

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

Oral evidence: Misinformation and trusted voices,  
HC 597

Tuesday 21 March 2023

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

[Watch the meeting](#)

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

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

Questions 444 - 526

## Witnesses

**I:** Paul Scully MP, Minister for Tech and the Digital Economy; Cathy Alexander, Deputy Director, Research Talent and European Programmes, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology; and Talitha Rowland, Deputy Director, Security and Counter Disinformation, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Paul Scully MP, Cathy Alexander and Talitha Rowland.

Q444 **Chair:** This is a meeting of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, the final meeting of our hearing on misinformation and trusted voices. We welcome Paul Scully, the Minister at now the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Cathy Alexander, Deputy Director, Research Talent and European Programmes, and Talitha Rowland, Deputy Director, Security and Counter Disinformation. Thank you all for coming this morning.

Let me start with you, Minister. Straightforwardly, do the Government have a strategy to counter disinformation?

**Paul Scully:** Yes. We believe that the spread of misinformation and disinformation needs a multifaceted approach. It is not something that a Government can tackle alone, so we need to work in collaboration with social media platforms, the media, society as a whole, industry and academia. We have a range of legislative and non-legislative actions that tackle that environment to make sure that misinformation and disinformation cannot be spread and cannot disrupt things like elections and events like COP26, which we held successfully in this country, to build literacy through our media literacy strategy, which I have no doubt you will raise later on, and to bring all these together through a multifaceted societal approach.

Q445 **Chair:** Despite your departmental move, are you still the Minister responsible for this?

**Paul Scully:** For part of it, yes. It is a cross-Government initiative. When you talk about elections, obviously elections sit with local government, but yes, online safety and the countering of disinformation and misinformation unit sits with me.

**Chair:** I appreciate it is cross-Government, but you are the lead Minister?

**Paul Scully:** Effectively, yes.

Q446 **Chair:** Coming on to the point you make about media literacy and so on, that is presumably not you anymore?

**Paul Scully:** If you are talking about social media literacy, that is very much with me because of the Online Safety Bill and the wider work that we are doing. If you are talking about broadcast and media, then that sits with Julia Lopez.

Q447 **Chair:** To put a boring process question, is there a sub-committee dealing with it? With cross-governmental efforts, often things fall through the cracks. What pulls this together?

**Paul Scully:** We do not have a ministerial sub-committee but officials do speak regularly to make sure that we are not siloed.



Q448 **Chair:** That is interesting if there is not even a ministerial committee on this.

I will ask all three of you a standard question that we have asked everyone. The differences in the answers have been fascinating. What organisations or individuals do you personally look to for information outside your own areas of expertise? Let me start for once with the officials.

**Cathy Alexander:** I would use a range of sources. I would look to some of the main media outlets. I would look to some of the particular specialist groups. I can talk particularly about national academies, and if I was looking for something in that sphere I would look to the national academies but would also look broader than that. I would always try to draw my information from a range of sources so that I can do that sense checking of it.

**Chair:** We will come back to the national academies later.

**Cathy Alexander:** I am sure.

**Paul Scully:** The range of sources is important because what I do, like every individual does, is you start with the colleagues and people around you. You start with broadcasters like the BBC and newspapers. I tap into social media, but I try to cross-reference those sources before I pontificate on an issue. Rather than just absorb an issue I will try to multi-source it.

**Talitha Rowland:** I am very similar, not much to add: a range of sources, print and broadcast media, online sources, known authoritative sources, but a range is the important thing.

Q449 **John Nicolson:** Thank you very much for coming in. Can I start with you, Ms Rowland? I am very interested, as I think we all are, in the role that Russia has played in spreading disinformation without the economic muscle and the economic power that the Soviet Union once did. It is quite clear that it has targeted us in the west with a deliberate campaign of disinformation. How successful do you think that it has been?

**Talitha Rowland:** You are right. It is an information war as much as it is any other conflict. I think the answer to that depends on which audience you are looking at. There is evidence that suggests that audiences in the UK are pretty resilient to Russian disinformation, but that does not mean that we should be complacent. We need to be cognisant that there is both overt disinformation and covert information operations. Understanding the scale of the challenge is part of the rationale for bringing forward the foreign interference offence as a priority offence in the Online Safety Bill so that companies have to introduce proactive systems and processes to ensure that the spread of that content is minimised on their services.

Q450 **John Nicolson:** How do you think the Russians have succeeded? Brexit, for example, was a success for them, wasn't it?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Talitha Rowland:** This is outside of my strict area, but I do not think there is any evidence to suggest that they have successfully manipulated anything. We know that there are persistent attempts to do so and that is why it is important to be vigilant and, as the Minister was saying, that there is a whole-of-society approach to addressing this. Regulation is part of the answer but it is not the whole answer.

Q451 **John Nicolson:** I read regularly online—and, of course, it is important to remember that Twitter is not the real world—a lot of Russian talking points. For example, you will suddenly hear people attack the White Helmets in Syria, a heroic group that rescue children from rubble and try to counter Russian and Syrian regime bombing. You will read relatively normal people telling you that they are absolutely certain that these are all actors, that the children are not really injured, that they have been buried in rubble. That is a phenomenal success for the Russians, isn't it?

**Talitha Rowland:** You are right, there is some abhorrent content out there and it has been a real focus for my team in the past year, working with social media platforms to try to ensure they have policies that adequately respond to that and to recognise that removing content and processes is not the whole answer to inform and educate people and to have authoritative sources of information.

Q452 **John Nicolson:** Minister, I will come back to you on another question, but presumably what is important is to counter some of this stuff beginning at school, to teach children. I know that some of the Scandinavian countries do this. Estonia, for example, is very big on this, and I think that Finland is as well. They teach children how to distinguish between trusted news sources and nonsense news sources. Do we do that enough in the UK?

**Paul Scully:** I don't think that we can ever do enough. We have our media literacy strategy, and that is what I meant about a multi-stakeholder approach to this. I was in a local constituency school a few weeks ago when Google was doing its Be Internet Legends assembly, for example, and it was amazing to see the children understanding the HTTPS, the S at the end of it, to pick scam websites and these kinds of things. You then need to move into trusted news sources. Of course, that was a primary school; they hopefully should not be looking at Twitter and those kinds of things at that stage. There is always more we can do, but we need to make sure that we are leveraging it as Government but that we are using academia and those companies to be able to counter some of this stuff.

In Government, we tend to look at trend. We tend to look overall. Certainly, the counter-disinformation unit that we have within our Department is looking at trends. It is not looking at individuals. It is trying to work out what is being discussed and what we can do to put the right messages out, frankly. Some of the things you described have been going on since we talked about the moon landing, since the Flat Earth



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Society has been saying how it has members all around the globe. It is these kinds of approaches for donkey's years, but it is exactly—

**John Nicolson:** Not really around the globe—across the globe, since obviously the globe is flat.

**Paul Scully:** Exactly. I am glad you picked it up. That is obviously exacerbated by the reach that social media companies have.

Q453 **John Nicolson:** Ms Alexander, can I talk to you about a specific problem that we seem to have? We have discovered this quite a number of times in doing this research. There are specific communities in the country that are quite resistant to health messaging. We discovered that during covid, that black and minority ethnic people, for example, have low levels of trust in the Government and, therefore, it appears that the take-up of covid vaccinations was a real problem. How do we learn the lessons from covid and target these communities and teach communities to trust trusted voices?

**Cathy Alexander:** Quite a bit of this is stretching outside of my direct area of responsibilities, but some of the things that the national academies do will provide good sources of reliable information and then promote that information, to draw on their huge network of expertise and fellows across all the different academies and put together the right information. I would see that one of the key strands of how to counter that would be to make sure that there is good, solid, trusted information out there from reliable sources that people have a means of accessing.

Q454 **John Nicolson:** That exists; it is out there at the moment. There was no doubt that we were being given the best information that was available as scientists discovered the best information, yet even though that was being put out there, certain communities were just refusing to believe it. What can we do about that?

**Cathy Alexander:** I think it is about ensuring that we have multiple sources and multiple routes for information that goes out there. Perhaps I can bring in my colleagues on the countering information side.

**Paul Scully:** Part of your inquiry is obviously trusted voices, so the first thing is that we had the Chief Medical Officer, who started the process at the top of the pyramid, if you like, to put his trusted voice out there. I am also Minister for London, and we were doing work in London with Professor Kevin Fenton, who did amazing work making sure that we could segment the groups that you were describing, making sure that the messages that we were giving—consistent, clearly, because we cannot be saying different things to different people—were in a language and approach that would resonate with those people to make sure we got the right things across.

Q455 **John Nicolson:** Ms Rowland, why did it appear to fail? Because it has failed, hasn't it? When you look today at the different take-up rates in different communities, what the Minister described as his aspiration has



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

not worked.

**Talitha Rowland:** There are always lessons to learn and—

**John Nicolson:** What are they?

**Talitha Rowland—**I am sure that government communication experts are looking at that. One of the lessons that did come through is that trusted voices are different for different communities. Bringing in community leaders and faith leaders and understanding for each different audience who their trusted voices are is important in working with them. I know that a lot of that work was done during covid, but I am sure that there are lessons that can be learnt and more that can be done to utilise those sources and to understand particular communities and where those sources of trust come from.

Q456 **John Nicolson:** Are we doing that work at the moment, do you think?

**Paul Scully:** We are. I would not agree with the premise—

**John Nicolson:** I will come to you in a second, Minister, but do you think, Ms Rowland, that we are doing that work adequately at the moment?

**Talitha Rowland:** That is not an area of DSIT responsibility. The Government Communication Service would look at that. Yes, I am confident that it is learning the lessons.

**Paul Scully:** I would not agree with the premise of the question that we failed. You are trying to roll out a vaccination in this instance in a hurry. It is the fastest, biggest rollout ever, and clearly there were the disparities that you rightly describe, but we worked pretty quickly to try to tackle them. There is always going to be disparities, but we need to work to level them out. However, I don't think that because there were that instantly aligns to the fact that it was a failure.

Q457 **John Nicolson:** Do you think that the UK Government are trusted, Minister?

**Paul Scully:** Yes. There is always political discourse. There is always going to be political debate and different levels depending on the subject, but as an overarching organisation, yes. The gov.uk website, for example, has been a source of trust for information in a number of areas.

Q458 **John Nicolson:** Tomorrow your former leader, our former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, appears before the Privileges Committee. He is charged with not telling the truth repeatedly to the House of Commons and to the general public. His premiership has had a deeply damaging effect, hasn't it, on trust in politics and politicians?

**Paul Scully:** The former Prime Minister will answer his questions in the Privileges Committee in his own way and he will be judged by that Committee. It is not for me to pre-empt that Committee.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**John Nicolson:** I am not asking you to.

**Paul Scully:** Clearly, in the period of time that we describe, things like partygate, which he is in front of the Committee for, was a hugely unfortunate time when people have been—

**John Nicolson:** Unfortunate?

**Paul Scully:**—seeing the suffering of their own families and their own experiences, and then to feel that there is a disjoint between politicians and members of the public is always terrible. It is not what we get into politics for but—

Q459 **John Nicolson:** “Unfortunate” and “disjoint” enormously underplays, I think, what people feel about it. They saw a Prime Minister who was mocking the truth, as he has done throughout his political career. We know that he has been sacked several times for lying by different employers. A phrase has crept into the body politic and it is called post-truth politics. Trump did it. Johnson did it. You just spread untruths. You spray the public arena with untruths, so eventually people just think that you are in it to be dishonest, I am in it to be dishonest, none of us can be trusted. It is a success for the practitioners of post-truth politics but it is terrible for the rest of us. Your leader was one of the foremost exponents of this school of political thought.

**Paul Scully:** John, I am not in front of the Privileges Committee. I am not a witness in front of the Privileges Committee, so I do not want to get involved in that. I am, frankly, one of the biggest cynics when it comes to politicians and politics in the first place because, having run small businesses for 25 years, I have always tried to crack on and get on with my own life, my own business, my own personal life. I am very much a small government guy, that if government can find a way of getting out of people’s lives, fantastic, so I will—

**John Nicolson:** That is a different issue.

**Paul Scully:** No, because, as I say, I do not want to get particularly involved in politics when we are trying to address some very serious issues about disinformation and misinformation.

**John Nicolson:** Minister, politics is absolutely key to this.

**Paul Scully:** Politics is always going to be.

Q460 **John Nicolson:** At times of great crisis in our country—at other times, too—we have to be able to trust our leaders.

**Paul Scully:** You are right.

**John Nicolson:** As the public begin to think that they are all rascals—“Take that Boris Johnson. Not a word he said was true. He smirks as he tries to deceive us. It is his way of doing business”—that affects us all, doesn’t it? It has a crucially damaging effect on our ability to persuade





the public to listen to the experts.

**Paul Scully:** This is where what you are saying is rightly a political debate that should not be tempered as opposed to the question that you asked earlier about Russian disinformation, which absolutely should be disrupted because it is trying to disrupt our election process. The political debate is valid and there is a reason that Boris Johnson is no longer Prime Minister of this country. The parliamentary party have had their say, people have had their say, but we tend to judge our Prime Ministers. That is why we set a high bar through the ballot box and it is right that that is so.

Q461 **John Nicolson:** This is not really about political debate, though, is it? We can debate ideas and that is right and proper in a democracy, but when you move into an area that is not about political debate but about integrity, that is different. You hear a lot of people on the left who say to you, "You know what, I disagree deeply with Margaret Thatcher but on the whole I think she behaved with integrity". I would not necessarily agree with that, but people say that. Nobody says that about Boris Johnson, do they? He left a stain on our body politic, like Trump. It is not about political debate. It is about integrity and the effective functioning of our system.

**Paul Scully:** What has also happened over the last 30 years since Margaret Thatcher is that we have moved into not just a—

**John Nicolson:** Post-truth politics.

**Paul Scully:** No. I was going to say bear in mind that most of Margaret Thatcher's time in Parliament was not televised. PMQs and parliamentary proceedings were not televised even, so we have gone beyond that now to social media, where you get immediate responses. We have moved to a more presidential-style system where there is a far bigger focus on the Prime Minister and, indeed, leading lights of Government.

Q462 **John Nicolson:** Are you saying that it is good in a way that we can catch politicians like Johnson when he lies?

**Paul Scully:** No, what I am saying is that people will take their judgment not just on the political debate but on the leadership and the leadership qualities of the person that they see day to day, almost minute by minute, on social media. There is a far sharper focus there around the areas that you describe.

Q463 **Jane Stevenson:** I would like to go back to the pandemic and how we shared information with the public. We have heard some witnesses ask for more transparency about the information and the evidence that decisions are being made on the back of. Do you think there was enough evidence provided to people to back up scientific decisions when there is something so complicated? What would you change about how you presented it?





**Paul Scully:** It is difficult, isn't it? The problem is that again this is why it is important that we use the trends that we can see, the approaches that we can see, to distil our communication messages. So much of this is about trying to simplify an incredibly complicated message. Everybody became an epidemiologist; everybody on social media knew everything about immunology all of a sudden, it seemed. I think that people like the Chief Medical Officer not only was a trusted voice but he had a particularly reassuring, simplified way of explaining some quite difficult concepts. Again, there are always more lessons that we can learn, but I think it was a good start.

Q464 **Jane Stevenson:** Did you monitor whether the public wanted more information? Were you trying to engage with—

**Paul Scully:** Not really. That is not really the role of our Department. That would clearly be happening with the Department of Health and Social Care. What we are looking at is countering disinformation and misinformation specifically with that and very much around trends. If there is stuff there that we need to counter, that is what we do. Clearly, the positive side of communications that you describe would be more the Department of Health and Social Care.

Q465 **Jane Stevenson:** Use of the academies was mentioned a while ago. A lot of people do not know they exist or what they are. We heard evidence from them. They engage generally with Departments and with the Civil Service. Do you think the public would have more trust if we opened up the access to academies?

**Cathy Alexander:** The academies are already out there, reaching out to the public, to schools, to a much wider sector of the community rather than just influencing policymakers. They are actively trying to grow their digital and online presence and to do more in that space. They are a very trusted source, expert, independent fellows in their own respected fields who can bring together and harness a huge range of experience and knowledge to present concise and considered views on particular topics. They are definitely already playing a role in that sphere and it is something that they are seeking to do more through with their strategies. We are encouraging and supporting them to do more as part of the funding that we make towards them.

Q466 **Jane Stevenson:** I think that is slightly at odds with some of the evidence we heard and what is in our report. One of our experts had not heard of the academies at one point, which was quite surprising. On that very technical scientific information, when you are asking people to completely shift their lives and make big sacrifices, do you think you would do things differently? Is the Department looking back and seeing what would have been done differently?

**Paul Scully:** I come back to the point that I am not sure that is the role of what we are trying to achieve in the work that we do. It is specifically about countering disinformation and misinformation.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Jane Stevenson:** You can see how much mistrust there was in retrospect and you can perhaps learn lessons of what could have been done.

**Paul Scully:** We will always try to do that, but it will have to be part of that bigger piece of work. As I say, if you are going to effectively shut down major parts of the economy, if you are going to make sure people stay at home, if you are going to make sure that care homes are closed from the outside, that is a hugely significant thing. You do not just do that on a whim. You have to learn every single lesson that you can because pandemics in general are not going to go away. Crikey, let's hope that it is another 100-year event but it might be a one-year event or a 10-year event. We just don't know.

Q467 **Jane Stevenson:** In the role of your Department are you not offering Government advice about how much scientific information should be presented at this sort of—

**Paul Scully:** Not really because, as I say, we are trying to see the misrepresentation. That is specifically what we are trying to do. Otherwise you start to quickly get into overreach. As our specific area, when we are talking about countering misinformation and disinformation, what we tend to look for is trends that are coming back to us through social media rather than what we are putting out ourselves.

Q468 **Jane Stevenson:** Surely the information put out by Government leaves voids where disinformation and misinformation can take hold. If there is not enough trusted, reliable, detailed information, that is where conspiracy theories fire up. That balance I think is within your remit.

**Paul Scully:** We will provide the evidence and the information and what we have seen in some of the— We talked about vaccinations earlier on, for example. We worked with social media companies so there was some work around emblems and banners and the like to say, "This is a trusted source", promoting things there. For us, our cog in this is providing that evidence of trends to then have that wider thinking across Government, in this case mainly the Department of Health and Social Care, the Cabinet Office and No. 10.

Q469 **Jane Stevenson:** Do you worry that Government, because it is the Government, will always to a certain section of society be mistrusted and distrusted? What are the alternatives to Government telling you, "You cannot trust this because—"? I get quite a lot of emails in my inbox about vaccine theories and about many other things, and if I defend a position, it's, "You would say that, you are part of the establishment". Where do we go on that?

**Paul Scully:** That has always been the case to a certain extent. I am not sure that is a majority view but it is a significant minority view. We all recognise as politicians, whether we are campaigning, whether we are talking about constituency issues and whether we are talking about big Government issues, the more third party endorsement of what we are



saying, based on that fact, based on being a trusted voice—if it is a health issue, you want health professionals to be talking about it, not politicians. If you are talking about a business issue, you want business people to be talking about it, not politicians. It is getting that wider trusted voice, and that is what I meant, going right back to the beginning, about the multifaceted approach, with us, with industry, with social media platforms, with academia, and with organisations like the national academies. The more we can get them all working in sync, then those more trusted voices are coming through.

**Q470 Jane Stevenson:** Do you think that when politicians get involved, because of the nature of what politicians do, there is too much emphasis on certainty? There is a big pressure on politicians to just come out and say something 100%, “This is how it is”, whereas with more nuance do you feel that could add? So, “This is the evidence here. The alternatives are this, this and this. On balance, we feel the best decision is this”. It is that presentation of issues to people when it is nuanced and complex. Do you think politicians get in the way of that nuance?

**Paul Scully:** I don’t think they get in the way of it; I just think it becomes incredibly complicated very quickly. Whether you are talking about health disinformation and misinformation or climate change and environmental information, what you do not want to do is stifle debate. There is valid debate around all those things, but there are clearly some facts that are just incontrovertible and you do not want that to be misrepresented, especially in a time of national emergency like the pandemic or, indeed, like an election that, once it is disrupted, two weeks later it does not matter whether you can fix it, it is done. These are complicated issues.

I suppose nuance is always good when you can move these things. I remember having sat on the Petitions Committee years ago when I was first elected here that there was a petition that did the rounds about politicians being up in front of court or something if they lie. We obviously have the Privileges Committee coming tomorrow. There are stages in this. Who is defining misrepresentation, lies and these kinds of things? What is a lie and what is political discourse? In someone’s eyes, a member of the public, they may say, “That doesn’t chime with what I believe; therefore, it is a lie”. Actually, it is not because goalposts move all the time with this. Who knew we were going to be in covid and then have a war on the edges of Europe the last time we had an election, when lots of promises were coming through from all parties? These things are nuanced. They always are.

**Q471 Kevin Brennan:** I was interested, Minister, that you mentioned banners and things on social media. Do you think that social media have a responsibility in relation to information, disinformation, misinformation and so on?

**Paul Scully:** Absolutely. One of the things for the Online Safety Bill at the core—well, no, there are two cores. The core of the Online Safety Bill



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

is to pivot back into child protection, clearly, but the core of the adult safety issues is very much to try to get the social media platforms—bear in mind that the Online Safety Bill is wider than just the social media platforms and we often go just down that narrow middle—to adhere to their own terms and conditions.

Q472 **Kevin Brennan:** Do you think they are acting responsibly?

**Paul Scully:** I think it depends on the platform, but most of the big ones do. Their business model is based on advertising. It is based on attracting broadbrush brands and advertisers, and if they do not, then their business model falls apart quite quickly.

Q473 **Kevin Brennan:** What is your reaction to the fact that this weekend Elon Musk announced on Twitter that any press inquiries will be responded to with a poop emoji? In fact, I was just reading a story here in the *MailOnline* and it put a press inquiry in about a story regarding former President Trump. The *MailOnline* email to the Twitter press office was responded to with a poop emoji.

**Paul Scully:** It is difficult for me to second-guess Elon Musk. I come back to the point that his business model is based on broadbrush advertising. There was a joke doing the rounds at the time: how do you set up a multimillion pound company? You sell it to Elon Musk for 44 billion. I think he has seen the result of tinkering around with the basic premise of a platform that he likes and he is going to have to find very quickly a natural level for this to settle. I don't know with people like Elon Musk where their sense of humour ends and where that sense of propriety starts.

Q474 **Kevin Brennan:** We all have a sense of humour. I suppose the serious point is that the power that comes with something with that level of reach into our lives and something that is very difficult to escape from for many people in their lives comes with some responsibility. Does anything within the Government's policy framework address that level of irresponsibility and unwillingness to engage in normal civil society and democratic debate?

**Paul Scully:** It would not reach into his press responses but, none the less, the wider point of how he is moderating his platform very much does come within the responsibility of the Online Safety Bill.

Q475 **Kevin Brennan:** Would you have been concerned if he had been in charge of Twitter during the pandemic?

**Paul Scully:** I wouldn't want to postulate. We have a pretty good relationship with Twitter. We cannot ask it to censor stuff. It will not just censor stuff because we ask, but we can bring things to it. We have a reasonably mature relationship to bring disinformation and misinformation to it and it has responded.

Q476 **Kevin Brennan:** Have you been in contact with it recently with any



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

inquiries and has it responded with a poop emoji when you have done that?

**Paul Scully:** I am not aware of any.

**Kevin Brennan:** It would be interesting to know going forward whether that is the case.

**Paul Scully:** I was going to say I would write to you but I don't know what I would respond to—

Q477 **Kevin Brennan:** Moving on to other matters, the Government website and its usability, do you use it yourself, Minister, and do you find it useful?

**Paul Scully:** I do.

Q478 **Kevin Brennan:** What do you use it for?

**Paul Scully:** I do use it. I have used it for tax. I have used it for inquiries about other Government Departments, other government areas.

Q479 **Kevin Brennan:** Generally speaking, the evidence that we have heard is that as a consumer website it performs a function for citizens but that it might not be as good for people who want to dig in democratically to policy and how it is made and how it is being developed and what the background history of it is. Do you think that it is good enough at that sort of thing?

**Paul Scully:** It is a massive website. I remember when it was first relaunched into gov.uk and it was quite a simple one entry point into a wide range of areas. Since then it has had 1.4 billion unique views on covid, for example. There are always ways that you can look to try to simplify that range of knowledge on the website because it has to be usable. Because of the range, because of the people who are going to be accessing it, we do need to continually monitor how we can simplify it.

Q480 **Kevin Brennan:** The truth is that I was looking at it earlier on—and I have done this in the past—and it is quite important to the way policy is made and for our democratic process that we understand what has gone before, if you like, and what was there. What is often quite frustrating is it is very difficult because Governments, even of the same party, change direction sometimes in lots of areas. It is quite difficult to dig back down and follow what has happened.

I was listening on the weekend to Henry Dimbleby talking about obesity, for example, a massive, big, cross-governmental issue, a very challenging issue, a wicked issue, if you like, for Governments to try to tackle. It just struck in my memory a report that was published in 2008, I think it was. David King was the Chief Scientific Officer. I was the Minister for children at the time and signed off this report, the Foresight report on obesity. I thought that I would have a look on the Government website to try to find that report from back then because everything said in that



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

report—and now it is 15 years later—was completely true, yet we have still not tackled this problem. It was very difficult to find on the Government website but much easier to find on Google. I found it quite quickly on Google.

Shouldn't the Government website be better at allowing citizens, journalists and others to be able to find these things quite easily?

**Paul Scully:** Yes, from its creation, but it was only created in 2012 in its current form. To start going back prior to that and shoving everything on is a huge task.

**Kevin Brennan:** It is also true even of more recent reports and things when you are looking for them.

**Paul Scully:** Yes, that is fair enough. Going back to the disinformation and misinformation, what gov.uk has to also do is take down articles and reports that have gone out of date. As you say, that particular report is still pertinent today. There are other reports that may be superseded or whatever, so it is—

Q481 **Kevin Brennan:** That is my point, I suppose. Should they take them down or should they just put a banner on them saying, "This is no longer Government policy but this was what the Government thought at the time" rather than taking them down, because then you reach a page and it is almost like erasing history?

**Paul Scully:** It is a good point. I think it would depend. What you ultimately want people to do is to understand what they are seeing in front of them. As long as it is something that is clearly labelled, maybe this is what has taken over its place or something like that—

Q482 **Kevin Brennan:** It has been put to us that the priority is what we discussed at the beginning, the citizen side of it, the consumer side of the website, and not the information side of the website for citizens, the press and so on. Do you think that the Government should perhaps look at that and consider how they resource that side of things?

**Paul Scully:** As I said at the beginning, I think we always need to revolve that website because websites have changed a lot since 2012. I used to design websites back in 2012 and there is no way I could design a modern-day website of that type now because of the way things have developed. You clearly need to look at that. I would say, though, going back to what people perceive of the gov.uk website, it is still perceived as a trusted source. I think that 77% in a YouGov poll believed it was somewhere that they could feel comfortable in going to source things, but it is never going to be perfect, as you rightly say.

Q483 **Kevin Brennan:** Another criticism that we have received during the course of this inquiry has been that while some of the most trusted voices during the pandemic were government scientists—Chris Whitty, for example, had a very high rating of trust—other scientists who were





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

employed by the Government were actively prevented from talking to the press and the media and so on. Therefore, that expertise was not available to try to build trust in government information and so on. Because the Government were so concerned with controlling the message, if you like, they were worried that a scientist might say something inconveniently true but offside from what the Government's message was. Is that a criticism that you recognise and are concerned about?

**Paul Scully:** It is not something that I was particularly involved in so I cannot recognise or not either way. I cannot particularly take a view on whether that happened or not.

I would say that when you are seeking advice as a politician, and I am sure the Prime Minister, you need to take that advice, distil it and then communicate it yourself because you are the one taking the decisions rather than the scientists. It needs to be scientifically led in covid, as it was, but ultimately it is the Government that are taking those decisions. Who you are putting up to front those communications would be who you believe can distil those ideas down to simple messages that people can trust, people can adhere to and people can, first of all, understand.

Q484 **Kevin Brennan:** Just on one other thing, I am right in saying, aren't I, that until recently you had ministerial responsibility for the forthcoming gambling White Paper?

**Paul Scully:** Yes.

**Kevin Brennan:** That is correct. I know that you do not have ministerial responsibility for it now; that is correct as well, isn't it?

**Paul Scully:** Yes.

Q485 **Kevin Brennan:** The Committee has opened its own inquiry and was rather hoping that that would be an inquiry that would take place and we would be taking evidence with the White Paper in front of us so that rather than asking what should be in it, we could ask witnesses, "What do you think about what is in it?" and perhaps perform a useful function as a Committee in doing so. It has been delayed yet again. I know it was anticipated that it would be out around now, and that was the last of a number of different deadlines that have been missed. I know there has been another rearranging of the deckchairs in Government, but can you shed any light on how ready it was potentially for publication when you were the Minister? Would you describe it at that point as being over ready, for example?

**Paul Scully:** I would say so but clearly with a new Secretary of State it is right that she takes a bit of time to make sure she is comfortable. It is going out in her name with the Government so it is right that she has done that. I know that she has engaged with key stakeholders from both sides, essentially—there are many sides—of the debate around tackling





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

gambling harms, and I fully expect to see it soon. Having spoken to her about it, I know that she gets the need for an early publication.

Q486 **Kevin Brennan:** Had it reached the stage of a write-round when you were in charge?

**Paul Scully:** No.

Q487 **Clive Efford:** Thanks for coming to give evidence today. In what way has the counter disinformation unit changed its approach in the light of covid?

**Paul Scully:** Well, it was not set up—when was it set up? It was before my time or it was around that time, wasn't it?

**Talitha Rowland:** It had started before covid and it was a more limited range of circumstances, so around elections primarily, but covid was the first period where it was stood up for a sustained period of time.

We have learned lots of lessons. One of the biggest things that happened during that period was an evolution of the relationships with the platforms and, as the Minister said, understanding that there is quite a lot that platforms can do to ensure that trusted information is put out and to counter some of those perhaps misleading messages. There was a huge amount of work done on the authoritative information. There was the banners that the Minister mentioned, and things like when there was a lot of 5G disinformation ensuring that if you searched for 5G the first results that came up were a link to the gov.uk page and so on. There was a lot on understanding and evolving that relationship with platforms and what they can do in this space and a lot on understanding narratives and trends and, going back to previous questions, ensuring that they were filtered to the right places of government, so if we identify a particular narrative that is gaining traction in a particular area, ensuring that is communicated to communicators who can then build that into their messaging, look at the audiences and so on. We are looking at what is happening in the information environment and we are using that and we are feeding that information and evidence through to what government do in other places.

Q488 **Clive Efford:** Did Government Departments work effectively in passing out information and rebutting false information? Did the Department find that rebutting false information was more successful than promoting factual information or vice versa? How did its approach on those issues change during covid?

**Talitha Rowland:** Both are important and we would not say one was more influential than the other. The promotion of authoritative information is very important and, as I say, social media—

**Clive Efford:** Did it find that more successful than rebuttal?

**Talitha Rowland:** I think it only works as a holistic strategy.

Q489 **Clive Efford:** At any stage in the work of the CDU did the Government



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

themselves become a problem that it had to deal with?

**Paul Scully:** In what way?

**Clive Efford:** For instance, if the Government are issuing advice to the public and then the Prime Minister goes around a hospital shaking hands with everyone when that is clearly counter to the advice that is being given, do you then have to go and counter the image that the Government are portraying in the Prime Minister of all people doing that?

**Paul Scully:** No, that is not what the CDU does. What it does is it looks at trends, as I say. It is not going to take every specific example and drill down to each example. What it is looking for is whether there is a surge of opinion about vaccine disinformation or a surge of opinion about these sorts of things.

Q490 **Clive Efford:** Wouldn't behaviour like that have an impact on public opinion?

**Paul Scully:** I do not know if there is anything about that specifically that came out. I would be surprised. No, I don't think that was what happened in the CDU.

Q491 **Clive Efford:** Following on from what my colleague John Nicolson was asking earlier on, partygate had a big impact on public opinion, particularly trust in the messages that the Government were putting out. Did the CDU have a strategy for countering the impact of that behaviour and that row on public attitudes and public behaviour that might be detrimental to the campaign against covid?

**Paul Scully:** I was not Minister at the time so I am not entirely sure what the strategy was—

**Clive Efford:** Yes, but you are here now answering questions.

**Paul Scully:** No, absolutely, so I am not sure specifically that there is a strategy around that. I come back to the point, as I was saying to John, that the row around partygate quickly became a very potent but political debate. Bear in mind that what Government are not doing with the CDU is that it is not taking over the role of broadcast media and national media, of all these other voices in the debate that have for years and years successfully brought all these debates and arguments to the fore and to the public. There are journalists doing amazing work. The CDU is not some big, shady intelligence unit. It is trying to find trends that it can then say, "This is happening. What do you want to do about it?"

Q492 **Clive Efford:** That is a neat segue into my next question. Big Brother Watch has described the CDU as "one of the most opaque units in government outside of the security services". It flagged the deletion of UK citizens' activity on social media, including some that contained no factual inaccuracies but were simply critical of Government policy, and this includes posts from serving Labour and Conservative MPs as well as



academics and journalists. What is your comment on that?

**Paul Scully:** The CDU does not track individuals, it tracks trends, as I say. It does not drill down into individuals and it would not be the CDU that deletes anything. It would be the social media platforms themselves that would do that. Talitha, is there anything else you can add to that?

**Talitha Rowland:** I don't think that we would recognise that characterisation. As the Minister says, it is about trends and narratives. We do not monitor individuals. As a small part of the CDU's function, if it encounters harmful content that breaches platforms' terms and conditions or may breach them, it will alert platforms to that to take their decision. That is a very small part of the CDU's work and in no circumstances ever would any content from elected politicians, journalists and so on be referred to—

Q493 **Clive Efford:** Just to be clear, that just did not happen? As a result of the activity of the CDU, elected representatives and Members of Parliament from both major parties did not have any of their posts taken down?

**Paul Scully:** It is not something I am aware of at all.

Q494 **Clive Efford:** Okay. This is the last question. Is it appropriate for civil servants to be monitoring people's social media accounts?

**Paul Scully:** I come back to the point that it does not monitor individual social media accounts. It looks at trends. If individuals pop up in that, it is because it is part of a trend or it is something that has been referred, it is an article that is being shared and all these kinds of things. The CDU does not monitor individuals. It is not espionage. It is a trend measurement tool to tackle misinformation and disinformation.

Q495 **Clive Efford:** You described earlier on the grey area or that there is no hard line between what is discourse and what is dealing with facts, but how does the CDU go about deciding what is a political argument and what is actual facts that the Government need to get out? What stops the CDU being biased in favour of political arguments that the Government politically want to get out rather than factual evidence?

**Paul Scully:** This is why we are phrasing it carefully in the Online Safety Bill and other things when we talk about health information and environmental disinformation. It would be the easiest thing in the world to put something about climate change denial, for example, on the face of the Bill, which some people have asked us to do. Our approach is to understand that there is always going to be discourse and there is always going to be debate around the environmental issues and around health issues. If you are putting out something that is patently false—the 5G stuff, installing computer chips and 5G networks into people's arms through the covid vaccinations, for example, that was doing the rounds a little while ago—that is clearly something we have to tackle. It is hardly surprising that any number of minority groups are not vaccinating if that is the proliferation of what they hear through their channels. That is just



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

factually incorrect and we need to tackle that, but that is very different from talking about the merits of lockdown or something like that.

- Q496 **Clive Efford:** Finally, you just inspired this next question. You talked about climate change there. Have we reached the point where it is misinformation to deny that human activity is the cause of climate change? Should we be moving the goalposts?

**Paul Scully:** I am not really talking about that. I am talking about the fact that there is still lots you can talk about on climate. I am not talking about denial. You can talk about how you can tackle this, the nuance around it, but before you get into the black and white incorrect information there is plenty of scope for debate around that. I don't think that Government should be drilling down and excluding that debate.

- Q497 **Chair:** I am glad you said that. We allow the Flat Earth Society to exist so—

**Paul Scully:** I think they do their own job, don't they, to tackle disinformation?

**Chair:** Indeed so, but there is a limit, a dangerous tendency to say, "We have now proved that that is wrong so, therefore, we are going to cancel it," rather than, "We are going to challenge it".

**Paul Scully:** Yes, for sure. I think if it is harmful disinformation or misinformation, then that is something that we need to look at tackling. There is always going to be misinformation on social media platforms, there is always going to be disinformation, but a lot of it is comparatively irrelevant and comparatively harmful.

- Q498 **Giles Watling:** I will give the Minister's vocal chords a break for a moment. Talitha, this one is for you. In a previous incarnation this Committee went to George Washington University and we were talking about misinformation, disinformation and so on, part of your role in the counter disinformation unit. One of the nuggets I brought away from that—and you all three said when you are looking for trusted voices you look at the BBC, academics and other news sources, and then you take your reasoning from that—is that we learnt that one of the most trusted voices that people have is somebody they respect and that within a certain group, particularly online, you might find a respected voice within that. We also learnt that bad foreign actors would utilise this and would target disinformation at those respected voices, which is incredibly powerful I should imagine. Have you found evidence of that?

**Talitha Rowland:** Yes. There was some research that was published six months ago that I think showed a Russian troll farm particularly targeting politicians and others in the comments sections and various things like that. Yes, I think that is a known disinformation target. We would agree with you on trusted voices and those looking for different people. That is why it is important that we understand who communities look to for trusted voices. Yes, we would recognise Russian and other hostile actors'



attempts to do that, and that is part of what the foreign interference offence in the Online Safety Bill is designed to tackle.

Q499 **Giles Watling:** To drill down a bit further, what precisely is the action that is going to be taken on that particular issue?

**Talitha Rowland:** There is a huge range of activities that hostile states might use and the offence is drafted to try to capture the range of those. Platforms will have to put in place proactive systems and processes to prevent or minimise the chances of that material on their platform. That will look different depending on what the activity is, but say it is generated by trolls or bots, that might involve measures such as making it slightly more difficult to create fake accounts at scale. It will look different depending on the activity. Obviously, Ofcom will set out its codes, but it is very much designed to capture the whole range of disinformation and information operations techniques, including that one.

Q500 **Giles Watling:** Does the CDU have confidence that these measures will be effective?

**Talitha Rowland:** It is an important part of the jigsaw. It comes back to what the Minister said at the start. I don't think that any one system or strategy or approach is going to solve this, but it is an important part of the jigsaw puzzle, yes.

Q501 **Giles Watling:** Thank you. Moving on, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology reported that rumours and false news travelled faster and reached more people than the truth, which I find extraordinary. It studied 126,000 stories that were spread on Twitter over 11 years and found that it took true stories around six times longer to reach 1,500 people than false ones. This is the fact that really gets to me. The true stories were rarely shared beyond 1,000 people, but the most popular false news stories would reach up to 100,000. The most common subject matter was fake political news. This is incredibly damaging, is it not? This is to the Minister. Do the Government have the capacity to react fast enough to this, particularly when we are talking about fake political news?

**Paul Scully:** Probably not in many ways. I think that is why—one of the reasons; there are many reasons—we will curtail our activities to harmful disinformation, to the disruption of elections rather than political discourse. How do you define fake political news? Is it me just having a go at you and saying something about—well, I would not say that, no. Saying something about a political opponent, for example, for show, for those kinds of things, which people do, and then that takes on a life of its own. That is very different from just telling an outright lie to cast aspersions on someone's character to then get someone to vote a different way.

Fake political news has been a thing. It becomes more of a thing on social media because of the speed and people do share those things because it is sensationalised and people like sensationalised news. That has always been the case.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q502 **Giles Watling:** Therefore, of course, what you are saying fundamentally is that the truth is more boring?

**Paul Scully:** Yes, effectively, which is why we need to as Government make sure that we curtail our activities to tackling harmful activities rather than that discourse, whether it is boring or not.

Q503 **Giles Watling:** Yes, but is it not the case that the Government should be saying, "This is the truth," again and again, just keep the message going, otherwise is it not going to get traction?

**Paul Scully:** Absolutely, which is the Government's core duty whether we have a counter disinformation unit or not. The whole root of good Government is explaining what you are doing, explaining it well and explaining why you are doing things. It comes back to what John was saying about Mrs Thatcher at the beginning. Even if you do not agree with the Government of the day, whatever that Government are, if you are explaining what you are doing and explaining why you are doing it and why you believe it is in the best interests of people, hopefully enough people think you have the integrity and the approach that is acceptable for the country at that time and they will vote for you. It is good governance rather than just worrying about voting. It is good governance.

Q504 **Giles Watling:** What you are saying fundamentally, going back to covid, is that the daily covid briefings were doing just that, in your view?

**Paul Scully:** Yes, exactly, by having a range of opinions there. You have the Health Secretary when you are talking about health, the Education Secretary when you are talking about what is happening with the schools. It was interesting. If you cast your mind back to the questions that some of the journalists were asking at the time, inevitably, from what I was seeing outside looking in, the people asking the questions were almost always political journalists. They were not the education journalist tackling the Education Secretary or the health journalist tackling that. Why? Because it is the sensationalised approach to get the political angle on something. That is exacerbated many times on social media.

Q505 **Giles Watling:** I will move on to the mixed subject of TikTok. We know that it has been banned by the Government for senior Ministers to use from 10 March, I believe, because of its direct connections with the Chinese state. In 2022, 67% of young people were using TikTok. Two years earlier it was only 5%. These things move incredibly fast, at lightning speed. How do the Government keep up with these trends and engage appropriately? How do they possibly do that?

**Paul Scully:** I come back to the Online Safety Bill. We are looking to make sure that we can set a benchmark there, a world-leading benchmark. The EU, for example, has come up with its approach to this. It tends to be more prescriptive than the one that we are approaching, which is non-technology specific. It is proportionate, it moves on, because what I have always said is that I do not want it to be out of date





## HOUSE OF COMMONS

by the time it gets Royal Assent. It has to have that flexibility. Other countries are looking at what we are doing to see if they can come up with something similar to how we land ours.

That is important not just because it is great to be first mover or comparatively first mover as the UK, it means that these big platforms—and I come back to the point that the Online Safety Bill does not just cover social media platforms, it covers any user-generated content—do not have to have 120 different versions for 120 different regulations around the world. They can have one, which is for the betterment of everybody, frankly.

We have to get it right, and TikTok, you are right, was not even in existence by the time we first came up with the Online Safety Bill. I will let you judge whether the Online Safety Bill is slow or this is fast.

Q506 **Giles Watling:** Will your Department use TikTok to post, despite the ban?

**Paul Scully:** I don't know if the Department has. I have never posted. I have a TikTok account; I have never used it. It is certainly not on any Government phones that I have.

Q507 **Giles Watling:** How does your Department expect to reach young people who are using this if it is not posting it on there?

**Paul Scully:** I genuinely do not know if we have one or not. If we do, it clearly needs to be on a standalone unit, phone.

Q508 **Chair:** So the Government will ban civil servants from having TikTok on Government phones but will still use TikTok?

**Paul Scully:** I am just saying that I genuinely do not know. I doubt it but I do not want to give you incorrect information. That is all I am saying. I genuinely don't know what government channels there are on TikTok because I have not looked.

**Giles Watling:** Sorry, Chair, my reasoning was that I wanted to know how they were going to reach the people who are using TikTok.

Q509 **Chair:** Absolutely. It is an important point. This is an important platform that millions of people use and increasingly, we are told, use it as an important source of news for perfectly good reasons. The Government are wary of security concerns, which I get, but it is a genuine dilemma that needs to be resolved. If you are saying that this is an unsafe platform but we are still going to use it because millions of our citizens are using it, then that is a decision to be made.

**Paul Scully:** The counter disinformation unit does engage with TikTok itself, but in terms of Government platforms, you are right, one of the biggest inquiries apparently on TikTok is small business support and how to set up businesses and those kinds of things. I remember from when I was Minister for small business that was something that came through. I



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

cannot give you chapter and verse about how the Government uses TikTok, if it does, but we certainly engage with it.

**Chair:** It would be useful if, perhaps, when the Government have a policy, you could write to the Committee saying what you have decided on that because it is a very live and important issue.

**Paul Scully:** Yes.

Q510 **Julie Elliott:** Apologies for being late today and so not hearing the start of your evidence. Minister, what impact will removing “legal but harmful” provisions in the Online Safety Bill have on tackling disinformation once the Bill becomes law, bearing in mind you have just said to my colleague Giles Watling that tackling harmful things is the important thing?

**Paul Scully:** Harmful disinformation, and there are still measures within the Bill, like making sure that foreign disruption is tackled in elections and the like. Then our work will continue and tackle disinformation. That is important. On the wider view of legal but harmful, I have spoken a little bit while you were here and before you were here about the fact that what we do not want to do is to go beyond that into valid political discourse. That I believe would be stifled if we had kept the legal but harmful.

Q511 **Julie Elliott:** It was in the original draft legislation, so I am very interested to know why the Government decided that it was good enough to be in the original draft legislation but then is not. I did not see any evidence that came forward saying that it would be a retrograde step, so what evidence did you take into account as Government Ministers to remove it? I am happy if civil servants want to answer if you are not aware.

**Paul Scully:** We still have the foreign interference offence within the Bill, which tackles disruption of elections, troll farms and these kinds of areas. None the less, it is something that, I suppose, is a political and philosophical divide. We believe in protecting freedom of speech and freedom of expression, so that was the approach we took with the Bill, which is quite a fundamental—

**Julie Elliott:** Even if it puts people at risk?

**Paul Scully:** We have to have the approach that freedom of speech does not mean freedom to just offend everybody, but offence is something that is difficult to define. We have put the user empowerment processes, the so-called triple shield, in place so that people can build their own shields to protect themselves from what they might consider abusive or harmful content while protecting the freedom of speech and freedom of expression for others. If it is illegal, it has to go; if it is against the terms and conditions of that organisation, the social media platform or whatever, of which you would hope—not necessarily but you would hope—disinformation, misinformation and misrepresentation would be within those terms and conditions; and, failing that, the user



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

empowerment filters to be able to say that you do not want to see particular types of content as a safety net, as a last resort, are three pretty powerful ways of protecting individuals.

Q512 **Julie Elliott:** Do you personally feel comfortable with that change?

**Paul Scully:** Yes.

Q513 **Julie Elliott:** Ms Rowland, you looked very quizzical when I said were any of the civil servants involved in this. Do you know what the reason was that the legal but harmful part was removed? You were in the Department I think at the time.

**Talitha Rowland:** I don't really have much to say, sorry. I did not intend to look quizzical. As the Minister says, disinformation and misinformation are lots of different things and the Bill approaches it in different ways. Where it is illegal, absolutely—

Q514 **Julie Elliott:** Were discussions taking place on why it was removed? Did that happen?

**Talitha Rowland:** Yes, of course, there are discussions that take place before any decision is taken, but yes, as the Minister says.

Q515 **Julie Elliott:** Minister, on what basis would you judge how well the online safety legislation is working?

**Paul Scully:** It is not in place yet.

**Julie Elliott:** No, when it is in place on what basis will you judge it?

**Paul Scully:** Forgive me, yes.

**Julie Elliott:** I am not asking you to imagine what is going to happen.

**Paul Scully:** Sorry, yes.

**Julie Elliott:** Even I would not ask you that.

**Paul Scully:** We work with Ofcom regularly and we would expect Ofcom to be engaging with us on how often it is engaging with the platforms to see how many interventions they have had to make. Clearly, and I have said this on the Floor of the House and I will say it again, as much as this is as flexible and as proportionate and as technology unspecific as possible, it is something that you are always going to need to come back for the same reasons that we were talking about with TikTok. TikTok was not even in existence at that time. AI and large language models like ChatGPT are proliferating so we need to be on top of it.

Q516 **Julie Elliott:** In saying that, will the Government look again at powers to tackle disinformation if they find that the legislation does not bring about the change that they hope it will?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Paul Scully:** We want to make sure that we have the most progressive, powerful, effective legislation in the world, so we will inevitably have to come back to make sure that is the case.

Q517 **Julie Elliott:** Is there a role in government for Government to help the public to find trusted information?

**Paul Scully:** Yes. We have a media literacy strategy that we launched back in 2021. We are funding action plans within that, so establishing the media literacy taskforce. It is 17 cross-sector experts in that to develop ways of extending our reach in exactly that area. Again, before you arrived we also talked about the multifaceted approach that we need to have to make sure that it is not just us doing this. This is not Government taking the role of parents, taking the role of the platforms, taking the role of academia. We need to all work together.

Q518 **Julie Elliott:** Your submission referred to "Climate Change Explained", which summarises the latest science and signposts readers to other independent sources such as the Royal Society. What other explainers are there and how successful have they been?

**Cathy Alexander:** I can speak about the national academies. They all do a range of outreach work. Some of that outreach work is very much focused on encouraging participation in their sectors and seeking to bring the young people into those sectors. They do also promote and share information about topical issues, be it climate change or covid, where they will use their body of fellows to bring together and produce useful pieces of advice. Increasingly, they are looking to target more of that at the general public as well as the expert audience so that they can publish these summaries or useful sources of information.

Q519 **Julie Elliott:** Is there consideration being given to increasing signposting to trusted voices on other issues, not just climate change? Are the Government looking to do that or not?

**Paul Scully:** I think you have to in general. In my three years of being in four different Departments now, I always have three different buckets of how I can work. What can I do to proactively make sure the Government genuinely help people? I tend to be a Reaganite; the nine most feared words in the English language are: "I'm from the Government and I'm here to help". Then it goes to the second bit: how as Government can I do things to back out of people's lives? The third bit is important: how we convene and how we signpost. There is lots of amazing work being done on all this, but there is so much information around. How do we signpost people to the trusted voices, to the right voices?

Q520 **Julie Elliott:** I suppose the counter to that is: do you have any concerns that the Government promoting specific voices may unintentionally reduce the credibility with the public of those voices? Have you considered that?



**Paul Scully:** Yes. Again, we were talking a little earlier about the fact that third party endorsement is always good, so it should almost come the other way round. If the Government have a message and some trusted expert says, "I have this read this. That is sensible. I am not sure about that bit of it, but I agree with that bit", that in itself, that organic reach, is far more powerful to get that trusted voice across to more people. You are right and we are very aware that the more we have a trusted voice, it might be a career-limiting approach for them.

Q521 **Chair:** Can I pull together a couple of the threads that have emerged and explore them a bit more, particularly on the national academies? They are clearly very big players inside Whitehall and, if you like, inside establishment circles. It has struck us all that out there nobody has heard of them and nobody knows what they do, and that particularly in the pandemic there was a criticism that they should have had a much more prominent role. Is there any assessment going on inside government of the usefulness of the national academies and how they could be made more useful in countering disinformation and misinformation?

**Cathy Alexander:** First, with the national academies, obviously they are independent organisations. They receive Government funding but they are completely independent. It is for them through their fellows and through their council of fellows to determine their priorities and the particular topics and issues that they focus on.

On the funding that they receive from Government, a significant proportion of that goes to support their research, the pure research and development that they work on, to fund that excellence in academia. That in and of itself then brings value into the economy.

In terms of evaluation of what they do, through the controls that we have with the academies—with each academy we have a funding agreement and delivery plans and we monitor against that—we have ways in which we can see and track how they are performing. We do recognise, though, that increasing our ability to monitor and evaluate the impact of some of their work is an area where we are looking to do more and to strengthen more over the coming couple of years.

Q522 **Chair:** Therefore, I suppose the question for Government is: are you going to start monitoring how effective they are at influencing public debate in the direction of truth rather than misinformation? Is that going to be a criterion for you?

**Cathy Alexander:** Whether we would have that as an exact criterion is quite a specific one, and what we are intending to do is to work with them to understand and evaluate and work out what the best measures are to look at their impact in the round. Their value is, yes, of course, in being very trusted voices and being able to promote information, but it is also in the research they do and the benefit that that brings to society as a whole. There would be a range of measures that we would be looking to work with them on to agree which are the best ones to evaluate.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Q523 Chair:** In a sense, the national academies here I think are a subset of something else that has struck me in the course of this morning, which is that there are massive resources available to the state in terms of trusted voices and people who know what they are talking about and can communicate it. We had a slight discussion about this but only in the context of the height of the pandemic, but moving to now, when we are in relative peacetime in these debates, the fact that government scientists are not allowed ever to go out and do interviews seems to the Committee a potential waste of a massive resource. I get the point that in times of emergency you want to keep people on message so it has to be filtered through and all that, but in day-to-day discourse about something like climate change there are some great experts who we are frustratingly keeping away from talking to citizens in general. That seems to be a huge wasted opportunity. What is your response to that?

**Paul Scully:** It is a good point. I think anybody who can communicate that clear, positive, simple message should be because we have a difficult enough job to get across some complicated things across Government. Yes, it is a good point.

**Q524 Chair:** Okay. I hope that that can be taken away and considered. I have a final thought. Again, as described, the work of the CDU is all about trends and analysis of what is coming in. What seems to be lacking is any form of rapid rebuttal unit, which needs to be a million times more rapid than when they were invented by politicians in the 1990s because of social media and the point that Giles Watling was making. Am I right that you do not see that as part of the CDU's work to be a rapid rebuttal unit?

**Paul Scully:** I just don't think you could resource it. I have been to the Middle East and I have seen two rapid rebuttal units about extremism, and boy, was that a real eye-opening experience when you look at some of the extremism that they were tackling and rebutting, setting out the true meaning of the Koran that was being abused by some of the extremists. With the proliferation of social media that we have and the number of issues that we are trying to tackle, first, we would not be able to resource it; secondly, you are getting down to the individual tracking that we have been talking about that we are just not doing. I would understand why Big Brother Watch and other organisations would then have a problem about us tracking individuals for fear of needing to rebut. It quickly goes down a difficult slope, I think, if you do that route.

**Chair:** So there is no ambition to do that, taking the reasons about intrusion?

**Paul Scully:** No, but each Government Department has a comms department and for rebuttal, in terms of traditional comms rather than disinformation units and the like, it can take those trends and rebut them in that way.

**Talitha Rowland:** There are examples, when trends or worrying things are identified, of liaising with those Departments, which are able to





quickly respond. To give an example, during covid there were some fake emails about schools being able to get omicron tests and so on. As soon as that was identified as something that was starting to permeate through the information environment that was passed on to Government communicators, who issued a rapid rebuttal. That close working is not done in the CDU, but that evidence base and that quick passing on to the relevant responsible Department is a big part of our work.

**Paul Scully:** Of course, in those rebuttals it would not just be, "Oh, right, let's have a broadbrush message". If you can get that out to headteachers and to education influencers in that situation, then that is a targeted rebuttal, which is probably more effective as well.

Q525 **Giles Watling:** We have established that this is a very fast-moving scenario. We have established how TikTok grew from nothing and is suddenly everywhere. I just want to know how you regard the Online Safety Bill. Is it a kind of "that's it" moment, we have dealt with it, or do you regard it just as a stepping stone to future legislation, that we must keep on top of it all the way along?

**Paul Scully:** I think you always need to come back to it but, technological changes notwithstanding, I would not want to necessarily have wholesale changes that expand its reach. We probably have the balance right between freedom of speech and, in particular, child protection but also a level of adult protection; we just need to make sure that it keeps up with technological advances. I think it is a good balance at the moment.

Q526 **Giles Watling:** You said that you wanted to achieve the best online safety in the world earlier in this session.

**Paul Scully:** Yes.

**Giles Watling:** So that is the answer then? This is the big stone that you put in place and we just build from there?

**Paul Scully:** Yes. This is something that we should have done probably 15 or 20 years ago and we are putting the genie back in the bottle, which is why it is so complicated.

**Chair:** To our three witnesses this morning, thank you very much for coming. That concludes the session.