Yes.

**Fiona Fox:** I think they can make that distinction. There is a research—

**Giles Watling:** No, I mean a Government scientist and the fakes who are out there. You just have to go on YouTube and you can come across many examples.

**Fiona Fox:** I think that is separate to what I am saying here. I am saying if we flood the media and drown out the quacks and the mavericks and the outliers with good voices—I think how you increase the quantity is within the remit of your Committee—but if you are restraining, if you are holding back tens of thousands of good scientists because they happen to work for Government, then the outliers come up, they are more prominent and journalists sometimes have to find the outlier, because the trusted source is, “No, no, we don’t want them speaking.”

**Q243 Giles Watling:** Good point very well made. Will, you have been dying to get in.

**Will Moy:** Sorry, just a small thing. To corroborate what Fiona said, when there was a crisis of trust in crime statistics, they put the statisticians out to press conferences and it made a very big difference. I think just recognising that we do have all these experts in Government and if they are recognised as independent and given that platform, they can communicate their expertise very well and it is a valuable thing.

I just wanted to make the contrast with Chris Whitty and the US situation because there is absolutely a huge credit to Whitty, Vallance and the rest of them as to how they communicated their expertise. There was an aspect of restraint, I think, in the UK political environment. The media did not go on the attack at these people, the politicians did not go on the attack at these people in the way that has happened in some other countries and lost all the benefit or many of the benefits of having them as public health leaders. There is credit all round and collective responsibility about maintaining trusted voices as well.

**Giles Watling:** That is good. So it worked, in your opinion.

**Will Moy:** In this case, yes.



Q244 **Giles Watling:** Moving on, the BBC was criticised for interviewing a cardiologist earlier this month who claimed mRNA vaccines carried a cardiovascular risk. This is to Rebecca and Georgina. What background checks are done by news teams, or indeed fact-checkers, before a guest is invited to give an interview?

**Rebecca Skippage:** I am not part of that editorial process. You may be aware of the fact that the BBC put out a correction and clarification on that. I will just refer to it, "We agree that we should have been better prepared to challenge what Dr Malhotra said, given his past comments about the vaccination programme, and we are sorry that this did not happen."

**Giles Watling:** Yes, I have that here, but were there background checks?

**Rebecca Skippage:** I couldn't comment on that. I was not part of that.

**Giles Watling:** Okay. Georgina, do you have anything to say on that?

**Georgina Lee:** I don't work in the guest-booking and editorial department. I can have ITN write to the Committee about it, but I am not able to discuss it.

Q245 **Giles Watling:** Okay, fair enough. Do you think that there are now views that are inexpressible on mainstream broadcasting—for instance, anti-vax views and so on? If so, is that right in a society based on free speech?

**Rebecca Skippage:** As the BBC, it is up to us to reflect the views of the nation, but I think it is for us also to provide context and analysis around that. It is also up to us to be very clear about what is fact and what is opinion. I think when you are expressing anti-vax views or vaxxing-hesitant views or people who are cautious or don't understand vaccines, those are completely understandable views to have. We are absolutely able to give a platform to them. However, what we would then need to do is to contextualise those within what would be mainstream view as far as science is concerned.

If somebody is expressing a view that is wildly outside what mainstream science has to say, it is up to us to then come back with a credible voice, a voice that is reputationally valued, which is in fact what happened with the situation with Dr Malhotra. Professor Peter Openshaw from Imperial College came on and said—

**Giles Watling:** Yes. I deliberately didn't use their names, but yes.

**Rebecca Skippage:** He said: "This is what the vast majority of science agree with." I think there is a place for the reflection of viewpoints, but it is also about yes, giving that context and making sure that the expert voices—the trusted voices—are very much part of that.

Q246 **Giles Watling:** So organisations like the BBC should take more care, in





your view?

**Rebecca Skippage:** In what sense?

**Giles Watling:** Before presenting an interviewee who might have extreme risks attached.

**Rebecca Skippage:** As the comment said, we are sorry that didn't happen in this case.

Q247 **Giles Watling:** All right, I take that. It is impossible to counter all the misinformation that is out there, but we talked earlier about trusted organisations. Should the Government do something more to promote trusted organisations? Will, you nodded.

**Will Moy:** Yes. I was very glad to see that you had the House of Commons Library giving evidence. I think its funding compared to its responsibilities is tiny. The House of Commons Library could be doing an awful lot more and MPs are woefully under-supported in your very complex and broad briefs, so I think a significant growth of the House of Commons Library, which is dealing with more inquiries than ever on a very complex range of topics, would be one of the cheapest ways to improve the quality of evidence in public life. The House of Commons Library is a respected source outside of the Commons. Even though that is not its goal, it is recognised as doing that. That level of authoritative, non-partisan synthesis is rarely available elsewhere.

We should also be investing in intermediaries in the academic space, which combine the best of research with the best of communication. I am thinking of things like UK in a Changing Europe, which is an Economic and Social Research Council project; the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which is also ESRC; and the Migration Observatory, which is also ESRC.

At their best, in certain topic areas, we have very good communicators and very good academics working together. In many topic areas we don't have that and we feel those gaps in the quality of our public debate. I think, as I said earlier, the idea of reviewing the evidence-support system in the UK, as recommended by the Global Commission, is a very good one that the Government should take up. I think that the Government should look at—

**Giles Watling:** Sorry, going back to my question, should the Government do more to promote these sources?

**Will Moy:** Yes, they should be paying for them. They should be paying for the House of Commons Library more, they should be paying for these academic centres, they should be commissioning a review of the evidence support system in the UK, and they should be changing the financial incentives on social science academics to use plain language. That could be part of grant criteria, not determining but part of grant criteria, so there is an actual financial incentive to make your work intelligible.



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The one other thing I would say about trusted intermediaries is that in this world of kicked-up dust that we are going to have in the world of AI, tracing provenance from original sources all the way to end users is going to become very important. How do you know that a photo was actually taken in Ukraine and hasn't been manipulated since? Ultimately, we are going to need technical solutions to that. There are some very interesting industry and sector efforts in that space and I think Governments need to get behind that before essentially we get overtaken by this cloud of dust that is coming our way.

**Giles Watling:** I am terribly aware of time, so I am going to stop there. Thank you so much.

Q248 **Julie Elliott:** This question is for Will, Rebecca and Georgina. To what extent do you, as fact-checkers, use the website gov.uk? If you do use it, how do you find it to navigate and are there any specific improvements that you would like to see in it? I will start with Rebecca.

**Rebecca Skippage:** I use it personally. I do not use it as part of my work. I asked my colleagues about this—because I am the editor of the team, it tends to be my colleagues who are more at the sharp end of doing this—as to which websites they typically use and which experts they go to. It was not one that was mentioned.

**Georgina Lee:** I use it regularly. It can be very useful indeed. It is also quite labyrinthine. It is not unique among websites of otherwise very reputable and useful sources that they are not laid out particularly easily. With great respect to the ONS, which I admire a lot, its website is also quite difficult to navigate and it is not always obvious and intuitive.

Q249 **Julie Elliott:** What could they do to help? What could they do to change it?

**Georgina Lee:** I think with gov.uk particularly there seems to be two quite siloed elements of it. You get the stuff that is coming out that is from Ministers, press releases, which is quite managed and manicured. That is absolutely fine—that is the business of doing politics— but then often it will be referring to things that are datasets and other background information that is much more technical but much more useful to the journalist. Occasionally, you might get a little “Notes to editors” section at the bottom of a press release, but what would be very useful is if all those elements could come together so when you are looking at a policy—the Government have made an announcement about small boat crossings or something—and you have three or four of the relevant datasets readily available for you and they are hopefully the things that are being referred to in the press release, it is a bit more—

**Julie Elliott:** It is sort of a click on.

**Georgina Lee:** Yes, a sidebar type thing or however it would be laid out. Sometimes that does happen; it does vary quite a lot. I think that should be best practice.



While we are talking about it, another thing that I do find very useful on gov.uk but unfortunately is not always available is impact assessments. I mentioned earlier that I used to be a civil servant, so I am familiar with the laborious process of producing impact assessments. They are very useful. I think a lot of journalists are not necessarily aware that they exist and that they are quite as full of information and background evidence as they are. If they could be published much more frequently, more closely to the time when either the Bill is introduced to Parliament or when it is being presented at whatever stage—consultation, response to consultation—that would be extremely useful. Again, that is the sort of thing where if I see a press release on gov.uk, I would like to see the impact assessment for the policy alongside, maybe also Bill documents, things like that, and an explanatory memorandum. It should be a kind of grab bag, effectively, that all sits together in one simple place. That would certainly add to the fact-checking process.

**Will Moy:** I agree. I do think there has been huge progress in Government—

**Julie Elliott:** Do you use it?

**Will Moy:** Yes, pretty much daily, and my colleagues even more than I do. There has been huge progress in Government digital in recent years. It has prioritised transactional public services over democratic accountability. I think it would be good to rebalance priorities on that front. The things that Georgina and Rebecca have suggested I fully sign up to. My colleagues use these sites all the time, so I would like to throw this question to them and write to you if they have any specific grudges.

Q250 **Julie Elliott:** That is fine. To what extent do you use academics when you are fact checking? Again, what are the barriers to using them? We will go in the reverse order this time.

**Will Moy:** Broadly speaking, constantly. They have specialist expertise that we do not. The barriers are identifying academics who are knowledgeable, trustworthy in a very broad sense—which is to say they want to give people information to help make up their own minds, not just tell you what their conclusion is and hope you will publish it—and also able to communicate effectively and in a timely way. Most often you find those in dedicated institutions that support them, places like the IFS, the Migration Observatory and so on.

You also find outstanding individual academics who have made a huge commitment to communicating in that way, but by and large academic career paths don't reward that behaviour. An academic who has decided to, if you like, be a public intellectual is in a way sacrificing some of their other opportunities in order to do that public service. I think it would be great to look at how that public service could be better supported as part of academic careers.



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**Georgina Lee:** Again, I use academics constantly. In my experience, academics are very keen to talk to journalists. The only thing that has ever seemed to stop them is their own workload, but that is a literal occupational hazard. Yes, one of the great things about this job is that you get to talk to people often about the thing they are most enthusiastic about and they can give you 10 stories when you only asked them about one. So yes.

**Rebecca Skippage:** Yes, we use them all the time. I would say the key thing for us, building on what my colleagues have said, is availability. Particularly in a broadcast world, we need people very quickly and sometimes getting hold of academics, particularly outside of term time, is very difficult. We need people to be enthusiastic, great communicators and also to be available sometimes at pretty ungodly hours of the morning to do very early breakfast stuff.

Q251 **Julie Elliott:** Fiona, you have talked a lot about scientists and whether they give interviews or whether they comment or whatever, but do you find that the scientists find themselves the target of abuse when they give interviews?

**Fiona Fox:** Yes, absolutely, and increasingly so, of course. We refer to cakegate again. That turned into a big row and Susan received many horrible emails and very aggressive attacks on Twitter. I think, however, that as you talked about scientists as public intellectuals, the ones that have made a decision that part of what it means to be a great scientist is to do their research in the laboratory, but also publish that and speak to the public and policymakers about it, most of them have made that decision and accept that with that comes the nastiness that politicians have been dealing with for years. Interestingly, in surveys, many are abused but take the abuse and carry on because they know what they are doing is important. But it is stopping some of them.

The Science Media Centre ran a big event last February with hundreds of scientists about harassment and brought in all the comms experts and other experts to support, but it gets back to the point I was making earlier to Giles about encouragement and support. I think you are right that university academics have complete academic freedom and they absolutely love talking to journalists. Those same scientists, if they move into a Government agency, lose that. I know there was a wonderful one I wrote about in the book, Joan Webber, who is a leading expert on ash dieback, who did quite a few interviews on ash dieback in the media and was then told, "You are not allowed to do interviews," or it had to be agreed by the DEFRA press office and it took three weeks and they obviously found someone else.

I would love it if the Committee could recommend that that change, that flip over, so that Government experts, who are scientists—they are the same: they are in Newcastle University one week, but then they work for a Government laboratory the next week and they go in and out—are encouraged and supported because the abuse and all the bad things that



happen if we do media, although there are lots of very good things, can all be tolerated if you are encouraged and supported and you know you have the backing of your institution, that they send you an email saying, "Well done. I know everyone went mad on Twitter, but you did a brilliant job." There is such a high gain here for public benefit—for public good. We need to be hearing from all these fantastic scientists who have this experience. I think it is something in Government that is restraining them.

You saw it with Kate Bingham—that was fascinating, wasn't it?—in her book, where she talked about being treated as a political Minister. She is a vaccine expert. She only came in for six months to help run the Vaccine Taskforce, but all these senior Government comms people in No. 10 told her, "You can't talk to the media about your interview or the process by which the Vaccine Taskforce was set up because you are getting too much media coverage." They treated her like a political Minister.

I do think, in answer to your question, that the public can see the difference between politicians and people who are civil servants, but only because they are a scientist who works for a Government laboratory.

**Q252 Julie Elliott:** Finally, Will, I want to go back to some of the comments you made, particularly to my colleague Clive Efford, which I find difficult to understand because you have talked about how the House of Commons can change this. In this Parliament, the Conservatives have a big majority, so in the real world it is not the House of Commons as a whole, as you kept saying, that can change this. I would love to say, as a Labour Member of Parliament, we can go in and win and vote every day on whatever, but in the real world that isn't going to happen. Why do you describe it in the way you do? Because I think that is misleading in itself.

**Will Moy:** That is an interesting challenge. I think the history of Governments recently has shown that a small minority of their own party is capable of tipping the balance. If the Labour party and the Opposition parties of 40 Back-Bench MPs, said, "We want to make these changes to standards and processes in the House of Commons," I think the Government would have a difficult time resisting that. I think that is also the reality of politics. I don't mean to suggest—

**Q253 Julie Elliott:** When has that happened? That just does not happen in the real world of politics.

**Will Moy:** Really?

**Julie Elliott:** You do not get Government Back Benchers voting with Opposition parties, even if you know in private they agree with you. That does not happen.

**Will Moy:** But what you do get is—

**Julie Elliott:** I think it is disingenuous, saying it does happen.



**Will Moy:** You do get Government Back Benchers telling the Whips that if the Government do not change their position on something, then they will vote against them. We saw that just last week. We saw it with the Online Safety Bill. The Government made concessions on the Bill, not because they were voted against and it was forced in a vote, but because they knew that if it went to a vote they had a real problem with a rebellion. There are ways of sending signals in Parliament short of a vote.

Q254 **Julie Elliott:** Your statement saying the House of Commons can do this, yes, technically the House of Commons can and every MP has a vote, but in the real world that is not the reality. Do you think saying what you have said—that the House of Commons can change that—is reflecting the real position of politics and the way Parliament operates in this country? Because I don't think it is.

**Will Moy:** Well, let me ask you a question. Do you really—

**Julie Elliott:** No, you are answering my question.

**Will Moy:** Okay. I agree with you and your colleagues that it is a tiny minority of Members of Parliament who want to have the freedom to mislead the House of Commons without consequence. I believe—and I think I agree with every member of this Committee—there is a tiny minority of Government Ministers who believe the Government should be able to lie to the House of Commons without consequence. My experience for over a decade of fact checking is that most MPs try to get things right and, leaving aside the political consequences, will largely want to correct the record if they have something wrong, even if they are sometimes a bit pragmatic about the reality of that. If you believe that the vast majority of MPs want those basic standards of honesty—

**Julie Elliott:** But you have not answered my question.

**Will Moy:** Then, yes, I do believe that the vast majority of MPs, acting collectively, have the influence to move the decision makers in the political parties and make these changes. We are not suggesting something radical. We are suggesting—

Q255 **Julie Elliott:** To go back to my question, do you believe your statement that the House of Commons can change things, taking in the backdrop of the real world of the way politics operates, is a true and reflective statement on the way things are?

**Will Moy:** I absolutely do. I would also ask: if not the House of Commons, then who? If not you, then who can change these rules?

Q256 **Simon Jupp:** Sorry, Will, can I just throw you a challenge? I agree pretty much with everything you have said about changing the record, about the desirability of making sure of statements, exactly, but where I do have sympathy with my colleagues is when I take a look at your website. You have been absolutely emphatic here today that Back-Bench MPs cannot correct the record and you have been absolutely emphatic when





the Chair said routinely people do come into the House of Commons and use a mechanism of a point of order to correct the record. Yet on your website you have a whole list of MPs who have gone a certain number of days without correcting. You are saying they should be correcting the record and at the same time saying that it is impossible for them to correct the record.

I know how you can parse an answer to the question—I can anticipate it. What I would ask you to do, though, is to go away and think about the way you present that on your website and the way you are presenting the arguments about correcting the record, because you didn't fully contextualise the point about correcting the record and you gave the impression that MPs don't correct the record because in some way they are banned from going into the House of Commons and saying, "Actually, I got that wrong because I was relying on a fact that I thought was correct." I will not ask you for a long answer to that, but I am just putting that to you, as someone who is very sympathetic to what you have to say, and asking you to go away and think about it.

**Will Moy:** I am grateful for that. I had already come to the conclusion from previous conversations that I wanted to go away and reflect. When a cross-party group like this is coming back in the way you are, that is something of course I take seriously. The only thing I would say is the level of learned helplessness from Back-Bench MPs about your sway over the system is an astonishing thing and a dangerous thing for our democracy.

Q257 **Chair:** Nor was that the point Julie was making, to be fair. Anyway, I have one last thought. I am struck that we have the national academies—these grand institutions that are supposed to be the source of truth and accuracy—and in two and a half hours none of you have mentioned them at all. Do they not impinge on any of the work that any of you do day to day?

**Fiona Fox:** They absolutely impinge on us with their media team. All professional academies are excellent at it. In the reports I have referred to today, there was the Academy of Medical Sciences' report on evidence, which was brilliant, the Royal Society's report on misinformation, which was brilliant. I agree with Full Fact's evidence on this. I think that deciding that the oracle of authoritative trusted voices in science are the four national academies is the wrong way to look at it. They don't employ their own scientists, their own academics. They are made up of fellows who work in universities or research institutes or medical research charities, who are so brilliant, so amazing, that they are appointed as fellows of the Royal Society or the Royal Academy of Engineering.

They are individual fellows we work with every day. They will be the academics you are phoning, but you will not call them as a fellow of the Royal Society; you will call them as professor of geology at Newcastle University or whatever. I think they are doing amazing things. They are a trusted voice for Government and policymakers and they do do some



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public engagement, but they don't see it as their own aim to be the trusted voice for the British public but to facilitate and give a lead to scientists. I think that is their role.

Q258 **Chair:** You don't think they should be a trusted voice? Is that what you are saying?

**Fiona Fox:** I think they are a trusted voice, but not "the" trusted voice. We have hundreds of thousands of scientists. We have not mentioned medical research charities, Cancer Research UK, the British Heart Foundation, Alzheimer's Research, the Crick, the research institutes, the universities or the companies. There are very good scientists in companies. All the above are experts who should be trusted if they stick to the list of things that I identified in your very first question of the way they behave as scientists. The role that the national academies can play is co-ordinating that, facilitating that and encouraging that.

The Bodmer report was the seminal report 30 years ago, conducted by the Royal Society, which said scientists have to come out of their ivory towers and engage in public debate. Prior to that, most scientists never did. They may get a paper published in *Nature* and then they went right back into the laboratory. Now the Royal Society have facilitated a situation where to be a very good scientist you need to do your research and engage with the public and policymakers about it. They have an incredibly important role to play, but it is not to be the place that Channel 4 and the BBC go to every day. I don't think that is the reality.

**Chair:** Has anyone got anything to add to that?

**Georgina Lee:** I can't improve on that answer, apart from just to reiterate the point that I think the theme that has been coming across throughout is there is no single cause of misinformation, disinformation and why people fall for it. There is no single silver bullet; there is no single authority that is the final word on anything. It is narratively not very satisfying to hear, but every one of these elements contains lots of different component parts.

**Will Moy:** The only thing I would add, and not just about the national academies but learned societies generally, goes back to this question of how the public is meant to distinguish trustworthy, credible experts in a particular field from hacks. The learned societies often have a code of conduct or something on a shelf gathering dust, but have very rarely done much to distinguish who is trustworthy from who is not. One of the things that I think they may need to consider in future is how they challenge people, including potentially their own members, who may misrepresent evidence, as well as how they promote their own members who are great sources of trusted information. That is not necessarily an easy question for them to answer, but I think it is one they need to give more thought to.

**Chair:** Thank you all very much indeed for what has been a long and



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interesting session. Will Moy, Fiona Fox, Georgina Lee, Rebecca Skippage: thank you all very much for coming to the Committee this morning. That closes the session.