



# Communications and Digital Committee

## Corrected oral evidence: The future of news: impartiality, trust and technology

Tuesday 5 March 2024

2.35 pm

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Members present: Baroness Stowell of Beeston (The Chair); Lord Dunlop; Lord Hall of Birkenhead; Baroness Harding of Winscombe; Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill; Lord Kamall; Lord Knight of Weymouth; The Lord Bishop of Leeds; Lord McNally.

Evidence Session No. 5

Heard in Public

Questions 55 - 63

### Witnesses

**I:** Deborah Turness, Chief Executive Officer, News and Current Affairs, BBC; Jonathan Munro, Director of Journalism, BBC; Rhodri Talfan Davies, Director, Nations, BBC.

### USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on [www.parliamentlive.tv](http://www.parliamentlive.tv).

## Examination of witnesses

Deborah Turness, Jonathan Munro and Rhodri Talfan Davies.

Q55 **The Chair:** This is the Communications and Digital Select Committee. We are continuing our inquiry into the future of news. We have two panels of witnesses today. We have the BBC first and later we will have the commercial PSBs.

Let me start by asking the witnesses to introduce themselves by saying their name and the position they hold at the BBC. Ms Turness, you hold the most senior position, so I will ask you first.

**Deborah Turness:** I am the CEO of BBC News.

**Rhodri Talfan Davies:** I am the director of nations in the BBC, which covers the operation outside London.

**Jonathan Munro:** I am the deputy CEO and the corporation's director of journalism.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. We will cover four areas of questions this afternoon. We will start in a moment with the role of BBC News, how it is changing and what impact those changes or otherwise might be having on audiences; we will come on to spending and investment decisions and how they relate to priorities; we will then come on to impartiality; and we will finish with questions about future plans and the impact of technology on those.

As you will understand, we have quite a lot of ground to cover. If you are able to be concise and to the point in your answers, that would be truly welcomed by us. I am going to hand over straightaway to Lord Kamall, who is going to kick us off.

Q56 **Lord Kamall:** Thank you very much for coming before us today. Let me start with a couple of declarations of interest. I have worked with a couple of think tanks that have written on the BBC, and the BBC's head of public affairs is a former landlord of mine. I am not going to ask him to tell you whether I was a good tenant.

From your perspective, what counts as news today? We often hear the phrase, "The BBC is unique". When the BBC says it is unique, what does it provide that others do not?

**Jonathan Munro:** First of all, what is news today? The definition of news is one of those exam questions to which no one has written the definitive answer. I quite like the phrase that news is the unexpected. With the unexpected goes the analysis of whatever has happened in the world. News is a mixture of facts, impact and analysis. What has happened in the world? What does it mean to people? Why has it happened? Those are the three major questions. It comes in all shapes and sizes.

News varies across the BBC. What we do for the Radio 1 audience, who have news summaries through "Newsbeat" but listen to the station for other reasons, differs from what we do for the Radio 4 audience, who are

probably quite heavily into news stories. The level of knowledge that is assumed needs to be slightly different.

They all need public purpose journalism. They all need to know what is going on in the Middle East and in Syria, what is happening in Rochdale or what is happening with contemporary political and social stories. All those things are in the mix. Our job is to make choices that serve the audience. They all pay for us and they are all entitled to that level of service.

**Deborah Turness:** News is information that allows people to better understand the world around them and better live their lives. It is context and analysis, but it also needs to be used and useful. The BBC's public purposes mean that we are here to make sure that every single person in the United Kingdom finds the BBC and our news coverage and information usable, useful and helpful, so it becomes a daily habit.

**Lord Kamall:** Is that unique to the BBC? Is that one element of the BBC's uniqueness?

**Deborah Turness:** Having worked outside the BBC for most of my career, both here and in the United States and around the world, what is unique about the BBC is the obligation to reach all audiences with information and news that is useful to them. We cannot cherry-pick an audience and say, "That's commercially viable" or, "That's going to grow here because our particular sponsors consider it a priority".

Our job is to work for the British public. We are paid for by everybody and we must be for everybody. That is a unique and sacred responsibility that we all carry at BBC News. We all work very hard, I hope you will find, to deliver on that. We take very seriously any shortcomings or where we find we are not serving people as well as we should.

**Rhodri Talfan Davies:** From a UK perspective, the other aspect that is unique is the extent of our commitment to reflecting local communities and devolved nations right across the UK in television, radio and online. We are the only media organisation that has that footprint of about 2,000 journalists spread across about 58 bases who are delivering across all platforms.

This goes to what Deborah was talking about. The universal commitment to ensuring that every community feels like it is getting value from the BBC's journalism underpins the trust that audiences have in us.

**Lord Kamall:** Can I pick up on that? One of our witnesses spoke about how his polling suggested—let us put it that way—that the BBC was losing some audiences, particularly leave-voting working-class areas outside London. They were more attracted by, say, GB News or other channels. How do you respond to that criticism? Is that unfair? Is it true that you have some work to do? How do you feel about that? That is to Rhodri.

**The Chair:** It might be worth putting it to the director of BBC News in the first instance. We can start with the boss and work our way down, if we need to.

**Lord Kamall:** I will let my Chair direct me.

**Deborah Turness:** Then I will take the question. You are pointing to the broad issue of trust and the need for the BBC to be trusted by all its audiences. In a world of disinformation, deepfakes and distortion, it is even harder to earn and keep the trust of our audiences. We are the most trusted news provider in the UK and around the world, but our collective job is to keep it that way and to grow trust in a world where that is very hard to do.

Perhaps it would be useful to share some of the work we have done. We have listened to our audiences across the world and across the UK. We have had some in-depth conversations with them specifically about how we can grow and build trust, about what a decade of social media, distorted news and fake news has done to them and their ability to trust, and about what is needed for them to trust us.

They were very clear. The audiences spoke with one voice across many countries, including the UK. What they need from us is clarity. In a world of chaos, they come to the BBC to find clarity. They need us to continue to uncover the truth and seek out wrongdoing. That is our courageous journalism. They really value that. They see that as an added-value purpose within the BBC's mission and our public purposes.

They also seek fairness and respect. That is where we come to the piece you are talking about, which is about fairness. The BBC must hold up and reflect society. We are here to report, not to judge. We must reflect fairly a cross-section of views and the broadest aperture of opinion among our audience.

The fifth thing they are looking for is transparency. Today's audience do not believe without evidence. They expect us to show and share the work we do to make sure that our journalism is of the highest quality. At the BBC, we are putting more effort, innovation and investment into verifying, double-checking, fact checking and sourcing user-generated content. We have pooled all the people together who do that and created BBC Verify. That is an effort to say to people, "We're pulling back the curtain on what we do. We're going to be much more transparent around our journalism so you can understand where it comes from".

In future, that approach will begin to permeate across all our journalism because transparency builds trust. If you know how it is made, you can trust what it says. We really understand that trust is earned. By doing all those things that the audience have asked us to do, we are starting to build a path to trust in this very challenging environment.

**Lord Kamall:** One of the reasons that I wanted to turn to Rhodri was that you said your role was about audiences outside London and reaching out to communities. How would you respond to that criticism?

**Rhodri Talfan Davies:** There are challenges in reaching working-class audiences, but there are challenges in reaching all audiences. We often talk internally about the challenge of what is called news avoidance. Given the current agenda, the international agenda, there are some audiences who choose to turn away and consume other things.

There are clearly challenges, but I would keep them in perspective. The BBC, by a country mile, reaches the biggest working-class audience in the UK every week. If you look at the regional and local services that I am responsible for, there are about 18 million people coming into those 15 regional programmes every week. We have the number one UK news programme on any channel.

Yes, there are challenges. Deborah has alluded to some of the work we are doing on how we extend and broaden the agenda. The BBC's position, even with working-class audiences, still remains incredibly strong.

**Lord Kamall:** It is interesting because you have all said that you are trusted more than other sources. We understand that. How do you avoid being complacent about that? When you are criticised, how can you address the criticism, rather than saying, "That's all very well, but we're still trusted more than other news sources"?

**Jonathan Munro:** Complaints and feedback are really important and valued by us. We have seen it recently on the war in the Middle East, for example. We have had a lot incoming from both sides of the divide. That divide goes back to the beginning of faith and religion in this world. It has prompted an enormous amount of feedback. Some of it is lobbying, but that does not mean they are wrong.

We assess literally every complaint that comes to the BBC. We have formal processes for those, all of which are on the record and available in our annual report, which lists the nature of the complaints that have been made. They are all taken seriously. I and others feed those conclusions back into the editorial process. We have a whole department called editorial policy, which helps guide us through those tricky areas. We live in a world where we are covering polarising issues very frequently. We see a divide in the audience.

To Rhodri's point, we are working really hard to ensure that everyone gets news that they trust from the BBC. There has been some discussion already this afternoon about working-class audiences. Some 49% of the audience of "BBC Breakfast" are what we would define as working class. That is a programme made in Greater Manchester. Its agenda is very different from some of the Radio 4 programmes that we make for higher news consumers, for example.

It also has what we call unique reach in big numbers. Those are people who come to the BBC only for that news programme and do not watch or listen to other news programmes in any great volume. That sort of programme is doing a lot of heavy lifting in that department.

**Lord Kamall:** Before ask others to come in, I want to ask you about local news particularly. We have heard two views that might be contradictory or complementary. There was some praise for the BBC's help for local journalists, but, at the same time, there was a concern that the BBC was competing with local newspapers, many of which had gone online. They were trying to get revenue for it, whereas the BBC is funded by licence payers' money. How do you respond to the criticism that they

are being squeezed out?

**The Chair:** Can I just interject at that point? We are going to come on to that when we get to the next group of questions. Was there anything more that you wanted to ask?

**Lord Kamall:** No, we can move on.

Q57 **The Chair:** Could I just follow up with a couple of questions? Can I just be clear? I was interested in what your new chairman said in his all-staff email—that has been reported this morning—about what he sees as the challenges coming into his role.

Do you have a specific problem in terms of one demographic or one group of your audience? We are describing them at the moment as working-class leave voters who live in former industrial towns. Is there a particular issue with that group? Have you identified what you are doing or not doing that is causing that particular concern and perhaps leading some of them to look elsewhere, now that there are other places for them to go?

**Jonathan Munro:** The mainstream media collectively has a problem in some of those demographics in society. The BBC is certainly among those organisations with a challenge there. Unlike commercial organisations, part of our funding stream comes from those sections of the population, so there is an important direct relationship. We absolutely recognise that.

We work really hard to ensure that we are addressing those audiences. Only last night, for example, “Newsnight” did a live outside broadcast from Doncaster talking about the sorts of issues that those communities want to see raised in the Chancellor’s Budget tomorrow.

We are doing a significant number of broadcasts around the country, sending out presenters and reporters—last week, for example, the “PM” programme on Radio 4 had programmes from Carlisle, Sellafield and Rochdale—to ensure that we are connecting more deeply. We have also moved more than 200 network news journalist posts out of London to places such as Leeds, Cardiff, Birmingham and Glasgow, so we are reflecting different voices.

All of that in turn should help us recruit in a more diverse way, which is a key point here. If we recruit huge workforces, all of whom can afford to live in London, we are not going to represent the UK very effectively. More and more of our activity is being moved out of London, and that trend will definitely continue.

**The Chair:** There are just a couple more questions from me before we move on. We will come back to some of this when we get to questions about impartiality later on.

As you have already heard, we have had some polling provided to us about different demographic groups. Do you have any data and research within the BBC that shows how different audience groups are trusting the BBC? Is that something you could supply to us? It would be helpful to

understand how you are looking at this within the organisation.

**Deborah Turness:** Absolutely, we would be happy to supply that.

**Rhodri Talfan Davies:** There are two lenses, if I may. One is clearly trust, which is driven by our journalistic reputation. The other lens, of course, is consumption. They are not perfect mirrors of one another. We have touched on the working-class challenge that we have in some parts of the United Kingdom. There is also an age challenge that we have, particularly given the globalisation of media supply and the tendency of younger cohorts to lean into those streaming options.

**The Chair:** It would be helpful to get that sort of breakdown. There was one other thing that I wanted to come back on before we move on. You mentioned BBC Verify earlier as a way of trying to generate trust and confidence in audiences. How would you respond to some of the criticism of BBC Verify? In the last couple of days, there has been debate about one freelance journalist's claims about some of the sources or journalists that are relied upon for Middle Eastern reporting. More broadly, BBC Verify is not necessarily seen universally as something that is helping the BBC's reputation or building trust and confidence.

**Deborah Turness:** BBC Verify launched a year ago initially as an experimental format to see whether we could build trust by being more transparent and responding to what our consumers had told us they needed. We have done some early research, which points to the fact that BBC Verify is supported and welcomed by our audience. We are building on it. We are going to be developing the format, et cetera.

With regard to the specific point that was raised in the *Telegraph*, which I think you are referring to, about one piece—

**The Chair:** There is one piece that we are aware of.

**Deborah Turness:** Yes. BBC Verify seeks to get multiple eyewitness accounts from the ground and is very clear about where it sources them from. The piece that is referred to says what eyewitness accounts tell us about what happened on the ground in the very unfortunate incident where people were killed during the aid convoy event. We made no particular claims about the eyewitnesses.

The report was positioned in a hostile media outlet, which has always reported negatively on the BBC's coverage of the Israel-Gaza issue. More broadly, if you look at the data about our coverage of the Israel-Gaza issue, it points to us being the most publicly trusted media outlet for impartial coverage. We are happy that the way we approached that story was fair and impartial. BBC Verify approached the IDF on that story as well. We feel that we were transparent in our account and in our journalism in that case.

**The Chair:** You do not feel that there are any questions. It has not triggered an internal inquiry or anything into how you use those sources.

**Deborah Turness:** If there is an incoming complaint, we always look at whether there is anything more we could have done and whether we should add any information or be even more transparent about our

journalism. The whole point of Verify is to be transparent about the journalism we do. We are looking at that.

There are conflicting accounts of what happens on the ground in Gaza and Israel. It is a war. You would expect there to be different views of the reporting that we do. Indeed, we receive an awful lot of incoming complaints about our journalism equally weighted from both sides of the conflict. That is not to say we are happy with that position. We always listen. We have responded by being really transparent. Where we have made any mistakes, we have put our hands up.

**The Chair:** At the moment you are looking at how you portrayed the sources for that particular story.

**Deborah Turness:** We will look at that, yes. Right now, we believe the journalism was good. It was an account of what eyewitnesses were telling BBC Arabic journalists on the ground at the time.

Q58 **The Lord Bishop of Leeds:** It is no secret that the BBC has faced enormous financial pressures in relation to its funding. There must be a cost to that. You cannot just keep rejigging the pieces of the jigsaw endlessly. Ms Turness, I heard you say earlier that the BBC has to be for everybody. How are you ensuring that efficiency drives, which we can see are necessary, do not undermine the BBC's ability to conduct trusted journalism that serves all the audiences you have referred to?

**Deborah Turness:** There is no doubt that the BBC is facing significant financial challenges. You have seen that over past years as our budgets have reduced. Within the news division, we have had to tailor our ability to spend to the budgets available. We have had a flat licence fee. We had a lower-than-expected licence fee settlement more recently, which will impact going forward.

We have had the impact of very high inflation. We also need to find the investment to build our digital future and to move at the speed of audiences while protecting our scaled reach on our broadcast platforms with high-quality programming.

Add to that a news environment where we are looking at two priority areas. The first is to build everything that is live now, in the moment and on the day. Particularly younger audiences gravitate towards in-the-moment news coverage and live pages. People are using live alerts to pull them into news. We must have livestreaming, on-the-day programming and journal-of-record programming across all of our platforms.

On the other side, the audience really value our added-value, super-high-quality premium content, which is investigations, analysis, and long-form and thoughtful podcasts. To take one example of what we are doing in that area, in the next few months we are going to launch a new dedicated digital platform, which will be for our most thoughtful, thought-provoking and curious-minded content, which will come from our unrivalled team of experts.



That will be a discovery pathway for people to find that content on our digital platforms. Right now, people know that they can get the super-high-quality content that you are referring to on our broadcast platforms from programmes such as "Today", "The World at One", "PM" or "Panorama". On our digital platforms, the challenge is that our offer is seen as being quite flat. Our competitors are becoming very good at pushing that wonderful added-value content. We have some of that, but it is not easy to find.

We are going to be investing in creating a pathway, but, to be excellent in live, in the moment and on the day, as well as in added value, deep and investigative, we have to do things more efficiently. It means looking at return and investment. It means looking at where our audiences are consuming and placing value.

The decision that we made recently about "Newsnight" is a good example of that. We managed to release around £5 million of the "Newsnight" budget by listening to our audience. We have seen a significant decline in that audience in recent years. That audience are very well informed. They are now looking for something a little different at that time of night. They are listening to podcasts. They are used to a more inclusive conversation. They are looking for a different kind of added value. They are finding elsewhere the straighter news coverage or the films and video that they were finding in "Newsnight".

They told us they would value a really consequential high-quality conversation about the issues of the day at that time of night before they head to bed. At that time of night, our competitor is sleep.

We released £5 million from the "Newsnight" budget, but that is not all savings. We have taken some of the journalism that existed in "Newsnight", which was reaching an audience of under 300,000 each night, including investigations, special reports, business and economics. We have lifted that and put it at the centre of the organisation. We have had a net increase in journalism roles. We are hiring an AI investigative correspondent, et cetera. We are trying to be as smart as we can be with a reducing budget, so that we can grow digital and still serve all our audiences.

**The Lord Bishop of Leeds:** Everyone understands the need to grow digital and the digital-first strategy, but it comes at a cost, does it not? One of the things that this committee has looked at in our last inquiry and in this one is the cost to linear audiences and people who do not have digital access. Could you comment on that? Rhodri, I saw you nod.

**Rhodri Talfan Davies:** This is one of the most delicate balancing acts we have at the moment. The committee will be aware that the licence fee freeze and the most recent licence fee settlement for 2025-26 leave us about £400 million short. That requires some really difficult trade-offs.

One of the areas that I have been focused on over the last 12 months is the evolution of our local services across England. The audience data is pretty compelling. If you take the average 65 to 75 year-old today, they are more reliant on the internet and social media for their news

consumption than on radio. That is the scale of shift that is happening across the different age groups.

You want to keep your broadcast services strong, but you also have to invest to ensure that you are well-placed for the future. There is no ducking the fact that that now involves some difficult choices. In the case of local radio, in the afternoon in England we have gone from 40 local shows to about 20 local shows. That is a compromise. It is still far more localised than our regional television footprint.

But the only way that we can invest in a new network of investigative journalists across England and strengthen our local online news delivery is to do these balancing acts. There is not a pot sitting somewhere else that is going to bail us out. We have to make these choices. You have to try to keep everything strong, but you also have to recognise that there is more risk involved today because the financial constraints are so intense.

**The Lord Bishop of Leeds:** Should the BBC not be honest—I am not saying it is dishonest—about these shifts in local radio? I am up in Yorkshire. This is not the optimum. It is not ideal. By making things more regional, all you have done is expand the concept of local. Local is now much bigger than it was.

**Rhodri Talfan Davies:** Perhaps I could push back a little on that. To give you an example, it is true that at times when listenership is lower, in the afternoon, we have reduced the number of local or regional shows, as you describe. The corollary is that we have invested in an additional 120 local online journalists. That has meant that in the last six months the consumption of local online news in England has increased by 23%. There are 2.5 million additional users of the BBC's local online news services today compared to six months ago.

I absolutely accept your analysis that there are some aspects of the local radio network that perhaps feel more regional than they did six or 12 months ago. On the other platform, we have seen stellar growth. We are now serving people day in, day out across the day. This is not just younger audiences but, as I say, older audiences, who are increasingly turning to online news over radio. It is a balancing act.

**The Lord Bishop of Leeds:** I will turn to Jonathan Munro and segue into the commercial elements of this. How do you respond to the suggestion that the BBC is crowding out commercial players in markets such as local news, podcasts and so on?

**Jonathan Munro:** Local news is very much Rhodri's area of specialist management so let me hand to him in a moment, if I may. On the broader point about podcasts, for example, a significant and growing portion of audiences are turning away from linear scheduled radio and moving into audio on demand.

There are all kinds of reasons for that, including the march of technology, but lifestyles have changed. That is probably not unrelated to the pandemic. People are not in their cars as often as they were and

so on. It is important for us to deliver journalism at the point of need, not just at the point that we deliver it.

To take an example, I assume that many of you listen to the “Today” programme on Radio 4. That is one of our most important news outputs and a very important programme for the reputation of the whole of the BBC. The “Today” programme podcast takes the journalism that is generated by that team and delivers it to an audience who are not necessarily up and around at the same sort of time every morning in the way that old traditional habits meant that people tuned in on a regular basis.

That is making our journalism go further at relatively little marginal extra cost. There is a production cost—nothing we do is free—but it is a very low marginal cost. Equally, that finds a role on the Radio 4 linear schedule late at night, which will catch a little bit more of the audience and displaces the need to commission a different programme to fill that slot, which would have had a greater marginal cost for us.

By making our journalism go further using existing production teams, existing journalism and existing talent, we can deliver better value for money. In the end, that comes back to the heart of your question about how we make decisions given the reduced income envelope for the BBC when we still need to service all audiences.

On local crowding out, I will hand over to Rhodri.

**Rhodri Talfan Davies:** I will try to be brief. I have a couple of quick points. First, the challenges facing the commercial media sector are the same worldwide. In the US, which does not have an intervention of the scale of the BBC, local publishers are facing exactly the same pressures as they are in the UK.

Secondly, the BBC has a crystal-clear commitment to serving local communities, not just in the old media but in the new media too. Every week, 26 million adults in the UK turn to the BBC’s local and national services. They are incredibly trusted and valued services.

When we decided to put additional investment into local online to fund these additional journalists, we submitted those plans in full to Ofcom. Ofcom provided independent scrutiny of those plans. It came to the conclusion that they would not materially affect commercial providers. In fact, it estimated that the impact on commercial revenues would probably be in the order of 0.5%. We are not unilaterally making these decisions. We are making analysis and recommendations, but our regulator, Ofcom, then runs the rule over those plans.

**The Lord Bishop of Leeds:** I did the “Today” programme this morning. It was far too early. One of the big changes in BBC News has been the merger of the two news channels, domestic and international. How financially viable is it to cover international affairs in depth nowadays? Was that decision driven by efficiency or finance reasons rather than news reasons?

**Jonathan Munro:** Taking the second point first, yes. In truth, the decision to merge the two channels into one core product with the ability to opt out, which we use quite a lot, was driven by a combination of the cost base and the audience numbers for rolling television news.

We opt out quite a lot from the global stream for UK audiences. For example, there is a degree of interest in domestic UK politics around the world but not to the level that we would want to deliver to the UK audience on the Rochdale by-election, for example. We split the coverage apart at times.

On your international cost base point, if you look at the World Service and network news combined, we have more than 70 foreign bureaus around the world. They are all sorts of different shapes and sizes. We have two people in Harare; we have nearly 300 in Delhi. There are all sorts of points in between those two extremes, including servicing 42 non-English services around the world. That is clearly an expense for us, but it is part of our public purpose to deliver journalism about the world into the UK and vice versa.

Being on the ground is an absolute prerequisite, wherever that is possible. Having people who understand the communities, speak the language and understand the history and culture is a massive BBC priority.

You will be familiar with some of the names and faces of people who do that for us. Steve Rosenberg in Moscow speaks fluent Russian and has made his life in Moscow. There is no one in the outside world, outside Russia, who analyses Russia more effectively than he does. He is quite lonely. We have had to move the rest of the Russian service out for reasons of safety and so they can do their job. They are now working in Riga. That is a cost, and it is a cost to the licence fee, but the benefit back to the licence fee payer is enormous.

If you look at what we have done in the last few weeks covering the Pakistan elections, for example, BBC Urdu was spread around the country, all over Pakistan. Not all of that content is going to surface on BBC1 or Radio 4. A lot surfaces on the BBC online service. The knowledge that those journalists bring into the organisation will absolutely impact the way we are telling that story for all audiences.

**Deborah Turness:** Could I make an additional point about the channels coming together? Yes, it released investment to put into the business or to drive savings. Linear news channel ratings are definitely in decline. That was part of what drove the decision. In the future, we are looking to make sure that news is a really vibrant part of BBC iPlayer. Effectively, it will become a streaming channel. We believe that will be a really important offer for our audiences in the UK.

Going forward, it will be really important to make sure that we are providing a streaming service of news that is interesting, important and relevant to a UK audience while still managing to provide a global feed. We place advertising revenue around that, working through BBC Studios. It is also reputationally really important globally. Even though it has

become one operation and we drove savings by bringing two organisations together, we will still strive to deliver to both those audiences simultaneously.

**The Lord Bishop of Leeds:** Give Steve Rosenberg a medal.

**Jonathan Munro:** With pleasure, thank you.

**The Lord Bishop of Leeds:** I am a Russian linguist. He is brilliant.

**The Chair:** Just to clarify that last point, there will be two separate channels again.

**Deborah Turness:** There are now. Sometimes we are in a single feed and sometimes we are in separate feeds. The point I am making is that we must continue to make sure that, as much as we can within our resources, we are providing, at the particular times of day when we know we have large global audiences, a service that is good for them and a service that is good for the UK.

We also have our separate live single-stream operation, which, as Jonathan was saying, can break in with specific UK news. That can stay on an individual UK news story for half an hour, an hour or three hours, if it merits it, while the main feed can carry on providing the global audience with a mix of global and UK content.

**The Chair:** I am going to move us on. I may at the end come back to Mr Talfan Davies with a question on local radio, but I am conscious of time. Let us move on to Lord Knight, who is going to ask about impartiality.

Q59 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** There is no doubt about the importance that Ofcom, this committee and you at the BBC place on impartiality. We have heard that there is a disconnect between how impartiality is regulated by Ofcom, what the BBC is doing and what audiences expect from the BBC. I am interested in exploring that challenge.

In particular, given misinformation and the proliferation of different platforms that people are using to access news, how is impartiality defined differently by different parts of your audience? How do you respond to that?

**Deborah Turness:** Impartiality is about fairness. I always think "impartiality" is a word that is used in rooms such as this. Among our consumers and audiences, it is about fairness. It is about not taking any sides. It is about reporting and journalism without judgment.

The BBC has to be seen to be the most scrupulously aware of anything that might be perceived as some kind of bias or preference to either side of an argument. As a public service broadcaster, it is a solemn oath upon which we place an awful lot of importance.

Our audiences are telling us that they value that impartiality through fairness and respect. They are increasingly saying that they want those are two things from us. The more chaotic the world outside is, the more we can be a life raft in a sea of chaos and disinformation, where audiences come to find us. We must be willing to explain and be more

transparent about how we are being impartial and how we go about our journalism so they will know we really thought about it.

On the "Today" programme, Amol Rajan will now often explain, "I'm going to interview you. This is what I'd like to cover. I'm going to approach it this way. Are you okay? This is how we've prepared". In all our journalism, whether it is how we write the lead-ins to our stories, how we film, how we edit, the questions we ask of each other and our experts or the answers we give, we can be more open and transparent, and show how we are being impartial.

"We've thought about this and looked at this, but there's another side of the argument and there's a third piece of this argument". We put it all together for our audiences so they can see it in action. The more we can do that, I believe, the more our audiences will understand how the BBC strives to deliver that impartiality in everything we do.

**Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Deborah and Jonathan, you both spent a big part of your careers in Independent Television News and you have now come into the BBC. I am interested in whether there is a difference in how you approach impartiality, having come into the BBC.

As part of that, the BBC has a digital news platform that is used extensively by the population and gives you real-time data on what is being read. How does that influence the running order, for example? For an issue such as Gaza and Israel, where you are under a lot of scrutiny about impartiality, it could affect how you choose to sequence the stories that are coming out of there.

**Jonathan Munro:** It is rather aligned to the answer that I gave a few minutes ago about feedback from the audience. Lobbying is commonplace. It happens a lot. We are mindful that audiences might need certain types of information or stories more than we are currently delivering. They tell us that.

That can have an effect on the way we commission stories but not so much on running orders. Running orders are really an editorial judgment for editors of programmes. Deborah and I do not get involved in running orders. They are dealt with locally by the editors of the individual pieces of output that we are producing on a certain day. The same will be true of the prominence on the front page of the website, for example. They are devolved decisions. We are not trying to make a vanilla feed where every programme does the same stories in the same order. As I said right at the beginning, we have very different audiences.

On Israel-Gaza, you are absolutely right. The challenges around the impartial path through that story are enormously difficult. We have had incoming feedback to the BBC ranging from literally, "You are aiding and abetting genocide" to, "It's an outrage that you are not showing more about the grief and destruction in Gaza". Others have literally said, "You're in the hands of the Israeli Government". None of the above is true, but you can see why those views are expressed. Some of those are genuinely held and others are lobbying. It is sometimes difficult to pull one motive aside from another.

It is a very asymmetric conflict. We are not on the ground in Gaza. We are not allowed to be. We cannot be on the ground in Gaza. It is a very difficult story on which to strike a balance. Balance is not necessarily achieved in one programme or one sequence. It is over time. That is an important point about impartiality.

Just briefly, Deborah and I worked together at ITN for many years. The regulations under Ofcom's guidance are the same. There is a small point of language that is always important to register when discussing impartiality. It is "due impartiality" in our world. What is the impartiality that is relevant to a certain story at the time you are telling it? We do not have to give balance to those people who do not believe there is a link between human activity and climate change and those who do. There is a massive scientific consensus that there is a link. That does not mean people who take the opposite view are banned from the BBC—occasionally, we might hear from them—but the scrutiny on them needs to be quite significant. That is the difference between "due impartiality" and "balance".

**Lord Knight of Weymouth:** You said that running order is an editorial decision that is devolved to the different platforms. I would guess that Radio 1 news has a very different demographic from Radio 4 news. If you are listening to your audience, a younger audience might have a different view on impartiality and running order. You do not comment to your editors about whether they are pandering too much to their audience, if they are changing the order from one platform to another, according to what their audiences want.

**Jonathan Munro:** I would not use the word "pandering". We certainly say to editors at a senior level, "We believe we need to move our coverage in this direction or that direction", as we make commissions around explanatory journalism or investigative journalism. It is part of our job to keep an overview on how the BBC overall, as an offer, is covering a contentious issue.

You are absolutely right that the audience expectations of some products will be very different from other products. None of us in this room has any idea what the top line of the Budget will be tomorrow, but something that affects student finance, for example, will be significantly more interesting for the Radio 1 audience than perhaps the "Newsnight" audience. There is a whole different demographic in play there.

Editors make those choices. They will say, "Our top line today is going to be X as opposed to Y". We will guide that. We are now working on what sorts of issues we think we are going to be looking at come the next general election, which is in the next few months. That is an urgent and imminent editorial challenge for us. What issues do we need to explore, interrogate and investigate? Some of those are issues that the political parties will not want us to probe on.

That sort of guidance from us is important, but we would very rarely speak to a programme editor about the running order. I do not remember ever doing it. I do not remember ever saying to a programme editor, "I want you to change your running order".

**Deborah Turness:** You mentioned our collective experience in other news organisations. I have been at the BBC for 18 months now. Prior to that, I was at ITN and NBC News for a decade.

With regard to impartiality at the BBC, I would like to raise your awareness of the amount of care and attention that is given to impartiality through all our journalism, whether that is in the daily editorial meeting at 9 am when the majority of those conversations are had collectively or in much more distant places such as the editorial guidelines and standards committee, which is chaired by Nicholas Serota.

We participate in thematic reviews, which have quite recently been rolled out. They are about upholding standards and impartiality. We really welcome the scrutiny and the conversations that are coming out of those reviews. The first one was produced by Andrew Dilnot and Michael Blastland. That was on tax and spend, how the BBC reports on matters around the economy and taxation, and how the nation decides to spend that taxation.

We had some really important learnings from it. The takeaway was that they found we are impartial in our coverage, although there are things that we could do to help certain sectors of the audience understand tax and spend better. For example, we are very focused on income tax, when VAT affects all our audiences. We tend to focus automatically on train fares and issues around rail, but buses are used far more by the broader population.

We have already applied many of the findings in tomorrow's Budget coverage. Even today in our preview work we are applying those on the ground in our team that is supporting the story. We really value that. What is impressive is the amount of time, attention and detail that is given at the BBC to making sure that impartiality sits at the heart of everything we do.

**Lord Knight of Weymouth:** I have one last question on impartiality for Rhodri, which in some ways is a segue into the next section of questions. As I understand it, Rhodri, you have some oversight of what BBC News is doing using generative AI. Clearly, there are inbuilt issues of bias attached to training data for AI. When thinking about generating content using that technology, how are you managing impartiality, algorithmic bias and training data bias?

**Rhodri Talfan Davies:** At a very simple level, we would not publish an article that was generated purely through generative AI. We would not publish anything that had not had active human oversight. We have very clear principles about the safeguards and guardrails that we need. Equally, we are incredibly interested and curious about how generative AI may be able to support content production across news and many other areas. We are actively engaged in about a dozen key pilots at the moment.

I will give you a couple of examples. If you think about when we publish news articles and write headlines, generative AI could play a part in recommending headlines. That is a million miles away from an editor



taking responsibility. You will always have an editor, a human journalist, who is ultimately responsible for everything that we publish. We are looking at generative AI as a support tool for our production processes, but we are doing this with some caution.

As you say, the foundational models, which are driving generative AI at the moment, have consumed huge amounts of data, but we know, from the source of public record, there are issues around hallucinations and bias. Until we have complete confidence in the output of these foundational models, we will be very cautious in their deployment.

**Lord Knight of Weymouth:** There is no ambition for a BBC foundational model just using the glorious impartial news content that has been generated by the BBC over the years.

**Rhodri Talfan Davies:** The BBC is lucky to have an extensive research and development team. We are looking at those issues and at whether we might do that in partnership or unilaterally. We will need to do a cost assessment on it as well. Clearly, the BBC holds almost 80 years of audio and video in its archive as well as a huge text archive online. We are actively looking at whether that might be an option for us.

Q60 **The Chair:** Just before we move on to the next category of questions, can I ask a supplementary about impartiality and the issue of helping audiences understand matters? You gave tax and spend as a particular example a moment ago. In the context of impartiality, do you see it as your responsibility for the BBC to help educate the educated?

We talked about due impartiality. That is quite easy to understand where there is a clear split between different perspectives, but, going back to this point about serving audiences better, there are other issues where there is a certain demographic whose perspective may not necessarily be heard or properly understood by a more sophisticated—let us describe it like that—audience, who feel they are already well educated. They might feel as though they need educating about the higher levels of policy but not about the other perspective. Do you think about how to address that?

**Deborah Turness:** We need to make sure that those who pay their licence fee, the public who fund the BBC—

**The Chair:** I get that, but what do you do?

**Deborah Turness:** Programmes such as “Question Time” are very good at surfacing views that you do not hear necessarily all of the time on other platforms.

**The Chair:** In your news coverage on a programme such as “Today” or “Newsnight”, do you think about whether there is an angle that needs to be reflected in order to educate everybody about the whole picture?

**Deborah Turness:** Nicky Campbell’s phone-in show does pull in other views and perspectives. I wonder whether you could be a bit more specific.

**Jonathan Munro:** I am not sure whether this addresses your point, Chair, but you are absolutely right. The "Today" programme is a very good example. Broadly speaking, it has quite a well-educated audience. We call it a news-heavy audience. These are people who consume a lot of news.

That has a role in highlighting and educating all sectors of its audience. For example, we recently ran an interview with a mother who had lost a daughter and who was driving through a change in the law and guidelines to the NHS about getting a second opinion. It was called Martha's rule. That was the first proper network broadcast exposure of that issue that I am aware of, at least. There are other very contentious issues, such as the very difficult area about the right to die and assisted dying. Programmes such as "Today" have played a role in advancing that debate.

That is for all audiences, including the decision-makers. The mantra of "inform, educate, entertain" does not stop at a certain level or part of society. It has to go through all of society. Broadcast platforms such as "Today" are at their most effective when they do those sorts of stories.

Q61 **Lord McNally:** Listening to senior executives from the BBC, I sometimes feel that they are like the knight in Monty Python who kept on having lots of bits of him chopped off and yet kept up a long stream of optimism about the plight that he was in. Looking forward, how many mortal wounds can you sustain and still keep up the optimism that you are keeping to that great tradition of informing, educating and entertaining?

**Deborah Turness:** I am entirely optimistic about the future, but thank you for your empathy. We all have to be optimistic. We start from a position of great strength. If you look at younger audiences, we are reaching 30% of under-35s in the UK. We want to reach more, but, compared to our competitors, that is a really good number.

We are building out our digital platforms. We are building out our livestreaming offer. We are investing in digital. We are growing those audiences. We are also growing on social platforms, where some younger audiences are not coming to us. We are really focused on under-25s when we go to social platforms such as TikTok, where Verify is really growing a big audience. That is good because we are driving media literacy and transparency in our journalism. It is really working.

There are so many reasons to be hopeful. We are building out a strategy for news to be a really significant player within the iPlayer platform. You will be bumping into and using news more as you consume there.

Within BBC News, there are so many green shoots. We are driving growth across our digital platforms. Yes, it is hard to find a way to invest. We are having to be efficient and make really tough choices and decisions elsewhere in our organisation, but those are the right things to do to build the future. There is no magic money tree, as somebody once said. In fact, ours is shrinking. We have to do more with less. That is the way of so many businesses, particularly in media at the moment. Just look at the job cuts and losses elsewhere in our environment.

**Jonathan Munro:** I agree with all that. I would just like to add that, in the spirit of your question, it is a privilege to work at the BBC. It is an even bigger privilege to help manage part of the BBC.

The BBC is a matter of public debate all the time. Everybody pays for it. Therefore, in my view, everyone is entitled to voice an opinion about it. Our staff tell us they are proud to wear the badge of the BBC; they are proud to tell people they work at the BBC. Of course, there are scars on all of our backs. There is a former director-general of the corporation here who can also vouch for that. The privilege of the BBC is something none of us should take for granted.

Your question takes me back to a day that we will always remember, which was the death of the Queen. Having the responsibility of reporting that on the national broadcaster, to use a slightly old-fashioned phrase, to an audience who came to us for all the qualities of our journalism that we have been talking about in other contexts this afternoon. That cannot be taken for granted. That was an enormous privilege. From that is born an optimistic prospect.

**Deborah Turness:** Could I also add to that? Having worked in different news markets and spent a decade working in US media, I have seen firsthand the impact of not having an impartiality governance framework around media. The abolition of the fairness doctrine in the United States under Ronald Reagan paved the way for the fractured and polarised media environment that there is in the United States of America today. That is blamed by many for leading to the actions of 6 January, which threatened a complete breakdown in democracy and the democratic powers of the United States of America.

Like Jonathan, I feel it is an honour to be here leading the world's most trusted news organisation at a time when our focus is on growing that trust and doing anything we can to listen to our audiences and deliver what they need to trust us. When polarisation comes into the media environment, we have seen what happens. It is so important. We must remain optimistic, committed and dedicated. Thank you again for your question.

**Lord McNally:** Again, we are talking about the various levels. Does the emphasis that you are giving to the digital-first strategy still hold good if you are losing contact with key audiences?

**Deborah Turness:** We are protecting the programming on our broadcast platforms that has massive reach and is most appreciated by our audiences. Over time, all broadcast platforms are declining and digital platforms, the fortunate ones, are growing. The use of iPlayer is growing while our broadcast platforms are declining. The audience loss is more an audience transfer in many cases, although it is not total. We are not retaining all those audiences.

The news programming remains very high quality on our broadcast platforms. That must remain the case for as long as we have scaled audiences on those platforms. We have to work smarter and more efficiently; we have to use technology and different skills to protect that

as we go forward. There is nobody at BBC News who wants to undermine the quality of our programming in any way. We remain some of the most watched programming of all programming on the BBC's platforms and in the UK.

As Rhodri said, the local news at 6.30 pm is the most watched programme of all on BBC1. The "News at Six" is not far behind. We have really big important audiences, who really value what we do. As we make our determinations and our choices, we have to protect what is most important and delivers the biggest reach.

**Lord McNally:** "Obsession" is the wrong word, but the emphasis on what Janet Street-Porter used to call the "yoof" audience can mislead you. It can lead you to go down rabbit holes in terms of the quality of what you are seeking to do.

**Deborah Turness:** We have to make all our content relevant to our younger audiences. That is why live pages, live content, live alerts and notifications are so important to us. We know we get a younger profile of audience. Some 16% of the audiences who come to our live pages are under-35s, whereas it is 11% for the rest of our digital content. We know where they are. We have to make it mobile first. We have to make it very visual. We have got to deliver our depth of analysis but in a really consumable way. That way, we can attract younger audiences to our mainstream platforms.

I agree that going down too many rabbit holes and creating niche content that attracts only younger audiences is not necessarily the most efficient way to go. On TikTok, we do something a little different. We are targeting only younger audiences because we want to reach them with a bespoke offer on TikTok that sends a message about the value of the BBC and how important we are in the current media ecology.

We know they do not trust the news on TikTok, but when they consume it from the BBC we know they trust it more. We think we are doing an important thing to create a connection with those audiences so they will come back to us and understand the value that the BBC can deliver.

**Lord McNally:** By going to TikTok, is there not a danger that you set yourself TikTok levels rather than BBC levels?

**Deborah Turness:** We are very clear that the content that we put on TikTok adheres to all our public purposes and is high quality. That is why the Verify service is really starting to connect with those audiences. It is a fresh and transparent approach to our journalism on the TikTok platform. We are pulling back the curtain, showing how we have done our journalism. and how we verify our video.

The younger audience expect that. They have a higher level of media literacy than the broader audience. They are telling us that they appreciate the level of transparency that we are showing in the video we are creating on TikTok.

**Jonathan Munro:** It is also about more than TikTok or indeed the next platform to be invented, whatever that might be. The digital-first

strategy is also about making the content that we have traditionally made for what you might call legacy audiences more available digitally for those who are consuming content differently. For example, "Panorama", which is the flagship current affairs programme on BBC1, as you will know, usually runs on a Monday night. There was an edition last night about the potential return of President Trump. That was available on iPlayer from 6 am yesterday, so that people who do not want to wait for a scheduled programme at 8 pm on BBC1 can access it whenever they want. In that edition, there was an artificial intelligence sequence of photos purporting to show Donald Trump meeting a range of voters, including young black voters. These were fake photos. That was debunked by the programme. That story ran out from the "Today" programme yesterday morning, so all audiences can get it.

**Deborah Turness:** It was the most watched piece on our website yesterday.

**Jonathan Munro:** Digital first is not just about new platforms; it is about taking legacy products such as "Panorama", which have a very important role for us in the in-depth journalism, and making them more widely available.

**Rhodri Talfan Davies:** I will give you one other example. If you take the by-election in Kingswood in Bristol a couple of weeks ago, historically, in terms of our local services, we would have done an hour's debate on local radio and that would have been it. This time, by using the full portfolio of BBC services, we were able to stream that debate on iPlayer, on BBC Sounds and across social media platforms.

Again, it is about making sure, in all the commissioning decisions that we take, that we maximise all the different routes to market that we have. When we do that, we broaden the audience that we bring in, because local radio audiences tend to be older.

**Lord McNally:** You mentioned the United States, where we have the example of Fox News. Have you the nerve and the courage to keep giving difficult questions complicated answers rather than giving simple answers to difficult questions?

**Jonathan Munro:** Yes, 100%. We have that confidence as part of our public purpose, and that is exactly what we are going to continue to do. This year of all years, with elections here, in the United States and in lots of other countries around the world, that is our USP.

Q62 **Lord Hall of Birkenhead:** Jonathan Munro has declared my interest, so I need not do that. This is a question for Deborah Turness. You have worked in this country and in the US; you have worked in different companies. With this really important job in the BBC, is there something about a BBC agenda that you think is different from what you have seen in other organisations you have worked in, or is the BBC's job to do better, with more context, what others are doing?

**Deborah Turness:** There is no BBC agenda, but the BBC is certainly a better informed and more rounded organisation, partly thanks to the fact

that we have the World Service, so we have that reach. We have that excellence in journalism. We have more expertise in more places around the world, so there is no doubt that our audiences expect from us more context, more depth and more analysis. That is what we are here to deliver.

Each news organisation must tailor its content to its audiences, depending on where it is or what its priorities might be. Because the BBC's priorities are universality and delivering to everybody, I see us as having to draw from an unprecedented array of quality inputs in terms of our expertise, our specialisms, our global bureau infrastructure and what the World Service gives us.

As Jonathan was saying and as we were discussing earlier, "Newsbeat" will create a different version of that from the "News at Ten", the live pages, the livestreams and Radio 4. This unrivalled scope enables us to create content tailored to the audiences we have wherever they are, and that is what is quite unique about the BBC.

**Q63 Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Just to take you back to the TikTok challenge, when I talk to people such as the founder of Duolingo, they are really conscious that the attention span of that audience is getting shorter and shorter.

Do you have any evidence that you are bringing that audience over on to the main BBC platforms, where items will be longer? As that audience starts to populate those main platforms, are we going to see shorter and shorter news items that are punchier and meet the needs of that generation?

**Deborah Turness:** That last piece is a bit of a crystal ball question. In our relationships with third-party platforms, we are always seeking to have a value exchange and to say, "We are going to invest in creating content for your platform". We want to make sure that that is optimised and reaches the audiences we need, but we are always looking to negotiate some kind of path forward and path back into the BBC's platforms, where people will seek and discover our content on our platform.

The strategy in the last few years has been to prioritise what is called value reach, bringing people to our platform so that we can push them through sign-in. Once they are through sign-in, we can gather data. We know what their preferences and interests are. We can track their journey so that over time, as our product improves, we are able to give people a much more sophisticated mix of what they want. Obviously, we are deploying a BBC ethical algorithm, not following a clickbait process, but making sure that we are giving them the right mix of content and not just chasing those clicks.

How does that sit comfortably with an environment where we are investing some of our resources into off-platform? Either we are negotiating a path back or, where we are not negotiating a path and a link back to the BBC platform, we are looking for attribution. We are

looking to make sure that this audience, who might not otherwise come to our platform, really understand the value of our content there.

Our attribution levels were much lower on TikTok a little while ago, but we have worked in an experimental way to test and learn by placing our logo in different places, enlarging our graphic presence there, and talking about BBC journalism in different ways in those clips. Yes, they are short clips and the attention span is short compared to on our own platforms, but by doing that we have more than doubled the attribution so that people understand, "I was on TikTok and I consumed BBC content".

When you look at the data, it is quite surprising the number of people who have no consciousness that they consumed anything other than TikTok on TikTok or YouTube on YouTube, whereas brands are placing investment and value on those platforms. It is really tricky, and we are constantly pushing third-party platforms for a better and more prioritised path back to our own. I will be honest here. It is not always easy.

**The Chair:** I am sure that is a whole new topic. Thank you very much to all three of you.

You do not have time to answer my final question, Mr Talfan Davies, but if you were able to follow up in writing I would be very grateful, alongside the additional research that I asked for earlier. You are going to have to forgive me for the way in which I describe this, and you can challenge it if you want to in your written response.

You talked about the fact that audiences have moved elsewhere as a reason for the change in approach that you are having to make to local radio provision, alongside budget pressures. This is a bigger question for BBC News more generally. Again, if you want to follow up in writing afterwards, you can. I am keen to understand whether there is a bigger purpose for local radio that should be driving your decisions about what and how you invest in it, that being around the role of local radio in community cohesion and strengthening communities, particularly in a world that is becoming increasingly fractured, as we have seen. You referred to recent electoral events.

I would be very interested in a considered reply to that when you send us the other materials that I have asked for. If you wanted to offer anything larger in the same written response about the role of BBC News and its fundamental purpose, and how it is distinctive and different from commercial PSBs or, indeed, the other commercial players such as Sky, that would be very helpful too.

As you all know, one of the things that we as a committee have been very interested in is getting a better understanding and for the BBC to be much clearer than it has been up to now about what it sees as its role and strategic vision for the future in this increasingly crowded and changing marketplace.

Your evidence today has been incredibly helpful. I am very grateful to all three of you. I am going to pause the transmission while we change over our witnesses, and I am going to ask everybody to be as speedy as they can. In the context of a television audience, we will be right back.