HOUSE OF LORDS

Communications and Digital Committee

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

Tuesday 14 May 2024

2.30 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Stowell of Beeston (The Chair); Lord Dunlop; Lord Hall of Birkenhead; Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill; Lord Kamall; Lord Knight of Weymouth; The Lord Bishop of Leeds; Lord McNally; Baroness Primarolo; Lord Storey; Baroness Wheatcroft; Lord Young of Norwood Green.

Evidence Session No. 17 Heard in Public Questions 157 – 162

Witnesses

I: Dame Melanie Dawes, Chief Executive Officer, Ofcom; Cristina Nicolotti Squires, Group Director of Broadcasting and Media, Ofcom.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Dame Melanie Dawes and Cristina Nicolotti Squires.

Q157 **The Chair:** This is the Communications and Digital Committee, continuing our inquiry on the future of news. I am pleased to welcome witnesses this afternoon from Ofcom: Dame Melanie Dawes, chief executive, and Cristina Nicolotti Squires, group director for broadcast and media, and very new to the post; I should imagine this is your first outing in this role before a Select Committee, so I am very pleased to welcome you to ours.

We are going to cover questions relating to the arrival of the tech platforms in the context of media plurality, and the impact of technology and its regulation on questions around free speech, and that sort of thing. We will then come on to questions around Ofcom's role and responsibility with respect to the impartiality of broadcasters, and then we will be more specifically looking at the BBC, the PSBs and the other non-PSB news broadcasters.

Before we get to those, can I start with a general question to Dame Melanie? From the perspective of Ofcom as the regulator, could you give us your overall assessment in brief terms of the current status of the UK news industry?

Dame Melanie Dawes: Thank you for inviting us to give evidence. Overall, we should be very encouraged. We have a thriving news ecosystem across multiple platforms and channels in the UK and a very strong public service broadcast contribution to news, with commercial broadcasters, in particular, making a contribution that you do not see in many other countries. We see PSB alongside that, which is a thriving TV sector, with new entrants coming in and offering new things to viewers and listeners. We also increasingly see online what one would have called the print newspaper industry, again with some global brands cutting through outside the UK.

There is a lot that we should be pleased about and proud of. However, there are two trends, which are highly related and raise questions around sustainability. First is the way audiences are increasingly fragmented in the way they are consuming news; they get more and more of their news from social media, which makes it harder for our quality and edited news providers to cut through.

Secondly, very related to that is the commercial challenge that results for many in the industry and being able to continue to provide particularly that public service content on TV. Those longer-term questions are important, and we will be addressing that sustainability question for news specifically in our next public service broadcasting review, which will start in a month or so's time.

Q158 **Lord McNally:** You mentioned the work in progress. How do Ofcom's timelines for examining these things keep pace with the rapid pace of market trends? Do you do it every three years or something?

Dame Melanie Dawes: We are required to look at public service media in the round every few years, but we are also required to look periodically at the media ownership rules. We last did that and made recommendations to government in 2021, and we will be doing that again before the end of this year. We have a number of strands of work across all these issues, which we have set out in our evidence to you.

Lord McNally: You mentioned the 2021 statement on media plurality, and you suggested extending the public interest test, but that has not been taken forward. What is the relationship between your recommendations and action? That is what worries people, especially in a sector that is changing overnight.

Dame Melanie Dawes: Yes, it is changing extremely fast. Our understanding is that the Government said relatively recently that they are going to take forward the extension of the media ownership rules and the public interest test system to online news providers, which is what we recommended in 2021. That will require secondary legislation.

A lot of the recommendations from our public service media review in 2021 have been taken forward in the current Media Bill that is going through Parliament, particularly the need to give more prominence through new means, recognising digital services are different from traditional linear ones.

Lord McNally: One thing that is usually thrown up, as you have just indicated, is that more people—particularly younger people—are going to the news via Facebook, Google, Twitter, Instagram, and especially TikTok according to young people. What does your research show about the news sources used? A lot of the traditional news sources feed into these agencies so the young people may still be getting their BBC news but via TikTok. What are the implications of that?

Dame Melanie Dawes: I might ask Cristina to come in on that in a moment; having spent most of her career in news, how to reach those younger audiences is something she is very close to. But just to give a general answer to that—

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt, but it would be really helpful if you could come at this through the lens of media plurality.

Dame Melanie Dawes: There are a number of different issues. What are the facts? The facts are that young people in particular are increasingly getting their news from online platforms. In the top 10 news providers, only the BBC is there now as a broadcast or radio source; all the rest are social media, search, or some kind of online platform. That raises questions about how that content is provided to users and given sufficient prominence, or some would say how publishers are remunerated for that. That is quite a big debate, and the digital markets Bill currently going through Parliament will give the Competition and Markets Authority the ability to think about a code of practice that could ensure fair and reasonable terms of trade between news publishers and online platforms. That is one piece of the jigsaw, if you like.

More generally, in some ways, it is a good thing that we have social media platforms that provide an opportunity for our PSBs and other news publishers to reach younger audiences, and they are increasingly successful in doing that. It is more likely to be short-form video rather than longer investigative reporting, so it is not quite the same depth of content. None the less, it is an opportunity to reach young people that did not exist 20 years ago, when young people may or may not have been watching the news or reading newspapers with their parents. Cristina, you have actually lived and breathed this.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: I have, yes. As you kindly pointed out, I have recently joined Ofcom after 35 years in the news business. When I started out, there were four channels. I worked for ITV News, and you heard the "News at Ten" music blaring out from every house. It is a very different landscape now. Most broadcasters—certainly the ones I have worked at, which are ITV, Channel 5 and Sky—create their content, but they now have the opportunity to get it in front of all sorts of different people, which they would not necessarily have been able to do in the past.

There are quite a lot of upsides to the proliferation of news on social media: for example, we decided we were going to put some of our news on TikTok just before the start of the Ukrainian war. We made a very conscious decision that we were not going to change the way we delivered that news; we were just going to use little excerpts from the material we were covering. I remember there was one video of a very young guy on a bridge with a gun. He was holding a gun for the first time; he was only 19 years old, and he was meant to stop the Russians from invading. That had something like 5 million views, from an audience that would not necessarily have caught that news. Most news organisations are now providing their news on different platforms, and it gets them in front of different types of people and different audiences.

Lord McNally: But that does not really provide the audience with what we understand as proper curated news. When Andrew Neil gave evidence and we mentioned the fact that young people go to TikTok for their news, he said they would grow out of that and mature into Andrew Neil-type viewers—a frightening thought. It is not the same thing; it is a different kind of delivery, and it may be doing some good, but it leaves a problem. I remember the impact of ITN, which was all to the good on a stiff and starchy BBC. I am not sure the impact of delivering news through these mediums necessarily improves the quality of news coverage, and that must be worrying.

Dame Melanie Dawes: You are right, and all change driven by technology, especially at this pace, has pros and cons. We were just describing some of the opportunities, but we also know, and have researched this and published research on it, that if you get your news mainly from social media—Facebook is now the third largest news source in the UK and has been for a while—you are more likely to be polarised in your views and find it harder to spot fake news. While social media feeds often show quite a broad diet of news providers, it is usually on a

narrower range of topics because that is how the recommender systems work and serve you content.

We feel that this is an issue for the future, and the lack of transparency about how the recommender systems and algorithms work is—as ever—one of the biggest challenges. At some point, at the very least, we are going to need to see the ability to require the platforms to open up that black box in some way for testing, maybe for external researchers, or for us as the regulator to be able to interrogate that more than we are able to today.

Lord McNally: You are really asking for an extension of powers for Ofcom into these—they are not technically news providers, but because of the power they have with the algorithms et cetera, they are certainly news influencers.

Dame Melanie Dawes: We would call them news intermediaries. I am not saying Parliament should legislate for a big code on misinformation and disinformation or impartiality; that is a highly political question and very much something that Parliament and Government have to determine. The Online Safety Act does not include misinformation and disinformation as harms on which regulated services are required to take any actions.

Transparency and information are very difficult to get. At the moment, as a regulator, we cannot do what the platforms do all the time, which is to test different forms of service design and see what the impact is on things we care about more broadly, such as polarisation, the ability to spot fake news; what one might call media literacy. We do not have the ability to force those kinds of tests. The platforms are doing tests like that all the time, but against their commercial metrics. At some point, that is the thing we would say would be useful. We have media literacy powers—particularly on the Online Safety Act—and we are going to be doing more and more work in this area, but that is always the challenge.

Lord McNally: I have a colleague who will be going on to that. To conclude, you are worried about the influence the tech companies have on the news we receive.

Dame Melanie Dawes: We should still be confident that high-quality news is breaking through; three-quarters of adults over the age of 16 still get their news from TV. It is high quality and regulated, and our other news providers also have a pretty wide reach, particularly when you think about online offerings from our newspapers, for example, weighted against the traditional print offering.

We have a lot to be pleased about and proud of, but the trends are all going in one direction, and they are moving particularly rapidly for younger people. It raises questions primarily about media literacy and about people being able to navigate that more diverse landscape, which can bring many advantages but can also bring some risks that are difficult to understand because of the lack of transparency.

The Chair: Just before we move to Lord Kamall, who will pick up on some of those things, can I check a couple of points for clarification? On

the question of the media ownership rules, and what you are expecting from the Government by way of the commitments that they have already made, is your understanding that that will reflect news online, or rather the role of tech firms, even if they might not own a news provider, or is that something that you would look at again as part of the review you are doing later on in the year?

Dame Melanie Dawes: We recommended that the rules be extended to cover takeovers of online news providers, including organisations such as the *i*, for example, and our understanding is that the Government are taking this forward. On tech platforms, should a major tech platform try to purchase a major news provider that is caught by the public interest test rules—subject to what the Secretary of State wanted to initiate—we would expect that to be able to open up any investigation quite broadly into what synergies, incentives and so on were created between that tech company's business and the news provider it was purchasing. To that extent, the rules already cover the role of the tech platforms.

There are some scenarios where companies grow and get ever more influence. I am not sure that would ever be caught by what are essentially merger rules; that is more of a broader competition question and would perhaps need to be looked at through another route.

The Chair: What is happening next as a result of the review you did of plurality in 2022? Presumably it covered that kind of issue.

Dame Melanie Dawes: Our work published in November 2022 was really about the issues I was just discussing with Lord McNally around the role of online media, in the media literacy of us all, and how that affects our news consumption, attitudes and so on. We followed that up with research, and we may come on to this, but we have not made recommendations on that because it is pretty complicated to know what those recommendations would be. That is slightly separate from these questions of ownership and market structure.

The Chair: Finally from me, will your review that you are scheduled to do later on this year include foreign state ownership?

Dame Melanie Dawes: I think that is being taken forward separately as part of the Media Bill.

The Chair: It is not.

Dame Melanie Dawes: My apologies if I have that wrong, but I thought that was being separately provided for.

The Chair: I have tabled an amendment that calls for a review of ownership including foreign state powers; maybe you are thinking of that.

Dame Melanie Dawes: That was what I was thinking of. Perhaps we can get back to you.

The Chair: So it has been endorsed by the chief executive of Ofcom.

Dame Melanie Dawes: If it is helpful and you would like us to, perhaps we can get back to you on precisely what that review will cover, but it is our regular review of the industry, so it is quite open-ended.

Lord Kamall: Would it be disinformation to suggest that it was endorsed by the chief executive of Ofcom?

Dame Melanie Dawes: I would never want to comment on legislation before Parliament; it is a matter for Parliament.

Q159 **Lord Kamall:** On more serious issues, you mentioned the Online Safety Act, and you will probably remember there were some concerns about either intended or unintended consequences. We are interested in what Ofcom is doing to ensure that implementing the Online Safety Act does not lead to legitimate opinions being stifled. We have heard some tech platforms are shadow-banning and age-gating legitimate news content. I accept it is a complicated area, but maybe you can explain to us what Ofcom can do to make sure legitimate views are getting through.

Dame Melanie Dawes: Cristina has been talking to one news broadcaster with one big platform about a very specific question around Channel 4's coverage; you may want to come in on that in a moment, Cristina. The Online Safety Act places better safeguards into the system than we have now. If we take the example of Channel 4's content being removed from YouTube's under-18 service—very good content about the conflict in Gaza—when the Online Safety Act provisions are fully in place, categorised platforms covered by these rules will not be able to remove content like that without notifying the broadcaster in advance and going through a process of explaining what they are doing. If it is journalistic content, they will have a further bar of freedom of expression that they need to look at and explain.

News publisher content is also not covered by the provisions of the Act, so platforms can host it without any concern that they need to be worried about whether it is illegal or harmful for children, or any of the other provisions of the Act. To that extent, there are quite strong safeguards that are better than the ones in place today.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: I was just going to pick up on what Dame Melanie said about Channel 4 on YouTube. That piece of content aired at 7 pm, before the watershed, totally compliant with Ofcom's codes on broadcasting, but because YouTube deemed it unsuitable for children, it was hard for people to access. As you know, Channel 4 has a remit to reach younger people. Once the Act is enshrined in law and we are able to enforce it, as Dame Melanie said, those kinds of conversations will be taking place between the platform and the broadcaster, and there will be a legal framework within which those conversations have to take place. Hopefully, situations like that will be resolved properly.

Lord Kamall: Dame Melanie, you mentioned earlier the idea of high-quality news. Do you have a definition for high-quality news?

Dame Melanie Dawes: No, we do not have a definition of high-quality news at Ofcom, but we have regulated news services on radio and TV

that have to meet standards of due impartiality and due accuracy. Although this is not part of our regulatory framework, I would also say there is a distinction between news offerings that are edited and curated—I would include newspapers and many other online offerings where thought and expertise have been brought to bear—against what you will get on a social media feed, where you are receiving what is determined by a recommender algorithm.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Broadcast news is still one of the most trusted sources of news. Although you cannot make a direct correlation and say it is because it is regulated by Ofcom, the fact that it is regulated and people know those kinds of services will give them accurate, impartial and trusted news really helps their brands and is a signal that this is high-quality news.

In my various roles, we have always chosen to comply our content to the same broadcast standards. When I was at Sky News, if we wrote an article we would not make it any different in terms of the standards from what we would say on television, because that standard guarantees good, truthful, impartial news, and that is an important brand that you want to be able to spread.

Lord Kamall: Interestingly, you also mentioned the phrase "trusted", and a number of our witnesses have talked about the importance of trusted news. Same question as the last one: is there a definition of trusted news, or did you answer it in the last question? I will turn to you first and then maybe to Dame Melanie. You can pass on it if you want to.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Gosh. Is there a definition of trust? I do not think there is, as such. At the end of the day, people will go to news outlets that they feel they can trust, and there are a number of different factors in there, none of which is a rule or cancel each other out. News that speaks to you as an audience is important as part of building trust. If you see yourself or your community reflected on the screen or the radio, if it goes to issues that are part of your lives, that is an important part of the trust.

It is also important to get things right and admit when you get them wrong. Sky News is part of something called the Trust Project, and one of the conditions is you apologise when you get something wrong and move on. Most of the broadcasters do that. Trust is a bit of a pact with an audience, and it can involve lots of different contexts; it would be quite a tough call to define it.

Lord Kamall: I want to turn to elections. Obviously, this is a year of lots of elections worldwide. One of the stories that caught my eye was the issue of Twitter admitting it should not have demoted some stories about allegations against Hunter Biden, and people on the other side of the political spectrum felt that was bias, as it were. Twitter, or X, denied it was bias, but it accepted it was a mistake and it should not have done that.

Given we are in a run-up to elections and the concerns about information and disinformation, but also the difference of opinion and how you

distinguish between those, what will be the focus of Ofcom's advisory committee on disinformation and what are your plans ahead of the UK general election, in particular, but other elections as well?

The Chair: In the context of the general election, please stick to this topic of disinformation and online texts; we will want to talk more about impartiality.

Lord Kamall: Before that, bear in mind that some people use the word "disinformation", whereas others would say that is just a difference of opinion. How do you distinguish that?

Dame Melanie Dawes: Exactly. We will talk about the broadcasting landscape in a moment, where we have very specific duties in relation to an election. When it comes to online services, there are no requirements on online, regulated platforms in the Online Safety Act around misinformation and disinformation. We are very clear there is nothing there, where we as a regulator can directly start setting requirements on how they handle information.

As you say, it is a very, very difficult thing to do. Even those platforms that have tried find that, as well as engaging really difficult issues of freedom of expression—freedom of political expression, but also freedom of creative expression, and humour, and so on—not only is that very difficult, but it is also quite hard to redesign feeds in a way that amplifies clearly truthful content and downrates clearly problematic content. If you uprank your good content—for example, public health content during the Covid pandemic—you just provide a vehicle for people who may have bad motives to provide comments on that because they know they are more likely to be read.

It is very, very complicated; this is what we have researched, and there are a number of other people researching it. We are quite a long way from knowing what any rules would be in this space, to be honest. As I was saying earlier, transparency and opening up the black boxes in the meantime are the main thing.

As for this year's general election, our main focus is as the broadcasting regulator and continuing with the work we are doing. Our priority with the Online Safety Act is to deliver to Parliament's timescale on the illegal harms provisions of the Act and the protection of children.

Lord Kamall: Thank you. I think I may have stolen Baroness Healy's question but I am finished for now.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: Dame Melanie, I would like to return to media literacy because obviously that is one of your fundamental duties, and, as Ofcom has said, a media-literate population is fundamental to a functioning society. I know you have been doing a lot of work over the years, but I am still slightly unclear about what you hope to be the outcome of your new consultation on media literacy. Could you give me some idea of what your top priority will be as an outcome?

Dame Melanie Dawes: We published our strategy for consultation at the end of April, just a couple of weeks ago, which sets out our priorities over three years; three years is the timescale that is set out in the Act. Essentially, it is to improve understanding and awareness, particularly among those in the market that are responsible for educating young people, or for educating others, and for other providers of services.

Ofcom has a very important role here, which we are mobilising with these new powers of online safety, and that will grow over the years, but we have also said very clearly that we are one player. While we can convene researchers and experts, in particular, we need other policy levers to be brought to bear here as well, and to be thinking about the education system, community education and so on. We will play our part, but I would not want anyone to think we are responsible for the country's media literacy strategy, because we are not.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: What do you think the outcomes so far have been of your media literacy work? Could you point to any examples?

Dame Melanie Dawes: We do quite a lot of work to champion and support groups that are working with others—for example, work with the *Guardian,* other news organisations, and particular communities—but we do not run large programmes where you can measure impact. That is why the main aim of our strategy is to improve awareness among the community we work with, which is essentially those that then work with the public. It is early days for us. Our strategy is out for consultation, and we want people's views about whether we are prioritising our relatively small resource into the right kinds of areas. We make a very serious effort on research; that has always been a strength of Ofcom's work. Again, shining a light on these issues to the best of our ability is an important part of this.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: Do you feel supported by the Government in this endeavour? Is there any example whereby you are working together very closely?

Dame Melanie Dawes: We are looking forward to talking to them over the next few months about the strategy we have just published, and perhaps engaging with them on where arms of government could also come in and work alongside us. As we see some trends we have been talking about getting more and more pronounced, media literacy becomes ever more important, and it needs a strong government strategy as well as a strong contribution from the regulator.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: My last question is in terms of the AI Safety Institute the Government has set up. Is that something that you might work with in terms of trying to enhance media literacy as a form of defence?

Dame Melanie Dawes: That is an interesting question. That work is still mobilising in government; it is quite new, and it is more focused on the protocols and rules that should be followed by those that are managing and owning foundation models in terms of how they are using data, what

safety testing they are doing, and so on. But that is a good question as to whether media literacy can be part of that, because we know platform design can help or hinder media literacy, so it probably needs to be thought about. The question you would probably need to ask is whether it is at the foundation model level or whether it is more where the service hits the consumer.

The Chair: Before we move on, can I come back to what you were saying before about the Online Safety Act in the context of news and the safeguard against the taking down of content? Does the safeguard apply to the activity of shadow banning? If TikTok deprioritises critiques of China, for example, how does the protection for news in that kind of arena work as far as you are concerned?

Dame Melanie Dawes: If it is news publisher content, it needs to go through a process of alerting that news publisher before it is taken down, unless the circumstances are so extreme that the platform feels justified in acting immediately. In any event, even if it does act immediately, it has to engage with the news publisher and get its views. If it is journalistic content—there is a definition in the Act about what that means but it is essentially content that is relevant to a UK audience and is journalistic in nature—freedom of expression must be weighed in the balance in any decision.

The Chair: But if the algorithms are doing it rather than—

Dame Melanie Dawes: They will need to have systems and processes that capture news publisher content so they do not make decisions like that to downrank or take down content that is from a recognised news publisher. We have just launched a call for input on this because we will be coming out with consultation documents on the specific rules next year, which will look into questions such as how that should work. It is one of the later parts of the Online Safety Act to be mobilised because of the priority Parliament gave to illegal harms and children. I hope and expect news publishers will engage quite heavily on this.

The Chair: We are going to move on to Ofcom's role in the context of broadcasting.

Q160 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** I would like to take you on to the specific issue of impartiality. It is not necessarily the easiest thing to define and is always in the eye of the beholder. As far as the main broadcasting channels are concerned, they are generally accused of a lack of impartiality by both sides, and the end result is that people feel they are pretty impartial. In judging impartiality, you have tried to have a degree of flexibility, and critics say that amounts to inconsistency. Dame Melanie, could you start by saying whether you think there is any fairness in that accusation or whether people ought to be able to determine what your standards are from the outside and therefore comply?

Dame Melanie Dawes: I will definitely ask Cristina to come in on this. You are right that impartiality as a concept is somewhat in the eye of the beholder. There is a distinction between the sort of considerations you

would have if you were doing research and asking the public, "Is this content impartial?" Often, the response you get depends on people's perspectives. Depending on where they sit, they will judge the same content very differently, which is what we see in relation to the BBC, for example. As a regulator, we have to turn what is in the law—in the Communications Act—into something that can be used practically to assess content on broadcast radio and TV.

The concept in law is of due impartiality, so it provides a very high degree of importance to the context, the content of the show, the audience expectation, and so on.

A lot of people would like us to draw bright lines here and to say, "This, that and the other is not allowed", or, "This language is not allowed", or, "These presenters are or are not allowed", but we do not censor in advance; it is an incredibly important principle in law and for Ofcom that we are a post-broadcast regulator. Yes, there is a degree of flexibility, which is the right thing.

Cristina has been on the other end of this for many years, but I do not hear from our broadcasters that they are confused about these rules. Sometimes they fall on the wrong side of the line because they are on air and there is a mistake made in live coverage, but it is not something we hear is a source of major confusion from those we regulate. People do respect the fact that the flexibility they have is important when we are safeguarding freedom of expression, which is central to how we operate these rules.

Baroness Wheatcroft: There seems to have been some confusion among certain broadcasters as to whether or not a very partial broadcaster could read news impartially. Do you think that is fair?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: I can pick that up. We have one set of rules that we apply fairly to all broadcasters. Those rules say very clearly that politicians cannot present news. We have had a number of cases recently where we have held broadcasters in breach of those rules for doing that.

On 18 March, we published five outcomes—against GB News as it happens—in which we made it very clear that politicians cannot present news unless there are exceptional circumstances. Interestingly, in one case we did not find it in breach because we felt there were exceptional circumstances. Jacob Rees-Mogg happened to be down at Buckingham Palace for one of the royal commemorations and there was a security alert, so it took him live on the scene giving an update. We felt that was an exceptional circumstance.

Those rulings and the guidance we gave made it very clear that politicians are not allowed to present news on any programmes that we regulate, and that has been made pretty clear to the broadcasters.

Baroness Wheatcroft: Do you think you came down heavily enough when the first politicians started presenting news?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: As I said, we have a very clear system of investigations. We judge each case on its individual merits. As Dame

Melanie mentioned, we consider a wide range of contextual factors when we make those decisions. It is a very thorough, two-stage process in which both parties get to make their points. When we think those rules have been breached and there is a reason to investigate, we do so and we have done without fear or favour. I do not mind which channel it is; we will investigate it to the same set of rules. There may be a commentary or some idea that we do it differently for different people, and we have given certain assurances to people that that is simply not the case.

Baroness Wheatcroft: But politicians can present current affairs programmes.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: The rules do say they can present current affairs, but, again, it is all about due impartiality. For example, no candidates can present any kind of programme during a general election period. Any broadcaster that decides to use politicians presenting a current affairs programme during an election period is going to have to work really hard to make sure they stick to the rules because there is a heightened need for due impartiality on a much wider range of topics. Everything becomes political during an election campaign, and I have made it pretty clear that we will expect a lot of hard work to go into that. We have an election committee, which is ready to investigate and make decisions on possible breaches really quickly—we have done it in 48 hours before—and we will hold the broadcasters to account. If those rules are broken, they will be treated quite severely with all the powers we have.

Baroness Wheatcroft: We are not in an official election period at the moment.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Not yet.

Baroness Wheatcroft: But it certainly feels like one. Nevertheless, there is this distinction between news and current affairs. Your own research shows that the public is quite confused about where one ends and the other begins, and probably does not make the distinction. Could you tell us how easy it is to make the distinction? Once you are measuring impartiality, in some cases you are doing so over a period; how do you decide what that period is?

Dame Melanie Dawes: Perhaps I can take the second of those and then Cristina might want to come in on the first. To be clear, the due impartiality rules apply to individual programmes, not to a particular period of programming, and the test is whether or not a sufficiently broad range of views has been brought to bear on particular topics. It does not have to be an equal range of views, but it does need to be a sufficiently broad range so that the viewer has more than one opinion being expressed. There has been a little confusion there because people perhaps do not always realise that it is around programmes, which is the central way to think about this from a practical point of view.

Baroness Wheatcroft: That makes sense.

Dame Melanie Dawes: Yes. As a broadcaster, you can link programmes. For example, you might interview the leader of one political party on a topic one night in one programme, and you might follow that with another leader on another night of the week but you need to signal that to the viewer or the listener. I think there has perhaps been a bit of confusion that you may do this through linked programmes, but you do not have to; the primary test is around individual programming.

Baroness Wheatcroft: The other element is that there is a view that if a channel has a small audience, it is a self-selecting audience, and their view of or need for impartiality may not be the same as the main broadcast channels. Ms Nicolotti Squires, I wonder whether you could put us right about that?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: As I said, we have one set of rules, which apply to everybody. When we think there has been a breach of those rules, we take a lot of factors into context. Audience expectation, the balance of freedom of expression, the time of day that the programme is on, the type of programme, and the nature of the presenter are all things that would be taken into account.

Every investigation and the outcome of every investigation is taken on its own merits. We do not go, "Well, we did that before so we must do it this way". Consistent rules are applied individually to each complaint. This mixture of news and current affairs is not necessarily a new thing. The "Today" programme and "Good Morning Britain" both have a mixture of news and current affairs. The research you referred to showed that people had quite a good idea of the difference between the two in theory, but sometimes they struggled in practice, and they made some suggestions to the broadcasters themselves about how you could make that distinction.

Ofcom has been doing this for 20 years and has a good reputation globally. When it comes to weighing up whether something is news or current affairs, it is very hard to put it down in black and white and say, "This is definitely news and this is definitely current affairs". We want to be able to welcome innovation and new formats in programmes, and it is up to us as an organisation to declare whether a programme has been in breach because news and current affairs were not treated like they should have been. So far, if I may touch wood, those decisions have all stood up in court. They have been challenged legally at various points and have withstood the legal test.

Baroness Wheatcroft: Thank you very much, particularly for clarifying the point about the period being the programme because I think there was some confusion.

Lord Hall of Birkenhead: I had better declare I have been regulated by Ofcom when I was at the BBC. Can I pursue this business of news and current affairs? You have said it is difficult to say when it is current affairs and when it is news. I want to put to you that it may be that the lack of definition is part of the problem.

When I was running the BBC, we talked about the "Today" programme or "Newsnight" as being news programmes not current affairs, which does not really help. They are news programmes, and news programmes are bound by the tighter definition of impartiality that would come from a news bulletin. I put it to you that part of the problem is, if you tighten it and say, "News is only about somebody reading a bulletin for eight or nine minutes", you are missing the point.

Dame Melanie Dawes: We have said it is broader than that. You are right: there are some programmes—including some of the BBC's flagship shows—which you would almost certainly describe as news. If we were assessing such programmes, a lot of the time we would apply the news rules, which are not just about politicians not being able to present but about due impartiality and due accuracy applying to pretty much all the content.

We believe it is right that we leave the discretion here to the broadcaster to work out how to meet the requirements of the code, and when you talk to audiences about this and you take them through how you might make a decision on a particular show, they get it. In the judgments we have made recently around politicians presenting news, we have been as clear as we can about where we think those boundaries lie.

It is worth saying that this is a new issue because there were no politicians presenting programmes that were at risk of crossing that boundary until very recently. It is quite a new area that has not been tested before. We have done what we think is quite a helpful job in setting out where some of those boundaries lie in relation to programmes that have actually been aired so that we can be as clear as possible about the issues. We have published that in a note for the industry so people across our broadcasters can see the sorts of judgments we have made.

Lord Hall of Birkenhead: But you can see why people get confused when they listen to a programme like "Today", which is highly impartial with impartial presenters of no known political belief, and then they watch a programme presented by a politician and think, "Well, that's a similar programme to 'Today', yet the way impartiality is treated is different".

Dame Melanie Dawes: Cristina may want to come in on this. Politicians can present current affairs, but they cannot present news. Even if they are presenting current affairs, the programme producers—that is where the regulator responsibility lies—need to make sure they are bringing a range of views to bear.

We have looked at a number of programmes where the question was not whether it was news, but whether it was impartial within a current affairs context. Again, we found a number of cases of politicians presenting where we felt a broad range of views was being brought to bear, but a number where it was not and where we have found broadcasters in breach—GB News and others.

I do not think anyone can honestly say that Ofcom has not been all over this in the past year when we have a number of live investigations. We have opened up a very significant number of investigations and found a number of breaches, and, of course, we have put GB News on notice that sanctions will follow should there be further breaches.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Can I just pick up on your question about the definition of news and current affairs? I am not convinced that having a very clear definition is possible. What is news? News is lots of different things to all sorts of different people. We put out terms that help guide the audience but at the end of the day, when it comes to applying the rules, we determine whether the rules have been broken and whether something was news or current affairs. One thing we will take into account is whether it was a live report from the ground or whether it was a long, discursive programme.

Going back to your question and your point about politicians presenting a programme, we do not let them get away with presenting a whole programme that does not have any impartiality in it. Whether it is news or current affairs is left to us to determine, and we have a pretty good track record of doing it so far.

Lord Hall of Birkenhead: Can I just ask one other question? Dame Melanie, you were saying, and you are right, that a lot of these issues are new because the broadcasting landscape is changing, which is in many ways enriching and a good thing. You also made the point that due impartiality applies to programmes having a range of views over time, et cetera. Is it different when you have a network or a channel that is basing its raison d'etre around one viewpoint and one take on the world?

Dame Melanie Dawes: We explained some of this in our written submission, but the due impartiality rules do allow current affairs specifically to be presented from a particular perspective as long as due impartiality is observed in individual programmes, which means that a sufficiently wide range of views is being brought to bear. That has supported quite a plural landscape on TV over the last few decades, which is our interpretation of what the rules in the Act mean and how we have taken them forward in the Broadcasting Code, because the requirement is for individual programmes to have due impartiality.

Lord Hall of Birkenhead: As a concept, I am wondering whether the same level of impartiality ought to be applied for news and current affairs or whether—as I think Lord Grade was describing—you need a new definition that has current affairs, such as "Panorama" somewhere over here, and a different set of daily news programmes, to which a higher degree of impartiality ought to be applied?

Dame Melanie Dawes: If I am hearing you correctly, I think you are raising two questions. One is about the definition between news and current affairs and whether we should have a brighter line there. We have argued that we have been clear about what the line looks like in some real-life situations, and that it is not an issue for most broadcasters because they do not choose to have politicians presenting current affairs

shows. It is for a small number of broadcasters to take particular care around that boundary.

The other question is around the due impartiality rules more generally—whether that is on news or current affairs—in relation to matters of public policy. That is a slightly different question. As I have explained, we are not looking for an equal range of views; we are looking for an appropriate range of views to be brought to bear so the audience have more than one perspective. Perhaps we have not highlighted enough that any regulation and legislation in this space has to put freedom of expression centrally at its heart. It is incredibly important to consider the chilling effect of going further in providing tighter definitions and so on.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: If Ofcom was telling me what kinds of programmes I could make before they had even been broadcast, I might have quite a different attitude towards the regulator.

Dame Melanie Dawes: It is what we used to do back in the day.

The Chair: I have three colleagues wishing to ask a supplementary. We will start with Lord McNally, then Lord Knight, and then the Lord Bishop.

Lord McNally: We have been looking at the narrow short term, but we all live in the real world. We know what has been going on over the last year or two and has been testing our regulations, which you both said have stood up for 100 years, never mind 20 years, and that is a concentrated attack on regulations to see how far they can go. As you rightly say, Ofcom is interested in free speech, but it should also be aware of the forces at work. We do not want to see what has happened in the United States with their news, where both CNN and Fox take absolute positions. What we have is worth preserving, and I just wonder whether Ofcom—in being so with it in modern and technological changes—forgets that what we have is still worth defending.

Dame Melanie Dawes: We do believe that what we have is worth defending. It is just over a year since some of these changes happened such as, particularly but not only GB News, introducing politicians as presenters. During that time, we have opened up investigations and concluded some, though not all. There is an inevitable period of time when we are doing that work where people are asking, "What is going on?" And I understand that.

During the autumn of last year, we had a huge number of complaints—28,000—about Israel-Gaza across multiple broadcasters. We chose to prioritise that work in October, November and December last year, and that did have an impact on some impartiality cases we were progressing. You have now seen us come out on some of those cases. We have put GB News specifically on notice that sanctions will follow if it does not improve its record of compliance with the Broadcasting Code. We have a number of outstanding investigations, and we will continue to do that work.

Cristina has experienced what it is like to be regulated by Ofcom. I do not think we should be in any doubt that a breach of the Broadcasting Code is a very serious matter, whether or not it leads to a further

sanction. It has already had an impact, and it is serious for broadcasters, editors and producers, for whom abiding by these rules is important for them as individuals.

We know we have more work to do here, this is hotly debated, and there are very different views here. I hope we have been able to explain what we do, but our work has not finished yet and we will continue to open up cases where we think we need to.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: You do not want a breach of Ofcom rules on your CV; as a programme maker, it is not a thing you want to carry around and it is the kind of thing that keeps you awake at night. I believe the chief executive of GB News sat here a few weeks ago and told you he wanted to be regulated by Ofcom and he wanted his programmes to be compliant. I have seen evidence that it has put measures in place; we will continue to judge it and find it in breach where it is.

Dame Melanie Dawes: We would like it to be compliant, too.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Yes.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: For a long time, we have seen journalists become politicians, then ex-politicians, then perhaps journalists again, and then politicians again. After the next election, there are likely to be a lot of ex-politicians. When is a person a politician in this context?

Dame Melanie Dawes: There are clear rules on candidates for the election, but, aside from that, I would say a lot of this is about what the audience expects and how a programme signals that somebody may have a clear political affiliation. I am sorry, I always say this, but it is down to the broadcaster to work out how they adjust for the fact that they have somebody who has had a very clear political affiliation in the past and been known for that, and whether that matters for that particular show. Do you want to add anything there, Cristina?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: We do have a live investigation going on at the moment as to whether somebody is a politician or not. Again, it is up to the broadcasters; if they choose to have somebody who has clear political leanings presenting a programme, they need to make sure a wide range of opinions is presented in that programme.

Dame Melanie Dawes: This is also a reason I am not sure it would help to extend the ban on politicians to current affairs programming. As you say, you have people who have been politicians in the past, so the fact that the rule is about them not presenting news but that they may present current affairs provided that due impartiality is protected gives a degree of flexibility to the industry, which I would argue is important.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Equally, somebody standing as a candidate in the election gives you absolute clarity; but when does a politician stop being a politician? It is a very difficult question.

The Lord Bishop of Leeds: If someone is serving in an elected political role, surely it is possible to say that they are a politician, and simply banning MPs, for example, from presenting these programmes would be

quick and simple. It is not a clampdown on freedom of expression; they can still be invited to respond, contribute and speak.

If they were politicians in the past and are not in elected or appointed office, I do not see what the problem is with them contributing, because their own record in office will also be held as a backdrop to the views they are expressing. But would it not just be simpler to ban them?

Dame Melanie Dawes: They are not allowed to present news programming, so the question is: can they host opinion or chat shows, provided they meet the due impartiality rules and that there is a range of views around the table? Of course, if you have someone with their own view and everybody knows that, then you are going to have to work harder—as we have found in some cases we have looked at—to make sure you have that balance in the programme.

It is a matter for Parliament as to whether politicians should or should not be allowed to do things. Our job is to uphold the due impartiality rules and assess whether or not a programme is meeting those rules. I will not repeat what we have already said; you may present current affairs programmes but the programme editor, the producer, needs to make sure and take special steps—even outside an election period—that there is a sufficiently broad range of views when the discussion is about major matters of public policy. That is how the system is designed to work.

The Chair: Before we move on, I am quite interested in how much attention Ofcom gives to public trust in news as a whole, and how you are tracking that. You have said this is a recent development in terms of the news industry—or rather we should make the distinction that this is current affairs—in terms of the arrival of politicians.

I wonder whether you see this as something that is affecting public trust in news as a whole. An argument made by some people from the news industry—even if they do not say it in quite these blunt terms—is that somehow what is happening in GB News has an impact on the way the public perceives them, or their confidence in news as a whole. I just wonder what your view on that is, because a measure we have looked at in terms of public trust goes back some years to, say, 2016; so that decline in public confidence in news started a long time ago. I would just like to understand a bit more about how you see these two things connecting, or not, as the case may be.

Dame Melanie Dawes: The best globally comparable source on this is probably Reuters surveys, which show that British TV and radio news have high levels of trust—specifically for accuracy and impartiality—but the overall UK news ecosystem has lower levels of trust than other countries. I believe that is a very important research source.

We also track trust for individual broadcasters. To go back to the points we were making earlier—I think it was Baroness Wheatcroft's question—impartiality and trust are very much in the eye of the beholder. GB News's audience, for example, which is about 4% of the viewing public, rates it highly for trust, accuracy and impartiality. The BBC's own

audience rates it slightly higher still, but none the less GB News, in common with other small audience-share broadcasters such as CNN and Al Jazeera, is enjoyed by its audience, which is quite important.

Our primary focus is looking at individual broadcasters and how they are viewed by the public—I am sure we will come on to this—specifically the BBC, where we think impartiality is a very important question.

The Chair: You have not seen anything at the moment that would lead you to think there is a connection between what is happening here? I raise this because that is what some people seem to be arguing.

Dame Melanie Dawes: I do not think so; I am not aware of any data that shows that, but I think it is a good question, to be honest, and we will take that one away. I am not aware of any data that shows a decline that one can associate with the arrival of alternative news providers in the recent past.

The Chair: Some people might argue that it would be helpful anyway, in terms of the questions around what is driving audience perceptions.

Before we move on specifically to the BBC, just to be clear, from Ofcom's perspective, are you driven by audience expectations in terms of how you interpret, apply and enforce the rules?

Dame Melanie Dawes: We take into account a whole range of contextual factors when we look at a programme, and it is one factor we look at, but not the only one by any means.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: It is a balance of all the different things, and it will vary for every different piece of work we are looking at; we take a wide range of factors into consideration, and audience perception is one of them.

Baroness Wheatcroft: Surely your point about the audience for GB News believing that what they are getting is impartial and correct should be causing you a degree of concern and point to looking for a different approach from it, or some sort of labelling. Does it not worry you at all that that is what the audience think?

Dame Melanie Dawes: There is a distinction between people giving their own view on whether they trust something for accuracy and impartiality, which is, by its very nature, subjective; we would all be subjective in our judgments of individual programmes because it is the human condition to have different views on different things. There is a distinction between that and how we use the practical rules we have been operating as a regulator for a number of years to assess individual programmes. As I say, that is about how the show is put together, how different opinions are brought to bear and so on.

They are slightly different, and they are sometimes a little confused in the public debate, but it is so important as a regulator that we ask the audience what they think; it is the bedrock of everything. It is important to know that audiences for GB News actually really enjoy watching it and have chosen to watch it. We also find from other research—including into the BBC—that people often want an opinionated current affairs

programme; they are quite keen on it and want to have a bit of attitude. As long as that is countered as appropriate, with sufficient alternative views, that is in line with the Broadcasting Code.

The Chair: We will move on to the BBC.

Q161 **Lord Young of Norwood Green:** I will declare an interest as an ex-BBC governor. How well do you think the BBC is fulfilling its public purpose to provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them? That is a pretty general question.

Dame Melanie Dawes: Overall, the BBC delivers a very important service across its remit, including on news. We write an annual report based on really serious analysis and evidence every year in the autumn. The BBC does a good job; it produces a very wide range of news and current affairs coverage across TV and radio and reaches a very wide range of audiences, including nearly three-quarters of adults over the age of 16. It is the one broadcaster that is still in the top 10 for young people.

There is an awful lot that the BBC should be very proud of. However, its role is so important, and we know, from the research we did on impartiality in 2022, that audiences hold the BBC to a very high standard in that regard and have things to say about it. Overall, impartiality scores slightly lower for the BBC than for the other PSBs, and impartiality tracks lower for the BBC than accuracy and overall trust, which is a really important issue for the BBC to address. I can perhaps come on to explain some factors we think are at play there, but it is very important that the board has gripped this as an important priority through the Serota review, which it is now implementing. It can never really let up on this one because it needs a broad audience and it has to be able to persuade the public that it can be trusted to be impartial.

Lord Young of Norwood Green: That sounds like the report I used to get: "Okay, but could do better". Do you think the BBC is taking sufficient action to address ongoing concerns about impartiality from some audiences? You have mentioned it, as did the BBC in a recent review on immigration, which I felt was quite an interesting issue. If you ask people what a matter of key interest is at the moment, ignoring things like Rwanda, how immigration impacts their local community is really important. The BBC's own review said, "Well, we only tend to stress the positive, rather than the perception of the negative". Do you think that is a fair criticism?

Dame Melanie Dawes: I do. This is the BBC's own report from last week— one of its thematic reviews. It is right to be doing these reviews, looking at different topics. This one was on migration, and there is a lot in it. It shows that you have to get under the bonnet and look at the detail here. The report says the BBC is too focused on just the political debates and not sufficiently bringing to bear the views of local communities; that, as you say, it sometimes risks only looking at the reasons why migration is a good thing; it needs to take care on who it is

calling migrants and who it is calling refugees—all sorts of, if you like, quite detailed issues that it needs to be examining.

We know from when we talk to audiences about this, which we did in 2022, that it is also sometimes about the way presenters appear and whether people feel they trust them. Some of that comes from who it has on air; it is also the choice of stories. As I was saying earlier, the audience often wants the BBC to take a bit more risk. Quite a lot of people say that very super-balanced coverage—"on the one hand, on the other"—is less interesting and engaging than they would like. They sometimes want the stories to be brought to them with a little more attitude, albeit making sure the views are being balanced.

As I said, the BBC does a good job overall, but this question of impartiality is very important for it to keep addressing; I do not think it can do too much work on it, to be honest.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: I agree. One of the things we picked up in our annual review last year of the BBC's performance was a feeling amongst people from lower socioeconomic groups that the BBC was not quite as much for them as it was for other people. Some factors were things like seeing themselves represented in programmes, et cetera.

It was very clear in the recent review into migration, and we made it clear to the BBC in our annual review, that we would expect it to make some changes to the way that it portrays or engages with all audiences, because it is meant to engage with all audiences right across the United Kingdom. When we do our annual review later this year, we will be making sure and interrogating what steps it has taken and what effect that has had.

Lord Young of Norwood Green: That was quite interesting—you say that you would expect it to.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Yes, we pointed out in the annual review that there was a feeling among lower socioeconomic groups that the BBC was not perhaps for them as much as people from other parts of society. We said to it that we expected it to improve that, and we will find out what it has done and if it has improved or not when we come to review its performance for this current year.

Lord Young of Norwood Green: How well prepared do you think Ofcom is to extend its oversight of impartiality to the BBC's online content?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: My team is working on that at the moment, and that was delivered as part of the mid-term review. We are just waiting for a framework agreement to be determined with the BBC; the team is working on drawing up codes already.

Just to be clear, we will be regulating the BBC's content on social platforms, but it is official BBC content; we will not be regulating what individuals decide to post. I will not mention any individuals, but we will be regulating what is written on the BBC website and app, official BBC

News tweets, Facebook posts et cetera. We are making good progress in working on those codes.

Lord Young of Norwood Green: So drawing up codes and the framework are works in progress?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Yes. As I think we said to the Secretary of State the other day, once the framework agreement has been reached, we would be in a position to aim for about a year to be ready to publish those codes, have all the consultation, et cetera.

Dame Melanie Dawes: We will consult on them; that is a very important part of the process. That will be the conclusion within a year when we have done all the consultation.

Lord Young of Norwood Green: In your view, does the BBC have a positive or negative impact on the wider news market? Is the BBC shaping the market or crowding out competitors, as some people accuse it of?

The Chair: In this context, we have heard stuff about competing in podcasts and the proposal to introduce advertising on BBC podcasts that are appearing on Apple, and that sort of thing.

Dame Melanie Dawes: It is an important part of Ofcom's job to, if you like, be the referee here. The BBC is required to assess any major programme changes and make sure it is not creating a commercial shadow for the rest of the industry. If we think it has not done that work adequately or there are important issues to address, we will look at it too.

We have not had a proposal on the podcast question, but were we to receive one, it is the sort of thing we would look very closely at indeed. The question would be about advertising revenues across the industry, not just about the BBC's own service and how it appears to audiences.

Lord Young of Norwood Green: I have one supplementary, if I may? When I watch or listen to news reporters specifically, I expect them to have a good background knowledge of the person they are interviewing. Sometimes what I experience is they are just listening to the response. The best example I can give is the industrial action on rail strikes. My perception is that the leader of the union will state their point, and there is not a lot of challenge. Do you think there should be? Do you take a stance on that at all?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: It is really important that we let broadcasters create the programmes they want to and do not put too many conditions in their path, but it is also important that we enforce our laws, and we will take action if we think a programme has not been duly impartial enough.

Everyone has different perceptions about what is and is not a challenge, and everyone is entitled to that. At the end of the day, people who make good news programmes with a sufficient challenge will get good audiences. It is not within our remit, and probably should not be, that we say, "You must challenge union leaders", or, "You must make sure there

is more challenge in your programmes". It is up to the broadcasters to make engaging programmes for their viewers that bring in audiences from right across the United Kingdom.

The Chair: When we come to Lord Storey, one thing he wants to talk about is local news; we may want to ask again about the commercial impact of the BBC in the local news area.

While we are still specifically on the BBC, I just want to follow up on something. I was pleased to hear you refer to the fact that the BBC is not performing as well as it needs to with a certain demographic in terms of its audiences. There has been some reluctance on the part of the BBC to accept and embrace that when it was giving evidence to us. It is interesting and good to hear that that is something you will pick up with it again when you are doing your annual review later this year.

When you are doing that, there is one thing that would be interesting and helpful to get your view on. One of the BBC's public purposes is to provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage the world around them. In the course of this inquiry, we have heard from a number of witnesses, particularly from James Bennet—who is now at the *Economist*; he used to be at the *New York Times*—that one of the problems in newsrooms, as he saw it, was the failure of journalists and newsrooms to properly understand the world and what was causing some of the disruption we have encountered via the ballot box in the last few years, whether that is Brexit, Boris, or Trump in the US.

It would be interesting to investigate whether the BBC is being too narrow in who it is that needs to understand the world around them, and how much of that is something that is a requirement on people beyond those who it might consider ill informed. When you look at this question of it not serving a particular audience, it seems to me that this is an area to dig into.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: It is really important that all PSB broadcasters in particular—including the BBC—are talking to all their audience. It is important that senior editorial leaders make sure that is happening, and that they are not reporting something from a particular mindset or group of people.

Please do not laugh, but a promotion was made in one of my previous jobs for our coverage of the cost of living crisis. There was an image of a ciabatta loaf over the words, "The price of food is going up", and I said, "I'm very sorry, I can't run that; normal people do not eat ciabatta loaves". It is really important in newsrooms across the country that people are cognisant of what is going on in the whole of the world around them, in this case particularly in the United Kingdom. Connection with the audience is really important, and I always say to people, "Make sure you are making editorial decisions for your audiences, not for each other".

The Chair: I am making a slightly separate point about helping people who already think they are well informed about the world to understand they are clearly not as well informed about it as they might be.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Oh, I see.

The Chair: We need to move on, but that is a point that would be very helpful for you to look at as part of your review with the BBC.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Apologies; I had not quite understood it, but it is clear. I will write it down.

Dame Melanie Dawes: That is an interesting point.

The Chair: We are going to move on to Lord Storey. I know Lord Knight also wants to come in; maybe he can do it under this one.

Lord Storey: Hello. Just to go back very briefly, can you reassure me that those politicians presenting programmes who are standing for election will not be on those programmes come the general election, because there is presumably a conflict of interest?

Dame Melanie Dawes: That is a very clear rule.

Lord Storey: That is all I need to hear.

Dame Melanie Dawes: They may not present any programme at all.

Q162 **Lord Storey:** That is fine. I was very interested to hear the chief executive of GB News saying there is an increasing thirst in the UK for diversity of opinions. Similarly, News UK told us that audiences are often turned away from traditional broadcasters. Does that mean that, to get that diversity of opinions, the PSBs are not sufficiently delivering a diversity of views across their programmes, or does it mean that those proprietors with very deep pockets and strong political views are the answer?

Dame Melanie Dawes: Our own research shows that people quite often want to hear strong views, and as long as those views are countered with others, that is compliant with the Broadcasting Code. Competition and new entrants into the market are a good thing, provided the rules are followed.

There will be things the PSBs and the BBC need to reflect on in terms of how they are reaching their audiences. It is an incredibly competitive landscape now, more and more so. The old days of a relatively closed shop of TV news providers are long gone, and it is not just other news providers on TV. As we have been saying, Facebook is the third biggest news source in the UK and people are switching the TV off altogether, although it still has quite broad reach.

As Cristina has been saying, it is very important for all news providers to spend as much time as they possibly can truly understanding their audience. That is the right way for commercial success, but it is also the right way to help make sure the public is as well informed as possible.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: News is an expensive business, as you point out, but I am also greatly encouraged by ITV and Channel 5, which have actually extended their news programming. They have been delivering more than they have to; they both recently extended their evening news

programmes to an hour long to get in more of a range of opinion and debate, which was a really good sign of health in that sector.

Lord Storey: Can I turn to radio and particularly local radio, because local news is really important to many people in communities, at city or regional level? We have seen how the PSBs have realised it is important to put their programme-making and programme delivery in different parts of the UK. Indeed, Ofcom has played a significant part in that; one only has to look at the BBC in Salford or Channel 4's move.

We have seen the opposite with commercial local radio; we have seen them making their programmes not at a local level but in London, made by London engineers, technicians and presenters, and then broadcast on the local radio stations. In some cases, they have even closed the local radio station down. They say, "Oh, we're giving news on the hour in the peak time"; that is a couple of minutes. Is that really a local commercial news station? Why did Ofcom allow this to happen? What is the future of local commercial news?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: As you know, the Media Bill is going through Parliament at the moment. In some respects, it allows the deregulation of local radio stations, but it protects local and locally made news in those. Once that comes into effect, we will have powers there to be able to enforce that a bit more.

As you point out, local news is really valued by people. Over the course of my career, I have noticed that local news availability—or the people working in it—has greatly reduced over the years, but it is an important service.

On the BBC side of radio, it has done some common programming at parts of the day when there are much lower audiences. It has kept distinct programmes at the times of day when there are more listeners, which is really important. We have made it clear with those changes that, again, we will review whether it works and make sure people are getting local news.

As I said, locally made news is covered in the Media Bill. That and the availability of those local radio stations on things like smart speakers is going to be in that Bill as well, which should really help.

Lord Storey: Where do you see the future of local community radio? Do you think they should be able to go on FM increasingly?

Dame Melanie Dawes: Community radio is very important; in fact, we are going to visit a community radio station in south London on Thursday. I am rather looking forward to it.

We have prioritised small-scale DAB services over the last few years because that way we can get to more companies or organisations that can broadcast. I know some are still really keen to get an FM licence, but our priority is to do it through another route. When we do license those frequencies at a local level, we are getting fantastic interest, and that is bringing some really good community services to people.

We also provide a lot of technical support to those services through our spectrum teams—not Cristina's teams but our spectrum experts—about how to get their technical side of things right; it is an important part of our work at Ofcom.

Lord Storey: This was not a question I was going to ask, but I have been quite interested in the BBC's funded Local Democracy Reporting Service. Are you responsible for ensuring there is impartiality from it?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: In terms of delivering the impartiality, that depends on where it reports.

Lord Storey: *Daily Mail* or—

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: It depends on where it reports; if its output appears in the *Daily Mail*, we do not regulate it. If its output appears on BBC "Look North", we do.

It is interesting that you raise that point, because we are doing a review of local media at the moment in the nations and in regions. We are going to do an initial cut of it next month and a fuller report in December; I will make sure you get a copy. We have been looking at the role of those BBC-funded local democracy reporters, and it has caused controversy in some sectors. It has been a very mixed review; some organisations think it is a great asset and have been enjoying using the output of those people, and other organisations see it as a bit of an invasion of their territory. We will report back more on that next month when we publish the initial findings of our review.

Local news is really important to people. As I said, I started on local newspapers. You did not have to have a degree in those days and you could start at 16, but that route has dried up somewhat. Holding local councils, police commission meetings and hospital boards to account is really important, as well as the big national organisations.

Lord Storey: I am glad you said that, and, of course, it is a lifeline for young would-be journalists, is it not?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Absolutely.

The Chair: Is there any work you are doing as far as the impact of BBC local news moving more online and away from radio on the rest of the market in local news?

Dame Melanie Dawes: Yes; we will keep that under review.

The Chair: Is that part of this review you have just mentioned?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: It is part of the local media review; we are looking at the BBC-funded local democracy reporters and the general market: is the BBC harming the commercial market by doing more online local news? We are looking at that as part of our assessment.

The Chair: On a slightly different topic but still on the issue of online, as we touched on a little while ago, you are now, or are about to start, regulating BBC News online. What is your view about calls from some PSBs for you to have your remit extended to cover regulating them online as well?

Dame Melanie Dawes: We will already be regulating their catch-up and digital services under the Media Bill—ITVX and so on. The question is whether we should also regulate written online material. We could. With any extension of regulation, you just have to think, "Is there clearly a reason for it? Is there a harm we are trying to address? Is there a concern that we have about standards slipping?" In this case, I would also ask, "Is it just the PSBs, or would you extend that to all licensed broadcasters? Why would you single them out?" You could perhaps do it as part of the licence. This might sound surprising, but I would not always reach for regulation as the solution to every problem.

Going back to what we were discussing at the beginning, we should be quite careful about introducing new regulatory requirements on the PSBs, and thinking more about how we get a better understanding of what the online world is doing to our democracy because of the way the news landscape is changing so rapidly.

The Chair: We will leave it at that. Thank you very much indeed for joining us this afternoon and giving us your evidence. Thank you.