HOUSE OF COMMONS

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport sub-Committee on Online Harms and Disinformation

Oral evidence: Misinformation and trusted voices, HC 597

Tuesday 21 February 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 February 2023.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Damian Green (in the Chair); Clive Efford; 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 259 - 353

Witnesses

I: Areeq Chowdhury, Head of Policy, Data and Digital Technologies, The Royal Society; Dr Natasha McCarthy, Associate Director, National Engineering Policy Centre, Royal Academy of Engineering; Dr Rachel Quinn, Director of Medical Science Policy, Academy of Medical Sciences; and Dr Adam Wright, Head of Public Policy, The British Academy.

II: Marianna Spring, Disinformation Correspondent, BBC.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Areeq Chowdhury, Dr Natasha McCarthy, Dr Rachel Quinn and Dr Adam Wright.

Q259 **Chair:** This is a meeting of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport sub-Committee that is part of our investigation into trusted voices. For our first panel this morning, we welcome four guests from the national academies. We have Areeq Chowdhury, the head of policy, data and digital technologies at the Royal Society; Dr Natasha McCarthy, the associate director of the National Engineering Policy Centre at the Royal Academy of Engineering; Dr Rachel Quinn, director of medical science policy at the Academy of Medical Sciences; and Dr Adam Wright, head of public policy at the British Academy. Welcome, all of you. I will do a quick run along the panel to start with. Which organisations or individuals do you trust to give you authoritative information, and why?

Areeq Chowdhury: The motto of the Royal Society is "Nullius in verba", which is Latin for "Take nobody's word for it". In the eyes of the Royal Society, trust is context specific. We trust statements or claims based on the evidence produced, the rigour behind it, and the transparency of inputs and outputs.

However, this is just a motto; 360 years ago, the founding fellows of the Royal Society are unlikely to have predicted the information overload that humanity faces in 2023. Therefore, there is an important need for trusted intermediaries to filter content, and the Royal Society and other national academies are an example of this. I would also add that being trusted does not mean being right all the time. Being trusted involves being open to challenge and open about mistakes. As we talk about in the Royal Society's report "The online information environment", the strength of a scientific method is its ability to accept challenge and correct itself when mistakes are identified. Those are our criteria.

Chair: So it is criteria rather than people.

Areeq Chowdhury: Yes.

Q260 **Chair:** Okay. Dr McCarthy.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: Thank you very much for the opportunity to give evidence; this is a really important inquiry. I will give my answer as part of an organisation that represents the engineering profession. The Royal Academy of Engineering, along with the Engineering Council, which oversees the engineering profession, has a statement of ethical principles, and a couple of those principles are really relevant here.

One principle is about honesty and integrity, which is about being open about conflicts of interest and working to address corrupt practice. Another is about rigour and accuracy. That is about using good evidence, reviewing evidence and working within your competence. Those are really important criteria for engineers, and they apply across the engineering professions.

Individuals, in engineering and beyond, who stick to those sorts of principles necessarily build trust.

In terms of organisations, I would trust those that work in ways that are similar to us as a national academy. We do work that involves listening to a lot of voices, bringing a lot of evidence together, being open, having debate in the way we work, and bringing good governance and good peer review into the process of using that information to reach conclusions. That rigour and openness are also important for trustworthiness.

Dr Rachel Quinn: I am going to build on what the other two have said; I do not disagree with any of it. For us, it is about organisations that share our values—therefore, integrity. Things like transparency of funding sources, people who are very open about their interests and honest about uncertainties. It is really important that people are respectful of the views of others. I will come to patients and the public in a minute.

The evidence base is, obviously, what people are using and we are looking at: whether it is a single observational study or a systematic review of multiple studies; what the sample size is; whether they have done the work in relevant conditions—that is particularly important for health, as you can imagine. Also, what role has peer review had?

As Natasha said, in terms of people and organisations, independence is quite important to us. We are all independent: irrespective of our source of funding, we decide what and when we publish. To a certain extent, we are often looking for a level of independence. For our organisation, the other academies and their fellows, the Celtic Academies and learned societies—I might come back to them—have got a really important role that you should consider. For us, medical research charities are important as well.

I just want to flag that for the Academy, the way we work with patients and the public is key in developing a trustworthy voice. If people can see we have involved people like them in the development of messages and answering the right questions, that gives the advice we are providing both meaning and relevance. Finally, as members of staff in these organisations we have the luxury to understand how we can judge the quality of the evidence and potential biases.

One of the things we have been keen on in some of our policy reports is to make sure, as Natasha mentioned, that people are able to ask the right questions and evaluate the evidence for themselves, rather than us saying "You are right" or "You're wrong" about something. Thank you—and as Natasha has said too—for the inquiry. It has already got a good conversation going in the Academy, and we look forward to your report.

Q261 **Chair:** Dr Wright, have they left you anything to say?

Dr Adam Wright: I certainly agree with both my colleagues on the panel. To take a specific humanities and social sciences perspective on the question, we are talking about people and organisations who are engaging in good faith in public debate, with honesty and integrity. We are talking

about the voices of those who are empowered in particular communities to speak on particular topics. Those voices are about being willing to listen and to change their beliefs, on the basis of reasonable public discourse in a liberal democracy.

Also, it is not just about the person or the organisation, but the medium through which that voice is being presented. It is important to understand that that also plays a part in the organisations or people that people will trust.

Trust is complicated: certain groups or individuals will trust different people and different organisations for different reasons. We know from published research by the British Academy that people will trust politicians for different reasons than those for which they trust scientists or medical experts. It is important to understand that potentially, these are very difficult questions, on which we require research from the humanities and social sciences to better understand.

Q262 **Chair:** Leap in, anyone who wants to answer this. Do you think that the public knows where to find authoritative, accurate information?

Dr Rachel Quinn: There is certainly more to be done to signpost people and to look at where that trustworthy evidence is, but I think a lot of them do. I think the debates we had around covid and scientific uncertainty helped in signposting people, but other people may have other views.

Areeq Chowdhury: The truth is that I don't know, but, if you look at what happened during the pandemic, you did see millions of people tuning in to the press conferences every day. That is one example of people looking towards a trusted voice. We did survey the public in the report I mentioned. The vast majority believed that the internet has improved their understanding of scientific issues and reported that they are likely to fact-check suspicious claims, but we do not necessarily know which sources they use for that.

Q263 **Chair:** I was interested in that. Your survey found that the extent of the impact of misinformation is questionable. A slightly cynical part of my mind thought, "Are the sort of people who you survey probably not the sort of people who are searching anti-vax websites, Facebook or whatever to get all their information?" Is there a danger that you are talking to respectable people who say, "We do respectable things and fact check"?

Dr Rachel Quinn: I think it depends. We are not necessarily just speaking to people like us. We use companies to get proper data of a representative sample of people. Was that your point?

Areeq Chowdhury: That's a really important point that you raised. What we talk about in the report is that, yes, the vast majority of people do not necessarily believe in misinformation, but the fringes that do are probably the ones that you read about in the news, or the ones who are going to these protests.

For example, the reason why we talk about not censoring misinformation, or at least focusing on some of the fringe platforms, is that is often where some of the most harmful misinformation occurs, and they are also the platforms that do not necessarily have headquarters in London, a named director or a public affairs person who you can call up. That is why, in our report, we say that it is not a massive problem across the whole population, but, among the fringes, it can be quite harmful.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: From our point of view, as an engineering organisation, it is great to see that, if you look at the Ipsos veracity index from last year, which looks at trust in different professions, engineers come second only to nurses, so people have a good sense that organisations like engineering organisations can be trusted.

I would say that the professional engineering network that we work with has really good markers of trust. It has things like chartered status and accreditation of degrees that people can recognise, so we know that they do trust professions like that. I think it is a big job for us to make people aware of who engineers are, what jobs they do and where you can find information from engineers, so we do lots of campaigns to make people aware of what engineering is and what engineers do, and we can help put that information out there so that people can more easily access it.

Q264 **John Nicolson:** I was interested in the Royal Society's report on misinformation, which states that, "Although misinformation content is prevalent online, the extent of its impact is questionable". I wonder if that is the case. I was listening to the news this morning and the horrible reports of Nicola Bulley's family being subjected to terrible disinformation. There are people literally out hunting for clues as tourists in the village where they live and there are all sorts of false rumours in that village, most of which came from disinformation. That seems a very real-life consequence of disinformation and the way people just gobble it up.

Areeq Chowdhury: I completely agree; it's disgusting what has happened in that case. What we talk about in the report, however, is that there is very little evidence that suggests that it is the consumption of misinformation itself that is causing people to go out there and commit some of these acts.

Q265 **John Nicolson:** Why would they go if they had not absorbed the disinformation?

Areeq Chowdhury: In our report, we talk about the different incentives that lead people to take different acts, or maybe even create disinformation content. One of those is financial incentives. I do not know the particulars of this case that well, but, if it is—

Q266 **John Nicolson:** There was a range of things. It was reported on the "Today" programme this morning that some families were coming with their children to do selfies on the bench where she was last seen and that people were going into the local petrol station and asking for directions to the bench. There was a whole swathe of misinformation about her and her life. There were people appearing in the local pubs and coffee shops and

claiming to have an association with her that they did not have, and there were people believing that. There has been whole range of really grotesque and deeply upsetting misinformation.

Areeq Chowdhury: I'm not—

Q267 **John Nicolson:** No, I am just putting that out into the room, because not everybody will have heard the report this morning.

Areeq Chowdhury: I am not disagreeing. As part of the finding of the report, the scale of misinformation is not perhaps as big as people might think when reading the news. Also, in that case or other cases where people are acting on misinformation, the actual content itself—the false statement—is just one aspect of why someone would pursue some form of act or another. The selfie example you gave might be personal validation that they want from being seen at certain sites or it could be a disinformation merchant trying to make money from clicks on advertising.

Q268 **John Nicolson:** Enjoying the attention and feeling that they are at the centre of a drama.

You can see that is deeply distressing for the family in a micro case, but—opening up to others on the panel—what about the macro cases? I understand that an American army study, curiously commissioned by the Trump Administration, has reported that escalating Russian aggression in Eastern Europe is an essential part of Putin's information war, spreading disinformation, spreading disharmony and spreading ill-informed beliefs about Europe, and that Putin himself saw Brexit as his first great triumph to get people to swallow that level of disinformation. Of course, that has a huge effect on national policy, as we have seen. That is a triumph of disinformation, is it not?

Areeq Chowdhury: Can I quickly comment on this before passing it on? Yes, and I think the origins of "disinformation" is the Russian word "dezinformatsiya". That might be wrong, but I am pretty sure it is right.

In our report, we talk about four types of misinformation actors. First, there are the good Samaritans, who are motivated to help others and they think they are just spreading awareness of an issue; there are the profiteers, who are knowingly sharing or are ambivalent about the content's veracity because they might want to make money; and there are the co-ordinated influence operators, who are the kind you are talking about, who are motivated to sway public opinion to benefit the agenda of their organisation, industry or Government. Finally, there are the attention hackers, whose motivation is a personal joy of trolling. So the example you used there, I think, is a very real one, but we also talk about that in our report.

Q269 **John Nicolson:** And the incredible success that some of these campaigns have. I remember, for example, if you ever tweet something about the White Helmets helping dig people out of the rubble in Syria and behaving heroically, you will then get bombarded with people—perfectly normal-sounding people—who will have been convinced that the White Helmets are all actors, that the children being dug out of the rubble are child

actors.

These people are so far down the rabbit hole of Russian and Syrian state disinformation that they believe this passionately. No amount of persuasion from BBC or Channel 4 news correspondents on the ground will persuade them that what they have read on Facebook is wrong. That is a terribly powerful tool and it is extraordinarily hard to counter people who are brainwashed to that degree.

Dr Adam Wright: I think it is important—the Royal Society report makes some of these points—to differentiate between the prevalence of misinformation and how easy it is to spread and the propensity for people to take it up and produce and consume it. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that we can resolve some of these problems not simply by trying to tackle the prevalence of disinformation and misinformation but by understanding the drivers by which people actually want to consume and believe it. The British Academy recently funded some research looking into why people share and consume misinformation on social media.

Q270 **John Nicolson:** That is interesting. What are the drivers? Are there some groups that are particularly susceptible to disinformation?

Dr Adam Wright: That research is ongoing.

Q271 **John Nicolson:** What's your hunch?

Dr Adam Wright: The research is looking into both some habitual practices and how the way in which people actually use social media might increase the propensity towards sharing that information and consuming it in a certain way, in that people will get a kick out of the amount of likes they get on a post or something and therefore they will want to share it without necessarily doing all their homework about whether that is false, or the origins of what they are—

Q272 **John Nicolson:** And of course they're then in an echo chamber, with people agreeing with them. Loads and loads of people—perhaps sitting in Norwich, with no knowledge of Syria whatever—absolutely convince one another that they know more about the White Helmets than the "Channel 4 News" correspondent in Syria.

Dr Adam Wright: Yes, and I think it goes beyond that, in the sense that there is evidence that people are feeling disenfranchised, in some ways, in our democracy and are therefore consuming different sources of information. They are not necessarily trusting the people we would expect them to trust in terms of the information that they are consuming. It is important to understand how people will share these things, because they are not necessarily as engaged in public dialogue and reasonable public debate as they perhaps have been in the past. Misinformation is not a new thing; it is just that we now have vehicles that make it easier to share it much more, beyond the local pub or the local community, so it becomes more prevalent. But as Areeq was saying, it is not just the prevalence that is important; it is about the drivers behind how people actually consume it and believe it.

Q273 **Simon Jupp:** Good morning to the panel. Touching on what John was talking about, you talked about looking into the different age groups that are affected by disinformation and misinformation. How much do you think that the covid pandemic exacerbated this problem? If you ask people to stay at home, they will naturally go towards those screens more often and try to seek out information. There was a heck of a lot of nonsense during covid about various different conspiracy theories, which I do not want to go into this morning, but how much do you think that impacted on the work that you do? I will go to Mr Chowdhury first, if that's all right.

Areeq Chowdhury: Yes, I think covid hit a lot of the ingredients for spreading misinformation. It involved lockdowns, as you say, but also a virus that people did not fully understand. It was the first pandemic on social media, basically, so it did hit a lot of those ingredients.

In terms of how that rolled on to people's actions, our survey back in 2021 found that the vast majority were still taking the vaccine—85% thought they were safe. There was still a significant margin at that time who maybe were a bit hesitant about vaccines.

Q274 **Simon Jupp:** It wasn't just about vaccines or the pandemic itself. As John alluded to, people disappeared down rabbit holes. Because they had that much time to do so, they did.

Areeq Chowdhury: We had platforms coming up with policies during the pandemic, so everyone was learning on the job almost. What I would say, though, about future instances of scientific misinformation is that the pandemic is useful to learn from, for all of those reasons, but it is unique as an emergency. It brought the whole world to a halt, and most future instances of scientific misinformation are unlikely to be like that; they are going to be in small pockets. They might not be on a range of platforms, never mind national academies, Government or Parliament.

Q275 **Simon Jupp:** I really hope so, because some of the emails I have had from constituents who have been taken in by this have been absolutely horrific to read. It is worrying that people can be taken in by such things—very intelligent people who are just convinced because they are in front of a screen, they read these things and other people talk to them about them on social media channels and on the phone. Dr McCarthy, is there anything you want to add on this point?

Dr Natasha McCarthy: I agree that it is a unique situation, but one thing I would say is that this was an episode where people also got to see information and data at a level they had not seen before. They were interacting with information on mainstream media a lot, so I think there were some positives in terms of accessing good information. Organisations like ours were part of providing that good information. We are an engineering organisation; we do not have expertise on how covid is spread as such, but we are able to think about useful solutions. For example, we did a lot of work on ventilation and how to keep space indoors healthy to help people, and that led to helpful information about having windows open and having good ventilation to help keep people safe. So there were

opportunities to give good information, but I would agree that these things are very challenging.

That leads to the point that one of the things that we do as organisations—the Royal Society does it really well, as do the Academy of Medical Sciences and the British Academy, and we are doing it more and more—is listen to the public. What are people's concerns? We are making sure the information we give and the solutions we design respond to people's genuine concerns so that we are able to answer those questions with robust evidence and present good solutions.

Simon Jupp: Before I move on, Dr Quinn and Dr Wright, is there anything you want to add?

Dr Rachel Quinn: Yes, it would be great to build on what Natasha said. I agree that what we saw was quite disturbing. Looking at the positives of what the academies and trusted voices could do, we worked with the British Society for Immunology right back at the beginning to get Q&As out about the authoritative information—what we know and what we don't know. We got that out in an accessible format.

As Natasha said, it is about working with the public. For all the covid work we did about how to prepare for a covid winter, we worked with a group of patients and the public, who had equal roles on our working group. That really helped us understand what people were worried about, so we could target our response. We used some of the patients and carers we worked with in the press dissemination of our work so that people could understand that normal people like them had the same concerns, and to inform them what they could do.

The big message that the patient and carer reference group would want me to bring forward today, in terms of trusted messages, is that they were really disappointed that, during covid, there was a real gap in co-development of public information about public health and the safety of things like vaccines. That was not co-developed with them and the under-represented groups that were targeted. They feel there is a real lack of good public information, because it is not being developed and they are not being listened to.

The other group I want to highlight is younger people. We worked with an organisation to develop a comic called "Planet Divoc-91"—covid-19 backwards. We gave a platform to the people developing it to speak to people like Patrick Vallance so that they could communicate their understanding of the comic. I can send you more details. They presented the facts and the information in a digestible form.

Q276 **Simon Jupp:** One of the other things that I want to touch on briefly—obviously, I don't want to give flashbacks to everyone in this room about the daily press conferences that we had to watch if we wanted to get the latest information—is that the questions that were asked off the back of the press conferences were not from people who could talk about covid. They were from political journalists, rather than, for example, health

correspondents. Would that have made a difference in restoring trust in the way these questions were being asked? It could be said that it would have been more useful if it was health correspondents with knowledge of the national health service or medicine asking questions, rather than people looking for political gotcha moments.

Dr Rachel Quinn: I think we saw some really good work by the health and science journalists. The Science Media Centre, which we all work with and feed our experts into, did a good job. That is a really important point.

Q277 **Simon Jupp:** If we had our time again, rather than having people asking about a scandal that may have happened or the latest political shenanigans—some of those questions were on the back of some quite disturbing data—it would surely be more useful for members of the public who want answers to questions to hear from a heath correspondent from the BBC, ITV or other broadcasters. That is just a thought.

Dr Rachel Quinn: That is an interesting question. We did see a lot of those questions asked by health and science correspondents outside the press conferences, but it is a good point, given that everybody was watching those.

Simon Jupp: Everybody was watching at 5 o'clock. It was terribly depressing.

Dr Adam Wright: People didn't just want health correspondents or science correspondents. The academy did a lot of work on the societal impact of covid-19, and they were also asking social, cultural and economic questions.

Rachel made a point about particular marginalised groups within the crisis. The crisis raised a sense of uncertainty for everyone, but children and young people, who we tried to engage with a lot through that period, felt very much left out of the public communications. As Rachel was saying, there is a two-way process. It is not just about the dissemination of information and one-way communication. There also needs to be a sense that you are listening to people and that they have a voice—that patients have a voice in the healthcare system, and that children have a voice so that they can really engage with the information that is coming out in terms of how their education is affected, for instance, or their family life. That disengagement and the lack of voice leads people down the route of consuming other forms of information, and they lose trust in certain institutions as a result of that. It is important to bring them back in.

Like the AMS, one of the things the academy did was to start publishing a lot of its policy work on covid and other things in child-friendly formats. We engaged young people to understand how best to communicate those quite difficult, complex issues in a way that children can engage with. I think that is a helpful thing. It is something that some Governments have taken up and taken up well. It is something that I think the Government could potentially do more of, as well as other institutions.

Q278 **Simon Jupp:** Right at the start of the session, Mr Chowdhury, you spoke

about the information overload that we all experience. It is true that we have so much information at our fingertips, basically, that was not there 20 years ago—whether that was during the covid pandemic or right here and now. What are the challenges that that creates? If I can, I would like to challenge each of you to come up with a different challenge. I will start with you, Mr Chowdhury.

Areeq Chowdhury: We basically have an online attention economy, which means that there is more information—information that is seeking an audience. The information overload idea is that we have lots of information trying to get our attention. Obviously, you only have a limited attention span, so you can only pay attention to certain things. The challenge that that creates is how you filter that content—both you as an individual, but also perhaps you as a broadcaster on your social media platform.

If I can make a recommendation to the Committee for further witnesses, I would bring in Google and Wikipedia. They both regularly have to deal with this problem. Google has to filter out what sources are trustworthy on their search pages—on page 1 and in the first three or four hits—and Wikipedia, similarly, have to decide which sources they should pay attention to and which sources they should ignore. The challenge is therefore filtering in this attention economy.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: I would agree with that. When you get a lot of information like that, the temptation is to think, "Is this true or is this false?" You get these bits of information somewhat in a little vacuum, and the question is, "Is this right or is this wrong?" One thing we are always doing, especially as an engineering organisation, is thinking about systems. Things like pandemics and crises are complicated, so there are lots of different forces at play.

Adam mentioned that it is not just about medicine; it is about economics and the impact on people. We do that work to think about this in the round and about how the different parts of a system interplay. That is hard to pick up when you are getting lots of bite-sized bits of information, so there is a really important role there in thinking about that. Along with that go questions of uncertainty, complexity, and evolving information and pictures. Our work is about what systems will work and what needs they need to meet. The challenge is conveying that complexity and systems thinking in a situation where you are getting a lot of information.

Dr Rachel Quinn: I think it is about something I said at the beginning: "What can we do to equip people to judge for themselves the value of evidence?" As an example, one of the reports we did looked at how you judge the risks and benefits of medicines. It came out with a list of questions that patients could take to their doctor, because they are obviously going and finding all this different health information about what sort of evidence there is around the benefits and risks to them of taking particular medicines. It is that kind of thing.

Education obviously has a particular role. As Natasha said, when our Fellows are communicating, and we are communicating and being very clear about the uncertainties, it is building that capacity for people to assess what is good evidence and what is not.

Q279 **Simon Jupp:** Do you think people actually do that though? After a while—going back to Mr Chowdhury's point—people have information overload. They just go, "Oh, whatever," and go with the last thing they read. If you read a selection of newspapers in the morning, you can read very different slants on exactly the same issue. People just get sick of it, and some people actually switch off; they just do not want to take any more in.

Dr Rachel Quinn: True, true. Anecdotally, and thinking about health—this is quite old work that we did, back in 2017—we talked to people and did some surveys on where they got information. They get it from their friends and family around health matters, and their GPs.

For us, and maybe this sounds a little naive, if people are out there understanding and questioning the evidence—unless they are in their little echo chamber—and asking friends and family, if they have that capacity, that might raise some of those questions. Perhaps I am being naive and hopeful.

Q280 **Simon Jupp:** No, no, I don't think you are. I am just saying—obviously it is not a criticism of anyone—that I think people have that information overload and go, "I have had enough now."

Dr Rachel Quinn: I suppose I am speaking from a health point of view. If it is about your health, you have a different motivation, don't you?

Simon Jupp: You would certainly hope so.

Dr Rachel Quinn: You would hope so, yes. Not that you can necessarily always see your GP, but we made a recommendation that what is now nhs.uk should be the place where you have that authoritative information. For us it is very much about what the harms and the benefits of something are. If you think about medicines, quite often there are either miracle cures or it is, "Statins will have the following impact." For us, in health it is always about the balance, and it is a very personal thing. That is why we developed those questions, so people can go to their GP and ask, "For me, explicitly, what evidence is behind this medicine? What evidence is there that it will work for me? What are the side-effects?"

Q281 **Simon Jupp:** There is one national newspaper that is fascinated with either telling you that statins are evil or that statins are the saviour of all society.

Dr Rachel Quinn: I just want to divert quickly, if that's okay, to one of things that you have heard from other people. You have heard from them that, actually, we play a good role in providing the kind of considered approach to things. I wanted to share that we were asked to look at statins and basically come out and say that statins were safe. When we looked at this, we realised that you needed a considered approach, because the issues are things like who you trust, how good the evidence is

and how you communicate it. As a result, rather than just doing something on statins, we looked at things such as HRT, and we were able to make recommendations. I have spoken about the suggested questions. We also have a labelling system for press releases, which SMC champion, so you could say, "Is this a first in man, or has it been tested on lots of people?" By that considered approach, you really get a chance to have a lot more impact than by just coming out and saying, "Statins are safe." Of course, statins are not safe for everybody. It is about understanding the uncertainties and understanding the evidence base.

Q282 **Simon Jupp:** Dr Wright—not about statins.

Dr Rachel Quinn: You can if you want.

Dr Adam Wright: I think the information overload obviously creates a huge pressure and stress on people. It creates a number of potentials towards mental health illness. I think that part of that comes from people wanting to try and be in the know and not really knowing how to be in the know. It also comes from people trying to navigate through all the information to find their own voice in that public debate, and that becomes more and more difficult the more information they have to consume. We know from evidence that some people are drawn towards things like conspiracy theory precisely because that gives them a feeling that they are in the know, and that they know something that other people do not. That gives them a voice and makes them feel empowered.

Information overload makes it much more difficult to empower individuals in that space. It is also much harder for people to synthesise raw evidence. I think that one of the things that the academies do well is to take a wide range of evidence from a wide range of different disciplines and different sources and synthesise that evidence to try to understand where the consensus is within the science and research, and where is there disagreement and conflict within the academic community on particular issues. That is hard for individuals to do on their own.

Q283 **Clive Efford:** Thank you for coming to give evidence this morning. I want to ask about the role of researchers in countering misinformation. To start with you, Dr Wright, a global survey of 3,000 researchers last year found that only a quarter thought that publicly countering misinformation was one of their primary roles in society. Where are the academies with that? Are you with the 75% or are you with the 25% who thought that it was part of their primary role?

Dr Adam Wright: I think the national academies have to take the position that the academics have to make their own minds up as to what is their primary role in that space. I think it is important that the academies all sign up to the ideas of research integrity, and that we all have an understanding that we have to produce rigorous academic research in order to have academic debate. Part of that involves ensuring that people within academia are open and transparent about how they conduct their research, and that they are rigorous in how they approach the methods they use and how they produce findings from that research.

Part of that process of creating that rigorous community within research is about dealing with and tackling misinformation. I do not think we can say, as national academies, that we have a particular position on whether individual academics should do more or less on that, but that is part of how you create a flourishing academic community.

Q284 **Clive Efford:** I will come to other members of the panel and you can comment on my supplementaries. I am sure that this is not true of every area of research, but if you are publishing research and you are not prepared to counter misinformation, is there not a danger that that will impact on how your research is received or understood?

Dr Adam Wright: It has the potential to do that, but academics are in an environment in which they are always challenging each other's research and always in a culture in which they are open to understanding that everything is falsifiable. It is important that they remain confident in terms of having those discussions and judging what is rigorous and what is not rigorous. I don't think that they have to play a specific role in tackling misinformation, but it is important that they promote, through public engagement and better dissemination of research and its value to society, and get their research out into the public domain so that it can override other false information that might be out there.

Dr Rachel Quinn: I agree with what Adam said. The support that we give our funded researchers and our fellows—media training and coaching—should mean that they can step towards controversy rather than run away and leave a vacuum. Having said that, I would not want to force anybody who did not feel able to. On your supplementary, if their research is being challenged, whether it is in an academic forum or otherwise, yes, we would probably expect them to come back and explain or clarify in a way that was accessible. I am not sure we would expect them to follow everything on Twitter and step in proactively. Some of them will want to, and we would want to see them do it respectfully.

Our president, Anne Johnson, was very active during the pandemic. She really set the standard that we would expect that part of being a scientific leader is being out there and communicating with the media. If you have the skills and the ability, we will support you. It is about exactly what people understood—this goes back to the evidence base—when they were asked whether their primary role was to counter misinformation. I think Adam is right: their primary role is to get good evidence out there. Part of that might be countering misinformation.

This is something that has not come up yet, but we have some concerning data about harassment of researchers. *Science* and *Nature* journals did some research, and between 80% and 90% of those that were fairly active in the media had experienced harassment. A question for the Committee to consider is about those trusted voices, particularly when they are individuals—what is being done to support them and who has responsibility for that? Obviously, we can. There are some really good guidelines from the Science Media Centre, but that is another flipside. You talked about the messages you get as soon as you tweet something.

Imagine if you are an early career researcher putting your research out there and getting that as well.

Clive Efford: I think one of my colleagues has some questions about that. We might get to that, but that is a very important point.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: This shows why there is a role for organisations like national academies. We are not individual researchers, but we have the skills to work with researchers and translate the work that they do on questions that the public raise and that people in politics and public life raise. It is not so much a question of whether there should be an individual researcher playing this role, but how can intermediary organisations like ours bring together the right set of expertise to be able to put good information out there and tackle misinformation? It is about making sure that we have those mechanisms and those bodies who can help to do that and can support, as we heard, researchers that put their information out there through other organisations. We do that by bringing people together and giving good evidence on policy. We do it through our Ingenious fund, which supports engineers talking to the public, and we do it by putting individuals in front of the media when appropriate. Our role is being able to bring those voices together.

If I take one particular topic that we worked on recently—the role of hydrogen in reaching net zero—there are lots of complex questions about the role it can play and what needs to be in place to make it work successfully. We can give a clear, systematic view of what can be done with hydrogen by bringing lots of different researchers and people from the industry together to build a more systematic picture. There is a key role for us in doing that sort of thing.

Areeq Chowdhury: One way of countering misinformation is to put out good information. The society is very pleased that the Committee is doing this inquiry, because the academies get overlooked in terms of their role in the information ecosystem. To give you an example, at the Royal Society, like the other academies, we fund research, educate the public, run activities for children, foster international research collaborations and produce science policy advice. In the latest figures that I have, for 2021-22, we awarded £100 million-worth of research grants. Royal Society research fellows are offered media training and public communication training, and in the same financial year, they published 1,800 peer-reviewed papers. Our most-downloaded paper on covid was downloaded a quarter of a million times, and you might be interested to know that our webpage on the basics of climate change was visited 120,000 times in the last 12 months. We are putting out good information that people are consuming. Yes, I think there is a role for researchers, but it is about putting the best quality information out there.

Q285 **Clive Efford:** You mentioned the awareness of what academies are doing. Most of the submissions we received for this inquiry did not respond to our question about the academies. Is there a concern among the academies that there is a lack of awareness of what they do?

Areeq Chowdhury: I am not particularly concerned. For us, our primary audience, at least as a policy arm of the organisation, is decision makers: Governments, research councils and companies. I think that awareness of us is pretty good among them. We also do a lot of public engagement. A lot of schools participate in our young people's book prize, and we do partnership events with schools as well. We have a relationship with the BBC; we do BBC Ideas videos. People who are interested in science will have some awareness of us. In the anti-disinformation sector, there is perhaps little recognition of the role of the academies, but I think that is because our role is to put out good information; it is not necessarily to firefight particular types of disinformation.

Q286 **Clive Efford:** Is that a good enough answer, though? In this world where we are seeing disinformation being put out, we need trusted sources of information to step up. Is it acceptable to say, "If they are interested in science, people will know about us"? Will the ordinary bloke in the Dog and Duck say, "I was reading a Royal Society paper and found it very interesting"? Do you have the common touch?

Areeq Chowdhury: We very much do care about the person in the Dog and Duck. However, we are just one part of the information ecosystem, and we cannot do everything, but we provide the best quality science advice for those who need it. Like I said, our paper on covid had a quarter of a million downloads. We were giving advice to SAGE throughout the pandemic. That kind of information is really important for making good decisions based on evidence, getting that information out there and being able to counter the examples of misinformation that exist.

Q287 **Clive Efford:** Dr McCarthy, on the whole, the people who responded to our request for submissions will be people who are well informed, but the majority of people did not answer questions about the academies. What do you make of that?

Dr Natasha McCarthy: There have been some really interesting responses that have pointed out that the academies play a key role but are not the sole organisations that can play that role. For example, the evidence given by Will Moy from Full Fact clearly set out what our role is: to provide evidence on these complex and emerging issues, to be intermediaries that link individuals with the media and to train the people we fund. I think it is exactly right that those are our roles.

We all do anything we can to promote the work that we do. We are proud of the policy work that we do. We fund excellent research. We support brilliant innovation. We do lots of public engagement. We do lots of work to bring things to different audiences. We very much welcome ways that we can grow our profile and reach wider audiences with our work. That takes a bit of creative thinking. One of the nice examples that I can give you is that on National Engineering Day, we partnered with [contestants from] "The Great British Bake Off" [1], which had a few engineers among its contestants. That was a great way to show that engineering is actually in

[1] Witness correction.

all sorts of different places. We do lots of things like that to try to be inventive and innovative in reaching different audiences. We are always trying harder, so I think it is definitely an area for growth.

Dr Rachel Quinn: I completely agree with that. I think that what you are potentially missing is that where we have a position on something that will help the debate, we are very good at getting it out there. We have all had very good hits and retweets on the work that we did around covid, but a big part of what we do is making sure that we have supported the fellows and our emerging research leaders to be out there having that debate. You will not necessarily see that piece. Our strength is not normally the rapid response, but to put somebody who is an expert up there and for us to do the more considered response that has a more lasting impact. But, as Natasha says, yes, we are all looking for ways to improve our profiles.

Q288 **Clive Efford:** Dr Wright, do you think you need to do more?

Dr Adam Wright: We have seen from our own surveys and research that there is growing awareness of the academies. We may have started from a low point, but we are certainly seeing more and more people engaged with the academies. We are also attempting to find ways in which we can use different resources, such a social media, to help do that.

We will run showcase events, which are open to the public. We had over 1,500 people come to our summer showcase last year. Over 40% of those people were young people, and I think it is important that we are engaging with that community, as much as anyone else.

We surveyed MPs and peers as well and found that there is a growing awareness of all the national academies among politicians, and that there is a growing positivity about the role of the national academies, which is very pleasing to see. We are all policy people on this panel. In fact, the academies have a growing role in the policy ecosystem. We are a trusted voice within that policy ecosystem and, more and more, we are becoming one of the first points of call, not just for Government—the UK Government are involved, and local government—but also for other people within civil society that are engaged in that policy ecosystem.

A key part of our role is bringing expertise from our disciplines to engage in the debate about policy making and decision making, which is what helps to resolve issues such as misinformation and helps to improve policy in the UK. It is good to see that we are growing in terms of people's awareness of us, but, as my colleagues have said, we are one of the many trusted voices that need to be part of that ecosystem, helping to produce better and more trusted information, and making sure people have access to it.

Dr Rachel Quinn: Can I make a cheeky plug? We all run events in Parliament and we would love to see more of you at those events. Come and tell us what your constituents are worried about, and come and learn a bit more about us.

Clive Efford: Well, I hope we've given you a cheeky plug as well.

Q289 **Giles Watling:** Following straight on from the recent questioning, Bob Ward, the policy and communication director at Grantham Research, said, "The academies have a role to play. I am afraid at the moment they don't have the appetite to wade in, partly because if you are an academic and you wade into a contentious debate, you will become a target. You get hate mail and you get all sorts of abuse." We have the example of Chris Whitty before us on that, because he became very public. Is there a tendency for academics to get their heads down, get on with the work and leave it to others to be public facing? I put that to Dr Wright first.

Dr Adam Wright: I don't think that is the primary reason. It is important to note that the national academies are membership organisations. The academics are fellows of our academies, not members of staff; they are largely members of staff at universities. The work that they do for the national academies is voluntary. There is simply not the capacity within the busy lives of our academics and researchers to engage much through the medium of the national academies, as perhaps people believe there is.

Q290 **Giles Watling:** But do you think there is a tendency to shy away from public engagement?

Dr Adam Wright: I wouldn't like to comment on individuals. I do not think there is a general tendency to shy away. We engage, and we have many of our fellows and funded researchers engage, in a number of critical and controversial debates. We work with the other national academies on very challenging debates around 5G misinformation, where obviously people receive death threats and all sorts of things around issues to do with 5G technology, as well as the issues around Chinese involvement in the technology, and things like that.

Similarly around vaccine misinformation and anti-vax communities, the research that the academies have funded on that has shown that we were very much willing to engage in some of those controversial debates, and we have academics from across a range of disciplines who are willing to engage. I don't think that there is a widespread issue there, but we have already mentioned that some academics have received terrible abuse, and I think that those individuals may well be put off from engaging in certain debates as a result of that. But I think those are individual cases.

Q291 **Giles Watling:** Is it not the case—I put this to you, Mr Chowdhury—that if you stand up and you are going to tackle misinformation, you are directly tackling some pretty unpleasant people, on occasion, and therefore you are being brave by saying, "This is wrong, this is misinformation", and from whatever echo chamber of conspiracy theory they exist in, they will be inclined to come back at you? Do you have any evidence for that?

Areeq Chowdhury: I don't have any evidence for it but, speaking personally, I do agree that there is a big risk in going out there and intervening in any controversial debate, whether it is to do with misinformation or anything else.

I do not think that we necessarily shy away from those debates. I think the pandemic proved that the national academies are very willing to

engage in conversations on face masks, for example, and we produced academic research on those issues.

On Bob Ward's evidence, I don't know that we have a position necessarily on debating issues on television and whether that is the best route. As I said earlier, we provide media training to funded fellows, so that if they do want to go on media we can suggest, "Here is a good way to communicate that message."

Q292 **Giles Watling:** This is a very difficult area; I understand that. Dr McCarthy, do you have any comments on this?

Dr Natasha McCarthy: One other thing that I would say is that I have worked at three national academies and the best thing about them is phenomenal people doing work pro bono to put good information out there—whether that is researchers, or people who run really large businesses and organisations giving their time for free to provide good information on a wide range of complex projects.

I was based at the Royal Society at the height of the pandemic and I worked with a lot of people giving time over weekends and nights, doing rapid evidence synthesis on complex issues—issues that were very contested—absolutely pro bono. I am really impressed by the dedication of those individuals.

As mentioned before, the president at the time was out there giving that information on mask wearing and the efficacy of masks. I think the model is that it is all about putting good information out there. I think it is less about putting yourself up to counter something; it is about working really hard to make sure that good information is out there. I don't think there is shying away; I think that there is amazing donation and volunteering of time by the people who we work with.

Q293 **Giles Watling:** I think that the more people understand, the more people will be sympathetic towards the work that is done. That was a brilliantly put case. Dr Quinn, how effectively do you think the Government communicated health messages during the pandemic?

Dr Rachel Quinn: That is not necessarily something that we have got detailed evidence on. I would go back to the conversations that we were having with patients and the public who worked with us on our winter reports about how the Government should prepare for winter. There was a real concern there that because patients and the public—particularly those from marginalised groups—were not being engaged, the health communication messages were not getting home.

I will declare an interest because I am a trustee of a learned society, but I wanted to draw your attention to the evidence that was given to you by the British Society for Immunology. I think that is a great example of how learned societies that have a lot more members who come from diverse walks of life work with local authorities in the UK to train community leaders, who have social capital within those communities, to equip them

with the tools to have those conversations in communities. It is that kind of thing—community-developed information.

On the other side, as you know, we were working with a lot of uncertainty during that time, so it was not the easiest thing. I think that it is that engagement and that co-development of messages, so that they actually get through, so that the information and evidence is put into context.

Q294 **Giles Watling:** So you thought the communication was effective during that period, or as effective as it could be given the circumstances?

Dr Rachel Quinn: I do not want to comment on that; I do not want to make a point on that or come down on one side or the other. I am just saying that I think it would have been better had there been more co-development with the communities that were affected. We do not have a position, as an academy, on whether it was good or bad; we have a position on how it could have been better. We worked really hard to feed our experts in through SAGE and into local public health to draw on that, and we went and talked to the committees in Wales and Scotland, too.

Q295 **Giles Watling:** A brilliant diplomatic answer, but I will put one question to Dr Adam Wright, if I may. Do you think the Government should have learned lessons from that communication? If so, what lessons could it have learned?

Dr Adam Wright: Certainly. If we look at the lessons learned that we put in our report, "The Covid Decade", there are a number of things that Governments can do to think about how they can communicate more effectively, not just in terms of communication directly to the public, but in terms of how they communicate across different levels of a multi-level governance system. It is important to understand that levels of trust in communities are higher towards local government than they are towards central Government. Communicating and giving local government resources to be able to communicate effectively on long-term issues like public health, through those local channels, will actually really help marginalised groups in those communities in particular to pick up that important evidence and information.

There are a number of points where Governments could be looking at more carefully when they are thinking about responding to particular crises—thinking about the kind of communities that might be worst affected, because they are marginalised communities; there are those where English is the second language, for instance, where communication might be more difficult. I will bring up again the case of children and young people, who need that information and consume it in a different way. There are a number of things that we put in our report that look at lessons learned. They are lessons learned not just for one crisis but for any crisis.

Q296 **Giles Watling:** But it is the case, is it not, that these sorts of communiqué have to be very balanced? You don't want to set hares running, you don't want to frighten people, yet you want to get important information over in a clear and concise way.

Dr Adam Wright: That's right. We know from evidence that people are not very good at understanding risk, for instance—to understand what risk something might pose to them. We have done quite a lot of work trying to talk to not just Government but other agencies—for instance, we met the Food Standards Agency recently to talk about communicating risk in terms of foods. There was a big hoo-ha about people not eating burnt toast and things like that—

Giles Watling: I love burnt toast.

Dr Adam Wright: —and how we communicate the level of risk to the individual in those cases. A number of different things from behavioural science can help with those questions. It is very complex and you are right that there needs to be a balance. Also, it is about thinking about where the sources of information are. As I said at the beginning, different people trust different sources of information, so it is important to understand that sometimes we need to have different channels.

Q297 **Jane Stevenson:** Good morning. In one of our sessions, we heard from fact checkers. The Royal Society recommended that academies should be an easily available source for them. Given the speed they need to work at, do you feel that your organisations have capacity at the moment or have you changed your focus to provide that capacity?

Areeq Chowdhury: Thank you for highlighting that. I don't think it needs to be that complicated, actually. We already engage with Fiona Fox's organisation, the Science Media Centre, on various topical scientific issues. I see it as a very similar relationship to that. That recommendation is really about identifying the academies to fact checkers more clearly, so that they and we can build that relationship for when there are emerging issues of what we describe in this report as information deserts—where there is an emerging topic of uncertainty, without any clear authority. With covid, for example, at least you have the NHS and the World Health Organisation; but is there a clear authority for 5G or some other specific area of misinformation? In those areas, it might be worth engaging with the national academies, and we can go out to our fellowship, who may have expertise in those areas. It was more of a relationship-building exercise; it does not need to be rapid response all the time.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: I agree with that. When needed, we do work really hard to get good information out quickly. We work really closely with the Science Media Centre to put expert people in touch with the media to give evidence and to give an opinion very quickly, but a lot of our ability to respond quickly is based on the fact that we take time to do things deeply and we build up bodies of expertise on particular areas. For example, there is work on decarbonisation in the energy system. In my area, there is work on health and medical technologies. It is that deeper expertise that we build up over time, as well as the people we engage with and the networks we build by doing that, that enable us to be quicker.

It is not a matter of either taking time and doing things more deeply, or being rapid; it is by virtue of doing that deeper work, especially on those

emerging and complex areas, that we are able to support others, either by directly putting people out there or by creating sources and resources that those doing fact checking can easily use because they know that they are robust, they have been checked and they are peer reviewed.

Dr Rachel Quinn: I do not have anything to add other than I think a developing relationship with fact checkers would help us to see the signals of what is coming up and what is the next area where we could be having some of these more detailed discussions.

Q298 **Jane Stevenson:** Do you think fact checkers do not have the knowledge of what you can provide for them?

Dr Rachel Quinn: I think they probably will as a result of this inquiry, and a better understanding. They will also have other access to universities and other academics, but yes, I think it would be good to develop those relationships.

Dr Adam Wright: I do not have much else to add. I think my colleagues are right in saying that we need time to be considered in our response. Often, rather than simply try to find one source of information, we try to find sources among a range of different experts and disciplines. The British Academy in particular represents a very broad range of different fields, and these are often interdisciplinary problems. They are problems that require some very careful analysis before forming a conclusion.

I think we have the capacity to provide very good synthesis of the evidence and look at what the different disciplines are saying on those issues, but it takes time. We can respond more quickly where there are particular crises, and we have seen the academic community be able to do that. Covid-19 was a very unique crisis that forged not only that sense of urgency, but a willingness among the academic community to get the results out as quickly as possible and to the right people. Not every problem will be like that, and there will be a lot of pressure on academics to respond to a whole range of problems all at once. I think we need to be reasonable in what we ask the community and at what point in time.

Q299 **Jane Stevenson:** I want to turn to young people specifically and the role you play. Mr Chowdhury, you mentioned that you are mainly there for the decision makers. As we enter a world that is full of conspiracy theories, misinformation and just a mass of information, are you making the most of your positions as academies in diversifying, so that you are educating young people? Dr Quinn, you mentioned educating people to make judgments about fact checking, and your methods and how people can evaluate things for themselves. That is a very much needed tool. Do you feel your academies could be doing more to shift their role slightly to get young people better information on TikTok and Instagram? We know that those are their preferred methods for accessing news, which, for someone my age, seems slightly odd, but that is where young people are finding news.

Areeq Chowdhury: Just to clarify, in terms of policy, I meant that the audience would be decision makers, but we also do engagement with the public more widely. The young people's book prize was one example.

I think you are completely right, and I would stress the point again that we live in an online attention economy, so we have to compete against co-ordinated influence operators, attention hackers and all these types of people trying to get people's attention. Young people are actually easier to reach as an audience. One of the follow-on activities we are doing at the society is to look at people who have left full-time education and what information literacy looks like if you are outside the full-time education system.

Going back to one of the previous questions around media engagement during the pandemic, a personal observation I had was that the press conference was on the main national news channels, but not on some of the community news channels. My family would have a different channel on, which did not have the broadcasts on. We are looking to try to engage and convene some of those other news organisations and other outlets that perhaps people get their information from, and look at ways we can engage people who have left full-time education.

For young people, the Royal Society does have an Instagram account. I have been pushing for us to get a TikTok account, but I might have to update you in future.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: On this, one of the significant things that we do as an organisation, as a royal academy, is to do a lot of work on good resources for STEM teachers, so that there is material schools can use to pique young people's interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Alongside building the skills of critical thinking that come from the humanities and social sciences, we do a lot of work to build those skills and give people the ability to understand information. So there is lots of work on STEM and for schools, but I would also talk about the Royal Society's Summer Science Exhibition, which gets loads of people through the door and is completely free. It is an excellent way to bring younger people together with scientists. In addition, we are on TikTok and other social media, with 600,000 followers across our platforms. Once we have young people interested and aware, we talk to them on the platforms that they use.

Jane Stevenson: Other royal societies need to catch up!

Dr Rachel Quinn: We are definitely looking at those kinds of areas. We are still talking about TikTok—a number of our fellows are on TikTok or encouraging us to be. Always, when we think about communicating information or what topics to tackle as academies, we are thinking, "Can we have an impact here? Are we the right people?" Or is it about us connecting with those people who can have influence? It is about that as well. We are not going to go on to TikTok for the sake of it—not that you have—but we will go on TikTok if we think we can have an impact there.

Q300 **Jane Stevenson:** Do you think that the man in the Dog and Duck is aware of your role?

Dr Rachel Quinn: They do not always need to be aware of our role, so I guess my question is, if we are getting scientists out there—we support early-career researchers, who might have more connections with younger generations—does it matter that people do not know who we are? I think it matters that people know who we are when we have something to say on a particular issue, such as covid, and then we are very effective at getting our message out. Do they have to know about us? We do not cover every single topic, so we are a source of information on some things, and we are good at promoting that, but I would argue that one of our big roles is just making sure that the people who are trustworthy are out there, and that we are making sure that they are trustworthy.

Q301 **Jane Stevenson:** Do you not think that there should be the knowledge that a direct network is feeding up into decisions? Just one person announcing something is perhaps less convincing than knowing that that person has resources behind them.

Dr Rachel Quinn: Yes. When we are all publishing our position—if we have one—we make it very clear that we have a network of people. I am thinking about TikTok and when we talk about misinformation: there is, "The Royal Society said this", or, "The academy said that", but there are also people out there, supported by us, to counter misinformation, to make what the scientific method is clear, and to enable people. It is just a slight difference, but yes, I think we can all do more. We have very active comms and public engagement teams across all the academies, which are looking at what the right thing for the academies to do is in this space.

Dr Adam Wright: One of the things that we have started to do differently is that rather than thinking just about communicating with young people, we are actually finding and creating spaces in which young people can engage in the debates on the information that we disseminate, so they can talk to the researchers who are part of our communities. We ran a four-year programme looking at reframing childhood policy, which was chaired by Baroness Lister. Among a number of things, the programme found that there is a distinct lack of children's voice and that children are dying to engage in some of these public debates, so through that programme we started to engage more and more young people in debates about issues that affect them.

Another thing the programme found was that, in policy, there is this distinction between being a child and becoming an adult. A lot of policy is focused on making sure that we are educating children to become good, productive adults, but obviously we also need to take into account the health and wellbeing of children as children, and the fact that children will see things and engage in their own discourses with other children. It is important to find the balance, and part of that is about engaging children and young people in important debates about things that affect them now and in future. A lot of research we have on environmental sustainability shows it is an issue that children and young people are very involved in,

and they want to be involved, but do they have the mechanisms to fully engage in those public debates? We hope that as a national academy we can try to create at least some spaces for them to meaningfully engage in those debates in a reasonable way, and debate with those who are experts in their field on those issues.

Q302 **Jane Stevenson:** Does that point to a wider potential for a schools programme, or just resources for different teachers at primary level and upwards? Where do you think the shift should be happening to widen that to every child?

Dr Adam Wright: We will obviously come up against some capacity issues as we do things like that. Other academies have programmes in which they engage schools. As I said earlier, we have our summer showcase, which brings in lots of different schools and a large number of young people to engage in a wide range of different debates. It is a safe space in which they can explore. We try to curate curious minds in some ways. No one has to be an expert, as long as they are curious about things—not just interested in science, but curious about some of the questions surrounding society's biggest challenges. We want to try to find ways for people to do that, but an important point is that the vast majority of the funding for national academies goes in and straight out the door to fund research.

We have only so much capacity and resource for policy and public engagement activities. Only in around the last 10 years have we started to develop a clear policy part of the work of the British Academy, and that has expanded quite a lot. I want to see it expand more, but it is something that we have to expand slowly; we cannot do it overnight. It is really warming to see that more and more young people and children are engaging with the academy. As we start to understand what those children and young people want and how they want to engage, we will know how best to deliver things with the resources that we have.

Q303 **Jane Stevenson:** So you have upped resources on that in past years?

Dr Adam Wright: As I said earlier, we are certainly publishing more child-friendly documents and we are engaging more young people in the events and programmes that we run. We have been using more resources, and we have a larger resource than we used to for things such as policy and public engagement. There are competing interests in terms of what we use it for, but we are keen to see a focus not just on children and young people, but on other important groups within society. We want to engage a wider and more diverse range of people in what the academy does.

Q304 **Jane Stevenson:** Very briefly, can I just come back down the line and ask all of you whether you think you have shifted enough towards that, and whether you are investing more of your resources in other people and other sources?

Dr Rachel Quinn: I will start with the smallest and the newest of the academies. That is not an area we have been able to put a lot of resource

into at the moment. Similar to Adam, only 7% of our spend is on policy and public engagement, but our experience working with the organisation that developed the covid comic with young people was really eye-opening. We have been looking for more organisations that are working with young people and supporting them. We feel like they have the expertise that we didn't necessarily have, so it is definitely an area that we are looking at.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: We have had a long-standing programme of education work, so we provide resources to schools and we do a lot of work on further education. We also have our Ingenious funding programme, which supports individual engineers in their own work to bring their thinking and knowledge to different audiences. That has been going for a long time. For us, it is a long-standing investment and part of the very balanced work that we do.

Areeq Chowdhury: I mentioned before that we do partnership grants for schools. They basically give grants to schools to run scientific experiments for young people. We also have a young people's book prize, where young people select a scientific book, read it and nominate it for an award. As Natasha mentioned, we have the summer science exhibition, which a lot of young people come to and participate in. I don't know the detail on whether we have upped resources over the past few years.

Q305 **Dr Huq:** Good to have people from the research world; I was an academic before all this. When I started, it was a world of OHPs and libraries. The accelerated times that we live in now, with the instant gratification of the internet, have in some ways changed how academia works. We talked about information overload—it is information ubiquity, maybe.

Do you think there is a bit of a mismatch between the 7,000-word peer-reviewed academic journal, where, as you alluded to, it takes six months to get back all the readers' reports and revisions, and the world of 140 characters in a tweet? Six months could be good, but that is not keeping pace.

When I started, we got 20 offprints when you did a journal—that was your reward—but now, people have de-paywalled all these things and they spread. With the 140-character tweet version of it, you hear of academics who feel they have a target on their back. Are there any comments from anyone who remembers the old days? I think you're probably all younger than me—everyone is nowadays.

Dr Rachel Quinn: I remember the old days as an academic, definitely.

Areeq Chowdhury: I am probably the least academic person on the payroll of all four national academies, as I have a 2:1 undergraduate degree and nothing else. However, I can tell you what we do with our policy work. We do a similar thing to you. No one, or very few people, will read every single word of this document, but they might read a summary of it on social media. I think the same applies for academics, as well. As I mentioned, when we fund researchers, we also provide public communication and media training. That is an important part of it—it's not just having the academic paper.

Q306 **Dr Huq:** Is that just for the people who are on your fellowships?

Areeq Chowdhury: We fund researchers—research fellows. It is different to the fellows who are elected to the Royal Society.

Q307 **Dr Huq:** So you get the project, you bid in on the competitive process—that sort of thing.

Areeq Chowdhury: Yes. Then, once you are on the programme, you are offered the training.

Q308 **Dr Huq:** So those people—the chosen ones—get the media training. Is that it?

Areeq Chowdhury: Pretty much, yes. That is my understanding.

Q309 **Dr Huq:** Is it an outside body? Again, academia is such a weird world if you don't understand it.

Areeq Chowdhury: Tell me about it! My understanding is that we provide communication training to academics. I also agree with you completely that we need to be able to communicate important findings. If the public is an important audience for those findings, we do need to communicate them better. As I mentioned before, and as we talk about in the report, we should think of ourselves as competing in an online attention economy.

Q310 **Dr Huq:** Does that mean it is dumbed down, then?

Areeq Chowdhury: No, I don't think so. You would still have the peer-reviewed paper, which is the most important part, but if you consider the public to be an important audience for your research, or perhaps you are looking for other researchers—social media is good for finding other researchers who care about your topic as well—you do need to be able to summarise and communicate effectively what you are writing about.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: It is a complex ecosystem. As we've said, we think that we as national academies play an important role in this ecosystem, bringing together those researchers and helping them to communicate their information, whether to policymakers or the wider public. We play a role there. There has been change in the academic world. There is obviously much greater focus on impact in research now, and researchers are rewarded for that. Again, we work with academics to help them to build that impact because we have those relationships with policymakers and the public that they can build on.

However, I would also say that we want to know that when somebody does tweet, they have tweeted on the basis that they have done some really good research, so it is not one thing or the other. We need to have that deep research in order to enable people to communicate it. There has been a lot of change to make that research more open, with the move to open publishing, especially during the pandemic, making things open and available very quickly. It is evolving and growing, and we are playing a role in that, but it is still a complex system that requires that deep research as well as that rapid response.

Q311 **Dr Huq:** Are you competing with think-tanks? I guess not. With social science, we were. The field is more crowded now; there weren't many think-tanks when I started, but there are more and more every day.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: I would say we are not competing with them, but we are part of that system. There are think-tanks, but there is also the fact that lots more universities now have policy teams that work with their researchers to ensure that that research reaches policy audiences. It is a collaboration, rather than a competition. There is room for lots of these different organisations that can take that research and translate it into public and policy questions and make it accessible, whether through a long report like this one or through some quite distilled messages that we put out on social media.

Q312 **Dr Huq:** Do you also have media training for your fellows?

Dr Natasha McCarthy: I think so, yeah. I don't know the exact nature of how that is offered, but I can find out. As I say, we certainly support engineers to do lots of different kinds of activities to engage with the public through our Ingenious fund. We also do a lot of work to connect people in public life, such as policymakers, directly with engineers to have deep conversations together. We do a whole set of things to try to make those connections between researchers, people who are in public life and the public really productive.

Q313 **Dr Huq:** And who are the current celebrity engineers? There used to be Professor Heinz Wolff, with his egg experiment—what was it? *The Great Egg Race*? I think he was my constituent as well.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: That's a great question. I will pick just one, which was somebody we worked with closely during the pandemic—Professor Cath Noakes, who was part of the set of Royal Institution lectures when they were talking about the pandemic the year before last. She explained airborne diseases really brilliantly. There are lots of great engineers and we'd like to get more of them out there on celebrity platforms, definitely.

Q314 **Dr Huq:** And the medics?

Dr Rachel Quinn: I was going to say, your question about the speed of publications was a really good one. The Royal Society and the British Academy have journals, so they are doing what they can to speed things up. The open access to information was really important during the pandemic, but while putting those papers out there was great for the experts to access, the issue is how you are to translate it, as you said.

We have a media training programme for everybody who gets support, but we are particularly focused on under-represented groups. I don't know whether you remember, for example, when the BBC said, "We've got to have 50% women on the 'Today' programme." We focused on our female Fellows and our emerging leaders to ensure that they were properly trained, so we would take them away to studios for a day, and they would do TV and briefing sessions with journalists to pitch stories, so that's excellent. We are now opening that up more widely to other under-

represented groups, because it is about getting a diversity of voices out there.

I think there is still a role for peer review, definitely. You do get pre-print journals that people can access, so there are different methods being experimented with. You raised an interesting point about think-tanks. For me, it is about that transparency and understanding where the funding for those think-tanks comes from. I wouldn't see them as competition, and actually, some of them—organisations like the Health Foundation—are really excellent in our field and bring another dimension to the evidence base.

Q315 **Dr Huq:** And this same survey that colleagues are quoting—3,000 academics worldwide? A third of them found that either they themselves or close colleagues had had online abuse after publishing research online. Do we know whether that is more women and more BAME people? I know that that is the case for politicians.

Dr Rachel Quinn: I will send you the links to the *Nature* and the *Science* analysis. I thought I saw something that suggested that women were more likely. There are two different areas of harassment, aren't there? Being harassed about the science that you're presenting and being harassed because of some attribute of you, which is awful but slightly different. I'll see whether they have figures for which people were more, but we do see it.

We do "AMS live", where we have fellows and early-career researchers giving easily accessible talks about the exciting work—again, getting to know the person underneath the research. We do find on our YouTube channel some quite distressing comments being posted. I will double check, but I think particularly for women, we have seen it.

Q316 **Dr Huq:** Mary Beard did an interview in 2013, which is 10 years ago now, saying, "It would put any woman off coming into academia, the Twitter stuff I get."

Dr Rachel Quinn: The Science Media Centre guidance is really good—I think it's from 2019—about how you use your colleagues, what to ignore, what to block. It is useful, and I think probably everybody has a role to play in supporting people who have put their head above the parapet.

Q317 **Dr Huq:** Again, there is a difference between science and social science, which I was, and between post-'92 institutions and Russell Group. I have been in all of them. Do we know whether it's more the softer social sciences that get it in the neck compared with pure science that looks more legit? We know everyone's talked about the pandemic and how scientists legitimated Government.

Dr Adam Wright: I wouldn't say that. I do think that perhaps the public and others view different disciplines in different ways, but I think that people still have a great deal of respect and fondness for humanities and social sciences.

I am still very much engaged in academia; I am an associate fellow and also a board member of a university. I finished my PhD 10 years ago. I wouldn't say that academia has changed a huge amount. Obviously, technology has meant that things have moved on. I would say that there are demanding pressures on academics that were perhaps different 10 years ago, but those demands are important in the sense that we in the academic community understand that we need to get research out there; it cannot just sit on shelves and gather dust. Most academics are very keen to be involved in public engagement, and there is a need to understand how it will impact on wider society and how their research has impact.

You mentioned academic journals. There is still a place for that kind of endeavour. It is just that academics now understand that they cannot simply publish a journal; they have to also think about how they can communicate the findings and the research in ways that a wider audience can pick up on and utilise. At the academy, we do not just publish open access journals and open access monographs; we also publish provocation papers, blogs and shorter syntheses to engage a wider audience in the findings that you would normally have seen in more traditional publications.

There is a wide range of things that academies can do to encourage that within the wider research community, and it is important to note that, certainly in policy, we engage not just with the traditional academic community, but with independent research organisations. We are talking to researchers within the wider civil society, within voluntary organisations, within charities and within the third sector. There is a wide range of research that is going on that is reputable and important, and that is not just happening in our traditional institutions. Obviously, it is happening in a wider range of institutions now. You mentioned that research is growing within post-'92 institutions and institutions outside the Russell Group, and it is important that that diversity continues.

Q318 **Dr Huq:** Is it also a subject matter and discipline that would make some things look automatically like disinformation? I get the sense that pure science is seen as more trusted. I noticed it when I was researching the 2011 riots or urban disturbances in the UK. There was a quote from Boris Johnson, who was Mayor of London. He said we needed fewer sociologists and something about needing more condemnation and less explanation. Over Brexit, it was the same: there was a gut feeling that people wanted their country back and to take back control, and they did not want—

Dr Rachel Quinn: They didn't want experts.

Dr Huq: Exactly: they'd had enough of experts.

Dr Adam Wright: I don't know.

Q319 **Dr Huq:** Can you ever be a trusted voice within social science or humanities? Your logic of inclusion, your sample size and your questions will dictate what it is.

Dr Adam Wright: I think it comes back to the point that I and others made earlier: it does come back to research integrity. It comes down to the principles and ethics by which you conduct that research, which make it reputable. I think that we should avoid this empiricist notion of what is and isn't objective truth. There is a whole range of philosophy and ethics that is going on, which are just as important, different perspectives on history and different perspectives that come from humanities, which people trust and do consume in the same way as they would science, but they might be thinking about trust in slightly different ways when they come to social science and humanities.

Areeq Chowdhury: Can I make two quick points? Again, I am doing everything I can to make everybody read this report, because we talk about the influence of longevity, which is about how, over the pandemic, you had scientists essentially become social media influencers. We don't really know what the impact of that is, so that is an interesting further research question.

In terms of what makes people consider some content to be more legit, we also identify some characteristics. We talk about author characteristics, and gender could be one of them; the semantic quality of the message content or how it is actually presented, which can also affect whether it looks authoritative; the platform characteristics of where you read it and what platform you read it on; and the audience attributes, so whether it agrees or not with that ideology also affects whether they consider someone or something to be authoritative.

Q320 **Dr Huq:** I know that in 2021, 200 academics wrote to *The Times*, claiming that they had been silenced, no-platformed or whatever. Again, it is where things tip from subjective to objective. I think it is largely on people who had said pro-empire things or people who were considered transphobes. Those are both difficult, knotty subjects. Would your media training equip people to deal with things like that?

Dr Rachel Quinn: In the media training we provide, people normally do media training on their area of research. So, yes, it probably would.

Dr Adam Wright: It comes down to teaching people how to engage in reasonable public discourse, and how to respond in a way that understands the civic virtues you would want to have in a liberal democracy. The vast majority of academics live up to those kinds of virtues.

Areeq Chowdhury: If you are interested, we could find out what is in our media training and perhaps provide that.

Q321 **Dr Huq:** I would be curious to see the content of that. Lastly on this subject, I know there is a New Zealand academic, Professor Anne-Marie Brady, who is displeased that the Chinese state had not liked stuff she was saying. Would your media training equip people to deal with big stuff like that?

Areeq Chowdhury: I don't know. I could find out something for you about it.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: I would have to refer back to see what exactly we cover.

Dr Rachel Quinn: There is the media training, but the other thing that we will do is individual coaching for people, if they want it. Some of those things sound quite case-specific, so it would be giving people the tools, but then specific information. If they are not getting support from their university, they can come to us for support, as well.

Dr Adam Wright: There are wider things that other institutions, such as UKRI and the research councils do, which try to promote tighter research leadership, to provide people with the right skills and the resilience to some of those things you are talking about.

Q322 **Dr Huq:** On the academies themselves, is it mostly the old red bricks and Oxbridge people that manage to get grants from your different institutions? I do remember from academia that snobbery is a big part of the food chain there. Would the academies support the idea that those employed in Government agencies should be allowed to speak in the media?

Dr Rachel Quinn: Yes, that is a really interesting issue. Yes.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: That is a question I would like to take to our fellows, rather than put forward a position here. One thing I would say about the Royal Academy of Engineering in particular, is that it is about 50% industry. It is not just academic expertise that we draw on. We have lots of fellows who are leaders in industry, and we also support a lot of entrepreneurship and innovation, so it is broader than just academic experience.

Q323 **Dr Huq:** Within the universities, is there a hierarchy? Within the universities that you do fund, is it the older ones?

Dr Natasha McCarthy: I would have to look at the detail. We work very hard on diversity and inclusion. We have a significant diversity and inclusion team, to ensure that we build a diverse engineering profession. It is core to our values to be inclusive and work with lots of different organisations. That is really important for us.

Areeq Chowdhury: Just to add to that, it depends on the merit of the topic we are looking at. We engage first of all with our fellowship, then perhaps with people we fund, and then other academics. We do also look outside our own expertise, depending on the topic, in civil society and elsewhere. We do try to diversify who we engage with on each of our topics. It is not just one or two universities.

Dr Adam Wright: I think we are making a lot of progress in diversifying the types of institution that receive funding, and also those who are elected to our fellowship. It is important to note that the more traditional

institutions are research-intensive institutions and, therefore, they have the capacity to produce a range of research, but it is important that we live by the principle of funding excellence in research, wherever it is found.

It is important that we continue to abide by that principle, and fund research excellence wherever it is found. We are doing a good job of diversifying funding. Certainly, there is a much wider range of institutions funded through our policy research—the funding people receive through our policy innovation fellowships, for instance—as well. There is a growing diversity among those we do fund.

Q324 **Dr Huq:** Should the Government be doing more to promote your respective organisations?

Areeq Chowdhury: It depends on what it is for, I think. If it was to promote us as a way to counter misinformation, I would probably hesitate about that, but it would just depend on the nature of that promotion.

Dr Natasha McCarthy: I would welcome support in making our work more widely known. We work closely to ensure that our work is valuable to the policymakers. As I said, we do lots of work to bring our work to the wider public. We fund a lot of research. We very much welcome awareness of what we do and the value it brings.

Dr Rachel Quinn: I would agree with that.

Dr Adam Wright: I would also agree with that. We are very keen to be seen as one of the first points of call for Government on a number of issues, particularly in the policy world. But it is important that, within that space and with that support, we maintain our independence as a national academy.

Q325 **Dr Huq:** Lastly, for the two chaps from the Royal Society, I think you are on record as saying that Government need to look at sustainable funding models for factchecking organisations. Does the Royal Society believe the Government should publicly fund these?

Areeq Chowdhury: That's a good question. I think that the problem with Government funding to tackle misinformation is that it feeds into the conspiracy that you're parroting the Government line. If Full Fact, for example, was funded by the UK Government, anything it said that aligned with what the UK Government was saying would not look independent. But I do think there is a big challenge around the sustainable funding of factcheckers in general.

In a previous life, I actually worked opposite a factchecker; it was basically two guys working in the middle of the night, coding and stuff like that. Most factchecking organisations are not Full Fact. Some are fledgling start-ups who are running out of money and may be reliant on funding from the platforms themselves, which, again, can affect their independence.

I think there is a need for sustainable funding, given how important their role is for firefighting misinformation, which pretty much no other

organisation can do to that extent—again, looking at Full Fact's work, which is amazing. I agree with your critique on the MPs thing, in the previous session, but what they do on automated detection is really advanced, and that industry should be supported. I do not know whether it would be Government funding, but there should be some sustainable funding, where they do not have to go, cap in hand, to the platforms to fund their work.

Chair: We have to move on to our next session, but thank you all very much indeed. That was a very thoughtful opening session. Mr Chowdhury, and Drs McCarthy, Quinn and Wright, thank you all very much. We will take one minute to set up the next panel. Thank you.

Examination of witness

Witness: Marianna Spring.

Chair: This is the second panel of the morning. We welcome Marianna Spring, the disinformation and social media correspondent of the BBC. The most important message today is: happy birthday!

Marianna Spring: Oh, thank you!

Q326 **Chair:** I am sure you can think of no way that you would rather spend your birthday than appearing before a Select Committee.

It is noteworthy, isn't it, that the disinformation and social media correspondent of the BBC is a job that did not and could not have existed 10 years ago? It shows how fast moving this is.

You will have heard through the course of the inquiry that we have concentrated a lot on the pandemic, obviously, because that was the point where the need for trusted information became very, very acute—literally matters of life and death. For your reports on that, who did you rely on? Who do you trust?

Marianna Spring: When it came to the pandemic, or in general?

Chair: Both.

Marianna Spring: I guess in general my broad principle is to rely, as any investigative journalist, on multiple sources to work out what is going on, and trusted sources where there are various people who corroborate the same thing. That principle applies across the board, for example, covering disinformation tactics around Ukraine and trying to understand how those played out on the ground, and speaking to people who had been affected by them, and piecing that together. A good example of that was another woman called Marianna, who was photographed outside a hospital in Mariupol back in April, or the end of March, last year. She was very quickly accused by Russia of being an actress because she was a beauty blogger and an influencer. I spent a lot of time speaking to people on the ground—my colleagues on the ground as well as other journalists on the ground—and speaking to the people who were there, present at the attack, speaking to the family and friends of the woman affected and so on, and

then piecing together a picture for a Radio 4 podcast, called "War on Truth". I did that to understand just how they had been affected and who believed what, and what had really gone on.

When it came to the pandemic, a lot of that involved relying quite heavily on doctors, scientists, medics and people with extensive experience of both frontline work, and of understanding coronavirus and covid-19. A lot of what I did was about the human cost of disinformation and conspiracy theories, and particularly understanding the most extreme disinformation. Within my team we have factcheckers who work very specifically on factchecking certain claims that have been made about coronavirus vaccines or about the disease itself. A lot of my work was understanding the people who totally denied that it existed or suggested that it was somehow linked to 5G technology, or that the vaccines were part of some terrible plot to kill lots of people. In some ways, a lot of what I dealt in was very categorically false and looking at the harm that that caused.

Q327 **Chair:** The difficulty obviously is that at times of uncertainty, like the pandemic, we did not know what effect the vaccines would have. There was reasonable uncertainty. Did it ever get to the point where the BBC's injunction for impartiality hindered you? Did you ever feel, "I've got to present the other side of these people who are saying that certain types of vaccines are damaging"? There were two clearly conflicting ideals, if you like. Did you ever find that in your daily work?

Marianna Spring: In some ways, I have found impartiality incredibly helpful with the work I do, particularly due impartiality, because, actually, it is not about giving equal weight to views where one is false and one is true. It is about looking at the facts and understanding the evidence, and what the truth is, and then understanding perhaps why people are pushing an idea that is misleading or that is counter to the evidence.

I strongly believe that it is important to empathise, understand and really interrogate what is going on. Certainly that was so with the pandemic, but the same applies to a whole range of conspiracy theories since then. I think it is important to hear from people and to understand how they have arrived at that point. You are totally right that there are times when we do not have answers and we do not know what is going on, and we have to be transparent with the audience when we do not have the answer. But there are times when we might not have the answer but the conspiracy theories are so extreme we are able to say, "I don't think the evidence we have so far points towards the fact that there is a mass horrible plot happening, but I want to understand why you believe that."

There was a podcast I did for Radio 4 called "Death by Conspiracy?", which looked at one man in particular who had fallen down a rabbit hole of covid-19 misinformation in Shrewsbury, and subsequently caught coronavirus and died. Having that space, which was 10 to 15 minute episodes, I could really get into understanding how he had arrived at that point, and the responsibility of not just the influencers pushing misleading claims that were contrary to the scientific evidence, but trying to understand all the other factors at play—the social media companies and

the responsibility they have, and the other issues at play in terms of agency, community and the different things offered by conspiracy movements. On the whole, I have actually found impartiality helpful.

Another good example is that I recently did an investigation for "Panorama" and a podcast called "Disaster Trolls" about conspiracy theorists targeting survivors of terror attacks—particularly the Manchester Arena attack—and accusing them of making up their injuries. In that case, I don't need to say, "There are some people who think those people weren't injured and there are other people who don't." Those people were clearly injured, and it was about understanding why it was happening.

The people at the heart of it—the survivors—wanted to feel like their story was told and that people were listening to what they had to say. The impact of that investigation has been very, very positive. They have told me that they have had less abuse. Legal action is being taken against the conspiracy theorists in question, and there has been a huge response from political figures and even social media companies. When you apply the principle of due impartiality, you are able to expose harmful mistruths and the impact they have.

Q328 **Chair:** Despite your heroic efforts, do you think disinformation is becoming more or less prevalent?

Marianna Spring: Unfortunately, more. I am sure a lot of you have seen the online speculation around the disappearance of Nicola Bulley. That is something that I have been covering over the past few days. The social media frenzy around that has been like nothing I have ever seen before.

I think there are specific platforms that play quite a big role in that. As a result of my investigation, we found that the TikTok algorithm appeared to be pushing a lot of this content to a variety of people—a huge number of people. I manually went through the different social media platforms, and Nicola Bulley's name had over 270 million views on TikTok—this was on Friday, so it is more than this now—in contrast with the other platforms. You can't always analyse views quite so clearly, but there were significantly fewer views on all the other mainstream platforms. It is the same with the much more sinister conspiracy theories that deny the reality of what happened and accuse people of being paid actors. I definitely think that disinformation is no better, and unfortunately I fear that it might be slightly worse.

Q329 **Chair:** And you think the platforms—in this case, TikTok—are not being responsible?

Marianna Spring: I always have to say that I am not a campaigner. It is not my job to say what the social media companies should or should not do, but my investigation showed that, certainly in this case, there appeared to be a frenzy on TikTok. When I approached TikTok, they came back to me and said that they will tackle content that is harassment or hate, and that they will remove stuff that is in breach of their policies. They said that, particularly in this case, they would look to not promote conspiratorial content when it comes to unfolding news events.

This is not the first time this has happened. There was a murder case—you might have heard of it, or you might not—in Idaho. Back at the end of October, four students in their early 20s were murdered, and a very similar frenzy unfolded on TikTok. It is really interesting, because if you ask people who don't use TikTok if they have heard of this case, most of them say, "I don't know what you are talking about," but if you ask anyone who uses TikTok, they say, "It's all over my feed," even if they are based in an entirely different country, have never been to Moscow, Idaho, and have never even heard of it. There are big questions about that.

There has been a lot of talk about the impact that Andrew Tate's content has had across social media. There is pressure on all the social media platforms, and TikTok as well. Understanding the way the TikTok algorithm affects people is a crucial next step when we think about the real-world harm of disinformation and hate.

Q330 **John Nicolson:** I want to ask a bit more about TikTok, because it is attracting such negative press, and I think a lot of people are a bit confused about the levels of power it has. Once again, on this awful thing that we have seen with the disappearance of the young woman and folk turning up in the village, apparently a disproportionate number of TikTok videos were being uploaded and causing great distress. How disturbing a phenomenon do you think TikTok is?

Marianna Spring: When it comes to people turning up at the disappearance, there is certainly a lot of evidence on TikTok that people have turned up at the scene and filmed. I interviewed someone yesterday whose family own the caravan park just behind where Nicola Bulley was last seen, and his family, including his nearly 80-year-old grandmother, have had absolutely horrific abuse, including people turning up at their garden and harassing them at home.

People turning up a crime scenes or scenes of disappearances is nothing new, and social media true crime is also nothing new. Certainly in this latest incident, from the investigating I have done, TikTok in particular has turbocharged this, and means that it is reaching more people than ever before. A lot of that is probably explained by the algorithm. It has a very sensitive algorithm; even if you just linger over a video for a little bit longer, it picks up on that and then it sends you more content. Lots of people that I have interviewed have said to me, "I wasn't really engaged in this kind of stuff and then I started. I saw one video on TikTok about this and now I am reposting it, I am involved, and I am commenting." I noticed that on TikTok more strongly than on the other platforms.

Q331 **John Nicolson:** Why is TikTok doing that? What is the purpose from a TikTok perspective?

Marianna Spring: It is always hard to speculate about their motives. What I found from looking at examples around Nicola Bulley's disappearance is that it is good for engagement. You have 270 million views on your videos—more than that. That is more than any of the other platforms. We know that engagement is good for social media companies

in terms of profit. It does pose problems and public pressure if they get things wrong, but ultimately a lot of this comes down to understanding the impact that high engagement has on the profits of social media companies. That is something that I found across the board with all of the social media companies at different points. They will say that they put user safety over profit and that that is more important.

I also think that a lot of this comes down to the style of TikTok, which encourages people to participate. It is often about people getting involved and feeling they can do their own research or turn up at the scene and stuff like that. Again, that is not totally new, but I think the number of people doing it has increased. There are big questions for the social media companies—but for TikTok in particular—about whether they realise the harm that is caused by those sorts of frenzies and whether they are able to do anything about it.

Q332 **John Nicolson:** That is an interesting question. We know what Putin's intention is with disinformation. We know he wants to undermine democracy, attack us and make our societies function less well. TikTok looks more benign because of lots of folk doing cute little dancey videos and stuff, but it is also owned by a malevolent communist despot and a regime that represses. Beneath the dancing, are we sufficiently focused on what TikTok is about, who its owners are and what its long-term plans are for our democracy?

Marianna Spring: When it comes to particularly new social media sites—TikTok is one that has come to the fore since the pandemic—we have to understand how quickly these platforms can evolve. With something like TikTok—although it began with the dancing, which is what we all know it for from the pandemic, and people do "get ready with me" videos and stuff like that—there is a lot more news on there than there was before. For example, every time I go on to TikTok and there is something big happening, whether it is the opening ceremony of the World cup or the case that has just unfolded with Nicola Bulley or the specific case in Idaho, these things play out on the platform. A lot of this is quite complex for the social media companies in terms of their moderation policies.

As you say, TikTok is Chinese owned. If you compare it to the US-owned social media companies, on the whole a lot of experts I have interviewed have said that TikTok's approach to moderation has tended to be much more categorical. They will totally ban certain terms. I did an investigation last summer about a little boy called Olly who was murdered in Reading and the role that social media played in his murder. When I set up a dummy account to test whether a teenage boy with a similar profile to him and his friends could be sent violent content—knives for sale and so on—I found that it was all the other social media platforms, or certainly Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, that performed much worse, and TikTok was quite good because it had just banned certain hashtags.

But when it comes to these evolving news events, and certainly when we do not know the truth—in the case of Nicola Bulley's disappearance, there was a lot of speculation because there was not an answer—I think the

social media companies really struggle. From the investigations that I have done, they clearly do not adapt their policies as quickly as we might expect. That is certainly what I have seen in their responses, so that is a big question to be asked.

When it comes to the ownership of these companies, the tech team I work with at the BBC do even more to analyse the companies—who runs them and what is going on. I am doing a "Panorama" investigation that goes out in just under two weeks about the Twitter takeover, what is unfolding there and the real impact that that has on users. It is important that we understand that impact on users—everything from the gathering of data to how that then means there is a mass frenzy and how that affects us. There is even more we can do to understand that.

Q333 **John Nicolson:** What does TikTok do if people want to write about the Dalai Lama, the Chinese invasion or Chinese brutality, or torture camps and the destruction of the Tibetan language?

Marianna Spring: I think it is a huge concern. We certainly saw when the invasion of Ukraine happened that there was a lot of disinformation spreading, in particular on TikTok with old videos. I spoke to quite a few young Ukrainians who were being targeted by accounts, seemingly without profile pictures or names, who were telling them that the war was not happening in the way they were seeing. Someone posted a video of their apartment block near to Bucha that had been totally destroyed in parts, and people were telling him that that had not happened, that it was not real and so on. It really concerns me how that would unfold on the platform if other huge major events were to happen.

That is something I hope my reporting and that of the people around me would continue to scrutinise. Also, across TikTok and all the social media platforms we do not always have access to as much data and information as we could. That comes down to a question of transparency. A lot of it requires all the old-fashioned reporting we would normally do. That includes manually going through stuff, finding people and tracking them down, collating the comments and trying to investigate accounts. Even trying to identify inauthentic accounts is incredibly difficult without information that can corroborate where they have come from or who is running them. It is certainly something we have to watch out for in the event of other major geopolitical changes.

Q334 **Clive Efford:** Thanks for what you do; I have followed your podcasts and "Panorama" programmes, and they have been really effective. In that role, are you attempting to expose disinformation, or are you primarily trying to refute it? Or is it a bit of both? What is your focus in the work that you do?

Marianna Spring: I would say that my focus is very much on exposing disinformation and other social media harms, and then in turn the real-world harm that it does. Fact-checking and other forms of debunking are really important, but they have to be coupled with real, human stories that bring them to life. It is really important that people understand that this stuff is certainly not limited to the dark corners of the internet or the

fringes, but that it affects all of our lives, all of the time. Actually, how busy I am at the moment is testament to that, because it is every single story, whether it is the sad story of the disappearance of Nicola Bulley or the so-called meltdown at Twitter and the chaos that a lot of employees have spoken about there, or the war or the pandemic. There are a huge number of events that are affected by what is happening online, particularly the bad stuff happening online.

My focus has very much been on understanding that human impact and really bringing that to the fore and helping audiences to understand the impact it has, as well as how they and others around them can be affected, and what the tactics are as well. I often think that disinformation is so effective because it is emotional and it gets people to react. It often takes one emblematic case and says, "Look, look. This has happened." It makes people sit up and take notice. I think we have to weaponise those same tactics in the journalism we do and bring stuff to life so that people understand the impact it has and so that we can engage them in a range of formats, whether that be by a podcast series, a "Panorama" documentary, or online and digitally. I certainly find that there is incredibly high engagement from younger audiences in the work I do, especially when it is online or on iPlayer or BBC Sounds. I think that tells you that young audiences, and also older audiences, are keen to understand how this could affect them.

Q335 **Clive Efford:** You talked about the number of people who have been following what has happened with Nicola Bulley over the last few days. You mentioned 2.5 million, I think. Is there an overlap in the people who are susceptible to social media? When you go from one story to another, do you find virtually the same people delving into it?

Marianna Spring: Absolutely. It is really important that we understand the legacy left by pandemic disinformation in particular and the way that certain people, often unwittingly so, have been drawn into these conspiracy movements. You find that they are very agile. Those movements will change shape and target new topics, whether it is talking about climate and climate change, the disappearance of Nicola Bulley, or the whole range of things that happen in the news. There is a denial playbook and tactics, and once you are well versed in that language, once you know what a crisis actor is—that is someone you think is being paid to act out an event—you find that people are quite quick to change between topics.

The BBC commissioned research from King's College around the disaster trolls investigation I did. It surveyed over 4,000 people who were weighted to be representative of the UK population and found that almost 14%—or maybe it was 14%—thought that the Manchester Arena bombing was staged by crisis actors. One third of people thought that the pandemic had made them more receptive to those kinds of conspiracy theories. Once you are down that rabbit hole, it is quite hard to get out. I find from people I interview who are caught up in it that, once you truly believe that everything is part of a plot—that is, beyond legitimate concerns and

questions, and holding power to account, asking questions of authority—you can find yourself, really, a bit trapped, to be honest.

But I also think it is important that we do not stigmatise and vilify people. I am sure that most people sitting in this room might know someone who has been drawn into that kind of stuff on social media. It is about trying to empathise and understand. I certainly think that is part of my job at the BBC, in terms of impartiality.

Q336 **Clive Efford:** One of the people you interviewed in the "Panorama" programme about the Manchester bombing was following Richard D. Hall. What struck me about her is that she was completely innocent about why she was doing it and totally sympathetic to the victims when it was pointed out to her; but she had been completely sucked in by the scale of the lie. That is what really fooled people.

Marianna Spring: I think it frightened her, as well. She was a lovely woman; she was really kind. She welcomed us into her home; she was really happy with "Panorama" and the podcast when it went out, which I am always happy to hear from anyone I interview. There are common attributes that people display, from my experience of reporting on this. They do not tend to be gullible or stupid—in fact, they tend to be often hyper-engaged, very sceptical, distrustful. They have lots of questions, they often feel let down, they are often looking for agency and community. Those are the things I see come up time and time again. Often, people just want you to listen. When I challenged her, I was surprised at how quickly she changed soft of her mind. She said "Actually, I'm not sure about this". Sometimes, people are not confronted with the reality of what they are believing. If you are able to say, "I've interviewed these survivors and their lives have been totally changed and they had a terrible experience"—she was really quick to say, "Actually, hang on a second, maybe I've got this wrong".

Q337 **Clive Efford:** Quite. I mention Richard D. Hall, but should I be? Should we be wary of giving the oxygen of publicity to these terrible people?

Marianna Spring: It is a really good question and it's obviously one that we talk about a lot, before we do any investigation or report. We judge it case by case, often by how viral they are and the reach they are having, but also by the harm they are doing. In the case of disaster trolls, we decided it had certainly reached the bar that it was important we reported on it and revealed the harm. There is a follow-up report to that coming out soon; it is really important to understand the impact that investigation has had. His reach has been significantly reduced by the investigation, rather than the opposite. His stall was shut down and his YouTube channel was removed. He removed lots of the social media videos from his website. The survivors themselves say that the abuse has lessened. They feel like people are listening; people understand and know about this problem. A lot of people were not aware of it. I personally think that it is the squeamishness to cover this stuff that can often contribute to the problem. If we cover it responsibly and think about how we are covering it, and we make sure we centre it in the harm that it causes—certainly, in the

survivors' testimony—then we are able to do it in a way that means the investigation is responsible and appropriate in what it does.

Q338 **Clive Efford:** In that case, what struck me was the attempt by him—you may be able to enlighten us about whether it was successful—to monetise the story that he was telling lies about, so that he could make money from it. Do you think that the social media platforms are quick enough in dealing with individuals like that, who are literally exploiting the platform to monetise what is a really miserable story for the people involved?

Marianna Spring: Certainly, that investigation is quite similar, in some ways, to the case of Nicola Bulley. When something is evolving and the platforms are not expecting it, you see that they have not necessarily got specific policies for addressing it. I know that Twitter certainly used to have a policy for reporting someone who was denying a shooting, like the Sandy Hook shooting and some of the conspiracy theories that Alex Jones has promoted.

Certainly, the investigation raised questions about how the social media platforms deal with someone like that. YouTube did subsequently remove the channel. It is important as well to understand that people like that build a very committed following. They do not have to be huge, but they often have a committed following that are willing to go to the talks, buy the books and who you can take from the mainstream platforms on to the more fringe platforms—whether that is a Telegram channel, just your website, specific groups that you create, a private Facebook group, or a community that they become a part of. You just need an opening—a point where you can draw them in—and then they continue to follow you. For that reason, there are questions over how well the social media companies manage when people are jumping from one platform to another or where they are banned in one place but have another account available somewhere else.

Q339 **Clive Efford:** My last question is: would you say, with all the research that you have done, that there is evidence that the public are becoming more wary of being tricked by people providing misinformation?

Marianna Spring: I would like to think so. I certainly think when I interview people now that quite a lot of people are aware of the tactics used to target them. They are more conscious of it and understand it a bit more. I think the difficultly is that there is a small, but often quite committed, growing minority of people who have been drawn into this stuff. It is quite hard to get out and to counter, certainly when you are being exposed to it day in and day out. Again, that brings us to the question of the algorithm and what people are being exposed to and recommended and pushed towards, and how they get drawn into this world. I would like to think, and I hope, that these kinds of investigations increase public understanding and help people to get how this works across a range of different platforms, and maybe my job won't need to exist in 10 years.

Clive Efford: I doubt it

Marianna Spring: Yes, I doubt it.

Q340 **Giles Watling:** You seem to be having a good birthday so far. There are a couple of things I have drawn from the evidence so far. Of course, you have to be balanced—you're journalists; you have to be even handed—but I imagine that one of the requests you would make of platforms is that they have to be more fleet of foot when responding to circumstances so that things do not get out of hand. Would you say that is the case?

Marianna Spring: I don't think it is quite right to say that I make requests of them. I present to them the findings of my investigations, in which I have, on many occasions, found that they are not always quick to react and adapt to new, evolving situations. That is certainly something that they have come back to me on and said that they will endeavour to do better, or change, or adjust algorithms or adjust what they are promoting and so on. That is one of the things that comes up time and time again in all of these investigations—every single time.

Q341 **Giles Watling:** That is a very equitable answer; thank you. When we are talking about misinformation, conspiracy theories can kill. As you identified much earlier, it can kill the conspiracy theorists. Would you say that is the case?

Marianna Spring: Certainly in "Death by Conspiracy?", the podcast I mentioned, and in other cases I have looked into, I have found people really seriously harmed by what they believe. It can be very difficult to say, "Because someone believed this, they lost their life". It can be a little bit more complex than that, but Gary, who sadly died in Shrewsbury, certainly believed his social media posts, and his conversations with friends suggested that he believed that covid-19 was not real or serious. He did not appear to take sufficient action to protect himself or seek medical help once he had fallen ill, and then he died, so I think it is fair to say that, in that case—

Q342 **Giles Watling:** What I am alluding to is that simple messages seem to be more effective. In fact, you said, "Facts are boring. The truth is complex, and misinformation is often not complex, so people hang on to the most emotive narratives. They give people a sense of purpose." It is sexy and attractive, so we go with that rather than the truth. Is that what you are saying?

Marianna Spring: Yes, absolutely. Often, stories that grab our attention and play on our existing fears, questions and mistrust really do suck people in. Things that are a single story about a person, where you think, "Wow, what's happened to this person? I can't believe I'm so worried about this", really do draw people in. I noticed—again to come back to the coverage of the Nicola Bulley case—that people I spoke to had never shared this kind of content before, but had been posting it online and saying, "I think I'm helping." It was the same in the pandemic and with lots of stuff. People often are well intentioned, even if that is totally misplaced and it does real harm, but if they understand it, I think that they are quite quick—similar to the woman in "Disaster Trolls"—to say, "Hold on a second." But we can only reveal that to them if we cover it in a

way that grabs their attention and appeals to them. Otherwise, they are switched off from it.

Q343 **Giles Watling:** Would you say that people want to find accurate information, or is the emotive appeal of conspiracies too strong?

Marianna Spring: I think people want to find out what is going on and they want to understand the world around them, but they can be misled if particularly emotive tactics that play on existing concerns—distrust and so on—are employed. Yes, I think that people broadly want to know what is going on, but we have to talk to them in a way that appeals to them and will make them engage with what we are doing. Often, we deal with people who feel distrustful of the mainstream media and the BBC, and it is about trying to win back that trust. Being transparent, revealing how we do an investigation, showing people how it works and the impact it has, and exposing that to them are all crucial, particularly in a social media age where it is easier to do than ever.

Q344 **Giles Watling:** Would you say that it is insidious, in as much as a little misinformation draws you into the entrance of the rabbit warren, and it becomes more and more difficult to get out as you follow it in? Once you are absorbed, it is really hard to see the daylight again. I am sorry about the clumsy analogy.

Marianna Spring: No, absolutely, we often use the rabbit hole analogy. Yes, I think that is true. It is really important for people to understand that misinformation can, as you say, be quite simple. It can start with one thing that is slightly misleading, and then it spirals. It does not have to use complex tactics or even have to employ complex technology—AI technology or anything else. It can be really straightforward and really easy to do, and people can then find themselves going further and further down, whether that is because algorithms are pushing content to them or they themselves are seeking it out. They are part of a community, others are sharing the content all the time and people think, "There must be something to this", "I trust these people", or, "I trust this person", and so they end up in that place and it can be hard to come out.

Q345 **Giles Watling:** And if you say it again and again, it becomes the truth—I get that. Do you think that the public in general know where or how to find the most accurate information?

Marianna Spring: A lot of people I interview, whether those who have been drawn into misinformation and conspiracies on social media or those who haven't, do tell me that they look into stuff and check things out. The problem can be that, on social media, stuff is served to you, rather than you going to seek it out, so when you are being served things, you think, "Oh, this must be something I would like. I would quite like to take a look at this. Oh, there must be something to this." I find sometimes, when sent things, I think, "That's really convincing." I can see why someone would be convinced by it.

I am reminded of the first ever "Panorama" I did, which was about anti-vaccine tactics being deployed during the pandemic, and the lovely woman

from Norwich who emailed me to say, "I've just been emailed this video. I don't want to get my vaccine. I am really, really worried." She was a clever person, but she just didn't know how to get to the bottom of what was true. Some of the tactics can be really frightening: people will brandish expertise or credentials that make you think, "Maybe I should trust this person." It can be hard to get to the truth.

I like to think that it is really important that we have something out there, if you—for example—stumble across a conspiracy theory that the Manchester Arena bombing didn't happen. Another example is Jeremy Bowen, the international editor, who was targeted by conspiracy theorists. They said that he had done a report near Bucha or Irpin, in which he was lying down on the ground, but that there was also a woman with some shopping bags, so people said, "Oh, this isn't a war zone. It's not real", and that was amplified by pro-Russian channels and so on. If we don't put the truth out there for people to find, someone who stumbles across that might think, "I cannot think about what is going on", and they will look up Jeremy Bowen on Twitter and think, "I don't know, maybe there is something to this." That is why I think it is important that my job exists—not just me, but other journalists, and Jeremy Bowen as well—and we are able to be transparent and able to say, "Hang on, this is how it works. These are the tactics being used."

Q346 **Giles Watling:** Final question, then. Clearly, you and other journalists are doing a great job of trying to get the truth out there and just reporting on the story. Is there more that the Government can do to ensure that the general public receive accurate information?

Marianna Spring: As I always say, it is not my job to decide policy, or to tell politicians, Government or whoever what to think or do. From my experience, I think that trust is really important, and the more trust that people have in the society around them, the less that conspiracy theories can thrive. I think it is really important that we work to just expose how this works and help people to understand how misinformation can thrive in all spaces, and the harm that it can do, so that people really understand how it is affecting them.

Certainly, for me, that focus is much more on social media. I have colleagues who do fact-checking across a whole range of different realms, and that can be offline as well. I just think it is important—I think that trust is key, because distrust, chaos and absence of information are all the circumstances required for misinformation and conspiracy theories to thrive.

Giles Watling: Another great diplomatic answer. Thank you so much.

Q347 **Dr Huq:** Happy birthday.

Marianna Spring: Thank you.

Dr Huq: We won't give you the bumps, don't worry! You are on record as saying previously that the way that young people consume information means that they are most vulnerable to misinformation and fake news.

Could you expand on why that is?

Marianna Spring: There is often this misconception that, because young people are on social media lots, and because they are really savvy about it, they are actually less vulnerable to this stuff, and that it is older people who are more likely to forward something on, believe it, or whatever. Actually, from my experience, young people are hyper-exposed online to this kind of stuff, whether it is on TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, or whichever platform they are using. I therefore think it is really important that we do not drop the ball, and that we actually understand how young audiences are exposed to misinformation, hate, or other things, among other content on their feeds.

I mean, there is quite a lot of data—including, actually, that same King's College research that I was talking about—about people believing in conspiracy theories around terror attacks, crisis actors, and so on. It was by far the youngest age group—the 18 to 24-year-olds and then the 24 to 30-year-olds, I think it was—who were most likely to believe that stuff, more so than the older people who were surveyed. They were also most likely to be hyper-engaged on social media, and on specific platforms such as Telegram as well, and we know that Telegram has large groups.

Telegram is one of those platforms that is interesting because, around the war in Ukraine, for example, we have seen that it has actually been a place that people in Russia have been able to turn to for information. It is somewhere where they have been able to find out what is going on outside Russia, and outside the state-controlled media. But here in the UK, it is certainly a place where conspiracy movements, and often extremist groups—far right groups—have thrived, and it appears to be a place that people who believe this stuff, and younger audiences who believe this stuff, are also drawn towards.

Q348 **Dr Huq:** The one my teenager is always looking at is Snapchat. They can literally see where everyone is. It's a bit creepy.

Marianna Spring: Snapchat as well—I mentioned the story of Olly Stephens, who was murdered in Reading. I did this "Panorama" investigation, and Snapchat was one of the platforms where a lot of the communication had been shared. I think there are big questions, again, and that investigation sought to ask those, of how the social media companies are protecting kids such as Olly and other teenagers who have been affected in that way. But, I have tended to find that with Snapchat, the questions I have been asking are more about abusive language and bullying, and less about misinformation, just because of the nature of the platform.

Q349 **Dr Huq:** How do we smash this young people divide—that they are maybe not interrogating sources enough? I imagine you have just brought the average age of correspondents down quite a lot. Were you taught media literacy at school? We are fed this thing that they are the most media-literate ever and that they are super-savvy. I just wondered whether that is now on the curriculum, whether you had it, and whether the BBC

audience is also still ageing.

Marianna Spring: I think that is a really good question. I spent a lot of time talking to audiences about social media literacy—everyone from Newsround up to Newsbeat, the younger outlets, and also on the BBC social media platforms—and I think just teaching people about how to spot information is really important.

It is interesting: there was a piece that I did comparing the situation with misinformation in the US, and also in Finland, which has a much more rigorous media literacy course as part of its curriculum. You do see that the proliferation of misinformation, or belief in misinformation, or belief in misinformation, appears to be lower in somewhere like Finland. Obviously, there are other factors at play, so it is not just about that. But I found that really interesting.

With younger audiences, it is really important that we are getting our reports out to the places that they are—on to social media platforms, and the BBC has an ever-growing TikTok account now, but also in podcasts and documentaries. They engage in that very on-demand way. Being able to package this stuff in a way that is exciting and engaging and really catches their attention—I certainly find that that performs particularly well with younger audiences.

I also think that there are ways that we can improve social media literacy through the reporting we do. There is a project and an investigation that I have been doing for the BBC's Americast podcast, called "The Undercover Voters". That is five characters that I created based on data from the Pew Research Center. They are supposed to reflect US voters sitting across the political spectrum. They are different ages, from different places, different backgrounds and so on. That is an opportunity to explain to the audience how different people are targeted, even on the same topic, and understanding polarisation and the subjective social media worlds that you can be a part of. Creating those dummy accounts to explore those worlds is one of the only ways of doing that.

I have had a really positive response from younger audiences as well. Trying out new, innovative ways of explaining to the audience, and younger audiences, how they are being targeted and what they are seeing and how they can spot what is true and what is false, and protect themselves from it, is a really important part of my job.

Q350 **Dr Huq:** Is it still an ageing audience that the BBC serves? For ages, we have heard that it is bit monolithic, and it is a bit old-fashioned. Is it changing?

Marianna Spring: I think there is a huge push right now at the BBC for it to be more digital—my job even existing is testament to that—and to report across platforms. It is important to serve an older audience who are more likely to engage with linear broadcasts, but it is also really important to serve younger audiences.

For example, when I do a BBC "Panaroma" documentary investigation, it will be on BBC1, but it will also be on iPlayer. We aim to package it in a way that appeals to both of those audiences. That can be quite hard sometimes with social media, because you have often got a difference in which platforms people use and what they are doing, but I like to think and I hope that the BBC is adapting to the digital world and is certainly putting a lot more into not just the different platforms and places we cover this stuff, but also how we cover it.

Being really transparent with the audience and really up front and courageous in our reporting, and saying, "This is misleading and harmful, and here is the harm that it's done" is a part of that as well.

Q351 **Jane Stevenson:** Good morning and happy birthday.

Marianna Spring: Thank you.

Jane Stevenson: I have a very quick question. I am wondering how we educate ourselves to monitor what Dr Wright in our previous panel touched on —the psychological attractiveness of conspiracy theories. I have not seen many articles, if any, about that. Do you think there is more space to educate older people and schools, as well, as part of their social media literacy? Is enough there? Whose role should that be?

Marianna Spring: I think that the psychology of conspiracy theories and online disinformation is really interesting. It is something I get a lot of questions about, particularly from family friends and people who message me to say, "Oh, I am really worried about this person"—my mum or my dad, or my uncle or my friend—"they have got drawn into this stuff; how do I talk to them? How do I have that conversation?"

I have done quite a lot of reporting that looks at that—how you can have a constructive conversation about a conspiracy theory or something that someone has fallen into or believes. In "Disaster Trolls" for example, we also interviewed a cyber psychologist who looked specifically at why someone would push these really extreme conspiracy theories. First, is it about money, or a following, or that kind of thing, in terms of the person pushing it? For the people who believe it, is it about fear? People actually genuinely don't want to believe the worst has happened. Just to come back to the Nicola Bulley case, because it is very fresh in my brain, I think that is also the case—there are people who genuinely just really did not want to believe that something really sad had happened. That is part of it as well.

There is always room for those kinds of conversations and more of those, and for people to better understand why we believe this stuff. I actually think understanding why we believe this stuff is more important than understanding what we believe. In all of the podcasts I have done for Radio 4, I have had conversations with people who believe this stuff. They will often start telling me something, and then another thing, and it is really specific and niche, and you are thinking, "Hang on a second, what are we talking about here?" Actually, if you ask them the simple

questions—"Why do you believe that? Who do you trust? What do you believe in? Where do you turn for information?"—you understand a bit more about what they believe, and that tends to be more effective. Absolutely, I believe that is a crucial part.

I particularly like podcasts, but also longer "Panorama" documentaries, because you can get into that a bit more. I think we shouldn't neglect that as a crucial part of covering this.

Q352 **Jane Stevenson:** Do you work with schools or is there a programme where schools can access resources like that?

Marianna Spring: There are different BBC things—there are obviously things like Bitesize and "Newsround" that look to social media literacy. We have the trusted news initiative as well. There is the young reporter scheme and all those sorts of things. There is quite a lot of stuff about fake news and how to spot it and believing it. I think that all of those relationships are really important.

Q353 **Jane Stevenson:** I think I mean the psychology specifically.

Marianna Spring: I don't think that I can think of an example of them specifically talking about the why. I think a lot of it is the how—how can you spot it, how can you do it.

I think that is really interesting and certainly something that could be explored, and I certainly find it one of the most important parts of doing this stuff. People always say to me, "Does anyone really believe this? Why do they believe it?"

Jane Stevenson: Yes, I think the why is very important too.

Chair: Thank you very much for a fascinating session. Do enjoy the rest of your birthday. Thank you for coming in.

Marianna Spring: Thank you.