



Communications and Digital Committee

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

Tuesday 15 October 2024

2.30 pm

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

Evidence Session No. 18

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Questions 163 – 195

Witnesses

I: Stephanie Peacock MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Sport, Media, Civil Society and Youth, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS); Baroness Jones of Whitchurch, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Future Digital Economy and Online Safety, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT); Robert Specterman-Green, Director, Media and Creative Industries, DCMS; Sam Cannicott, Deputy Director for AI Capability, DSIT.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witnesses

Stephanie Peacock MP, Baroness Jones of Whitchurch, Robert Specterman-Green and Sam Cannicott.

Q163 **The Chair:** We are completing our inquiry into the future of news. This is its final public hearing. We are pleased to welcome Ministers from DCMS and DSIT together with their officials. This is probably your first outing as Ministers in front of a Select Committee, so I welcome you. As it is your first time here, would you like to state your position in the departments? I will get your officials to do so as well, once you have.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: I am the Minister for Digital Futures and Online Safety in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

Stephanie Peacock MP: I am the MP for Barnsley South and the Minister for Sport, Media, Civil Society and Youth.

Robert Specterman-Green: I am the director for media and international at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Sam Cannicott: I am the deputy director in the AI policy team at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

Q164 **The Chair:** We will ask a range of questions covering the various different issues that have been raised with us or that we have explored during this inquiry. Could you explain the Government's policy or general approach in the context of the news industry? Do you see yourselves as being interventionist in this area or not?

Stephanie Peacock MP: Good afternoon to the committee. It is a pleasure to be here. It is indeed my first Select Committee appearance as a Minister, so I thank the committee for inviting me. Your inquiry is incredibly pertinent at the moment.

As the new Media Minister, it is important for me to state how important journalism, the press and the media are. They are invaluable to our society and our democracy. As a way of opening, it is important to say how committed we are to a free, sustainable and plural media landscape, while respecting the independence of the press. We see our role as providing the correct framework for the press. There are lots of positives about the press and media landscape, but it is no doubt an industry and area that has faced huge challenges and seen huge changes, which you are exploring through your inquiry.

One of the particular areas of interest and concern to the Government is the local press and some of the challenges faced there. I have seen the real importance of the role that the local press plays in my own community of Barnsley. We saw the huge value of the sector in August, with the unrest and the riots. Its value is in providing trusted, reliable information, but journalists, who in effect are on the front line, also face some challenges.

One of my first visits as Media Minister was to Leeds, during and shortly after the unrest, to talk to journalists who had reported on the riots. I was speaking to them about the role they had in imparting information, but also the risks that they took. I am sure we will talk about that later in the inquiry. Since I have taken over as Media Minister, the Secretary of State and I have met with a range of different stakeholders. I am very keen to hear from stakeholders, to meet them and to hear their perspectives.

The Chair: You mentioned local news specifically, and we will pick up on some specifics around that, certainly in the context of the economic challenges. Before I ask about local news, can you unpack what you mean by “correct framework”?

Stephanie Peacock MP: You asked whether we would be interventionist. The Government have to tread a fine line between supporting the press and seeing its value, and being overly interventionist. We respect that the press is a free press and that it has challenges. There are interventions that we might be able to take, and we are open and willing to explore all of them, but we have to tread that fine line as a Government.

The Chair: What sorts of things do you have in mind in supporting the future of local news?

Stephanie Peacock MP: The Secretary of State has announced her intention to develop a local media strategy, and that will be across government. We look forward to working with colleagues on that. We are open to all options; nothing is off the table. We want to be creative. You could apply this to all parts of the media and press, but the local press in particular has been at the sharp end of some of the challenges that this sector has faced. We look at the value not just in a monetary way, but as the society and community value.

For example, one of the things that the DCMS has done, in working with the Public Interest News Foundation, is to map out where there are news deserts. We have seen 300 titles close in the last 15 years, and there are far too many communities across the country where there is simply no local news—from the coalfields of Nottinghamshire, right through to south London and the south-east. There is not really a pattern to them or a one-size-fits-all solution, but clearly it is a real challenge where there is no local news provision. Again, it goes back to that balance in what the Government can do: we cannot directly support specific titles, but we can work with civil society, the community and carefully with local government to support areas to have a strong local presence—or to have any presence, in some cases.

The Chair: We may want to explore some of that in more detail when we come on to questions associated with more specific support packages and whether they are economic. We will talk about the BBC later. Baroness Jones, can I come to you on DSIT’s perspective on the future of news?

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: We see it as a very fast-moving area, with the increasing development online and all the creative effort that is going into new forms of communication and news distribution. We see that as sometimes being a great advantage: it enables all sorts of people to communicate in a way that they have not done before, and we want to encourage that. We also want to encourage good journalism and make sure that democracy flourishes on that basis.

We also want to make sure that those new developments are properly protected. Obviously you know that the Online Safety Act is coming on stream; we need to make sure that there are safe spaces for people to exchange ideas. At the heart of it, we want to make sure that democracy flourishes and that there is an opportunity for well-informed public debate on both online and offline media.

Baroness Wheatcroft: I am intrigued, Baroness Jones. You mentioned democracy flourishing a couple of times. Does it require a paper product to flourish, or can news be entirely online?

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: If we are being realistic, the way forward will be increasingly online. Far be it from me to prescribe or define that, but the reality is that people increasingly get their news online now and that will be the future.

Will democracy be protected? It is up to us to make sure that we have the right guard-rails. Obviously we have the Online Safety Act, but we might need other protections going forward as well. The Online Safety Act has provisions that will protect democratic engagement, particularly in the run-up to elections and so on. That is really important to us.

But it is important that we have a flourishing debate online using all the trusted media sources that we can. We hope that we can protect and enhance those sources, and make sure that they are where people go when they want to know what is happening in the world.

Q165 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** Should it be a cause for concern that London no longer has a daily newspaper?

Stephanie Peacock MP: It could be a concern across the country, from Bolsover to Lewisham. It is a reflection of the changing challenges in the sector. Inevitably, the paper product is diminishing, although it is still very important to a number of my constituents, for example, often older ones. It is really important, and a challenge, to make sure that there is still trusted journalism, created by trained journalists. It does not have to be a paper product; it can be online.

Baroness Wheatcroft: You have said that you are prepared to work with society and community to make this happen. Can you be more specific?

Stephanie Peacock MP: We are open to all options and solutions, and we need to be creative. As a Government, we are willing to consider all sorts of things, such as tax relief or innovation funding, but we are in a tight fiscal environment. I am not in a position, ahead of the spending review, to make spending commitments in front of this committee.

Whether we have money or not, the Government have to balance a fine line in any intervention that they make. If there was a news desert in Bolsover or London, for instance, just giving money to a particular title does not necessarily solve it. You have to look at the supply and demand. There is a supply issue, but also the demand issue around encouraging citizens to want trusted, well-researched information that they can rely on.

Baroness Wheatcroft: One area the pay for it is through advertising. Are you looking at potentially directing more Government advertising towards local media?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I had a positive meeting with my counterpart in the Cabinet Office on this issue a few weeks ago. We are both keen to explore how Government spend, and ad spend, can be used as effectively as possible. It is important to distinguish that it is not just using Government ad spend to support a sector that is struggling. Obviously, it provides funding, there is not getting away from that, but it is making sure that that Government ad spend can be used as effectively as possible, to reach as wide an area of the country as possible. I am open to that, and had a very positive conversation with my counterpart in the Cabinet Office, because it is, of course, ultimately their responsibility.

Q166 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** Can you tell me, from the point of view of the Civil Service and the work that has being done already, whether there is a metric that would see more money going towards local media and if that would be cost effective?

Robert Specterman-Green: As the Minister said, this is led by another part of Government, in the Cabinet Office, but the kind of thing they would consider is reach, the number of viables that they could get to through advertising in the local media. We need to think more broadly about the key performance indicators. Reach is certainly relevant, but you want to get to the right households and different demographic cohorts, depending on the issue at hand.

Baroness Wheatcroft: Do you think there should be particular support for training schemes for journalism and the publishing sector, or should they just compete on the same terms against other schemes for other industries?

Stephanie Peacock MP: It is a really interesting question, one that I am open to exploring. I represent Barnsley South, where Michael Parkinson came from. He trained on the *Barnsley Chronicle* and ended up as one of best interviewers in the world. I often ask myself where the next Michael Parkinson is coming from and how I can help support the young people I represent in Barnsley to get on in a media and press career. I cannot give you a clear answer to that, but I think we need to do better. If we are going to tackle it properly, it needs to be across government. It obviously falls not only in the DCMS but in the Department for Education, and there are all sorts of other levers that can

be used. We do need routes into journalism and to make sure that they are open to everyone, wherever they grow up.

Baroness Wheatcroft: Would you restrict that to local media? Would it be for the media in general?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I am open on that subject.

The Chair: What about the innovation catalyst funds? Looking at the future news pilot fund, would you be looking to retain or expand, or disband, it?

Stephanie Peacock MP: We are genuinely open to all options. I cannot make commitments ahead of the spending review, but we are, as a department, considering measures such as the example you gave of innovation funding, or tax relief. Where the sector is facing challenges, it should have support to innovate. There are different examples of how to do this, such as the Manchester Mill, which is more of a community newsletter type of base, or Tindle Newspapers, which have titles in radio and newspaper in the south-east. They have made it clear about having a physical presence on the high street, and there was tax relief related to physical business rates. We are open to all options, but I am mindful we are in a tight spending situation. I cannot make commitments ahead of the spending review, but as a department we are open to different ideas.

The Chair: Are you open to the point that you are promoting them back to the Treasury, or you are just open to being lobbied?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I cannot comment on the spending review, but I can reassure the committee that we are very committed to this matter.

Q167 **The Lord Bishop of Leeds:** To answer your question about the next Michael Parkinson, who in government is doing the thinking to put some flesh on the bones of what you are expressing in very aspirational terms?

Stephanie Peacock MP: The Secretary of State spoke very passionately about the DCMS and her vision to make sure that the population is reflected in the national story. For too long, people have felt disenfranchised and not reflected in the people who represent them, and they are not necessarily represented in the media either. If we are going to deal with that challenge, it falls across government. That is why the Prime Minister has talked about a mission-led Government, and we have a number of mission boards that sit across government. There are different levers in different departments, including, obviously, the DCMS but also the DfE. I meet regularly with the Schools Minister to explore some of these issues.

Q168 **Lord Kamall:** You spoke about news going online and potential news deserts. An earlier inquiry from this committee was on digital exclusion, which I am sure you are aware of. Who, across Government, is thinking about digital exclusion?

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: We have inherited that brief and it seems fundamental to our department going forward. The previous Government had a digital inclusion strategy that was 10 years old and in

need of renewal. My colleague Chris Bryant is doing a huge amount of work to develop a new digital inclusion programme, which has a number of elements to it. We want to make sure that digital skills reach right across the regions and socio-economic classes, to the dispossessed, to make sure everyone has those skills. We are also looking at access to technology to help those people, because you can have the best skills but if you do not have the equipment to participate in public life, that is an issue.

These issues are really important because people will increasingly need digital skills not only for their work life, but for their private life, and for accessing public services. We are very aware that we cannot have a system which only 80% of the population participate in, because it has to be 100% accessible for that to have any credibility. We are working extremely hard to make sure we come up with a strategy that addresses those issues. That strategy will involve the public and private sectors working together to find the best way to deliver our objectives on this.

Lord Kamall: Thank you.

Q169 Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: My question is for both Ministers, but I will start with Baroness Jones, if I may. You have said that people will increasingly get their news online. Are you concerned about the growing power of online intermediaries, the big tech companies, shaping access to news and affecting the type of information that people see? If so, do you have any plans to address that?

Baroness Jones: As I know members of the committee will know, we recently passed the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act, which we think is a huge step forward in tackling the issue of addressing the intermediaries. We hope that regime will rebalance the power of the big tech companies regarding those who rely on those services, including the press and publishers, to promote their news agenda.

The digital markets Act will potentially allow us to have all sorts of conduct requirements on the big tech companies. As you know, if necessary they can take more stringent measures against the companies if they do not balance out access to those services. We think the Act has a huge role to play in this. Obviously we are working closely with the CMA at the moment to talk about the detail of how that will be rolled out, which it will be in the new year. I hope we will then see quite quickly the impact of all that, and that we can ensure that the intermediaries provide a balanced platform for those who want to access it.

Q170 Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: Stephanie Peacock, if you are considering designating online news creators as being in scope of Ofcom's media ownership rules, is that something we should be looking at? They could become increasingly the owners of news operations, and this committee is quite concerned about the balance there.

Stephanie Peacock MP: Yes, that is something we are considering. The Secretary of State has said how important she thinks it is. We are not in a position to make any commitments today, but we recognise the

changing nature—this inquiry goes to the heart of it—of how people consume their news. It is important that the regulation keeps pace with that.

Baroness Healy of Primrose Hill: I know that you have youth in your portfolio. Is the way that young people access news a matter of concern? We have been told that they do not want to hear from authoritative news outlets; they want authentic news.

Stephanie Peacock MP: It is a concern, but it is also a huge opportunity. When I was growing up, I watched “Newsround” when I came home from school. For young people now there are challenges, and it is important that we as the Government make sure that there is the right framework, with guardrails, but if they are accessing news information on social media then there is an opportunity for them to learn more about the world and access different pieces of information. We know there are real challenges, and our role as the Government is to make sure that that is appropriate.

The Cairncross review, which is a few years old now, showed in 2019 that 90% of 18 to 24 year-olds access their news online, and I presume that figure is even higher now. I guess that is growing whatever age you are; it is inevitable that people are increasingly accessing it online, and intermediaries obviously play a role in that. As the Baroness has outlined, a number of pieces of legislation are coming in—brought in by the previous Government, to their credit—that we are now implementing that should not be underestimated. They have the potential to be quite transformative in this space.

The Chair: I have quite a few questions on this area before we move on, but before I ask them Lord Young has a supplementary.

Q171 **Lord Young of Norwood Green:** All the major news providers are now online, are they not? They are on social media—TikTok, Instagram and so on. I would have thought you would think that was a good thing, because you are looking for plurality.

Stephanie Peacock MP: Yes, we want a plural media landscape. We are where we are. The whole media landscape has been completely disrupted in the last 15 years. People are accessing their information not just online through websites but through these intermediaries—social media. There are of course challenges with that, as we know. The platforms’ algorithms will often determine what information is seen.

Ofcom gave evidence to this committee talked about how you will get a range of different news providers on social media but often the topics will be narrower, so there is obviously a challenge with the algorithms. Although that is a DSIT lead, we hope it is something that the digital markets Act, through the DMU, will start to address. Of course, it is independent, and I do not want to prejudice that, but there is a real opportunity in that legislation to address some of the challenges. To answer in short, is it good that people are accessing a wide range of news? Yes, it is.

Q172 The Chair: There is a risk of conflating a few issues. The digital markets Act is clearly an important way of ensuring that the big tech firms do not use their entrenchment in one market to become powerful in another. We are talking specifically about ownership and its impact on plurality. To come back to what you were saying about Ofcom reviewing its ownership rules, as we understand it Ofcom is due to do another review of those rules later on this year. The first question is to understand whether you as a Government are alive to and concerned about the prospect of the platforms as intermediaries effectively becoming owners because they control so much of people's access to news. Is that something you are actively asking Ofcom to look at as part of its review?

Stephanie Peacock MP: Robert will correct me if I am wrong, but I believe the last Ofcom review of this was in 2021. Obviously, it is for Ofcom to determine what it looks at. The platforms would dispute the idea that they are owners, but there is no doubt that as intermediaries they have huge power and control over the information and the news that people consume.

The Chair: Do you want to add something, Mr Specterman-Green?

Robert Specterman-Green: Yes. The debate about whether the platforms are publishers in their own right is not a new one. I recognise that it may be a legitimate question to think about whether the media ownership regime, as it currently exists, should take that into account more directly. As the Minister said, it will be for Ofcom to decide what it looks at. Some of the recommendations in its previous review remain on the table to be considered as well.

It is worth recalling that a number of different levers are already available to the regulator and the Government. We have the Enterprise Act framework, which, as the Minister said, needs to keep pace with changes in the way that people access their news. Then there are other levers intended to control and produce clearer guardrails for what happens online.

However, we should not just think about the supply side in the context of your question; we also need to look at the demand side. This goes to Lord Kamall's question on digital exclusion, media literacy and how we help citizens to recognise what is authentic, genuine, high-quality journalism.

The Chair: Let us stick with ownership at the moment. We can come on to that.

Robert Specterman-Green: But these are two sides of the same coin.

The Chair: All right. Well, let us get to some of the things are still outstanding in legislative terms. When Ofcom did its review in 2021, it recommended broadening the scope of existing media public interest test frameworks to go beyond print newspapers and broadcasters to capture a broader range of news creators. The point being made is that the platforms, as the technology develops, are increasingly becoming news creators because they are creating summaries of news that satisfy some members of the public without them going anywhere else. That is not yet

captured anywhere, and that was a recommendation that came out of Ofcom then. That is the point that is outstanding. Alongside that, you have the online news organisations, which are just online, not yet being designated as newspapers.

So, technically, a platform could purchase one of those organisations—an online-only news website—and not necessarily be caught by the existing framework. It would be interesting to know your view on that.

Then we have the commitment made by the last Government to bring forward regulations to designate the online-only news websites as newspapers so that what I have described does not become an issue and, furthermore, nor does their being susceptible to foreign government ownership. Could you give an update on where all these things sit at the moment?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I think it was on 10 September when the Secretary of State spoke about the importance of having available a wide range of accurate and high-quality news. She is very alive to the issue of online news providers. I am not in a position to outline exactly the legislative steps we will take now, but the Secretary of State has outlined her intention and commitment to doing something on this.

Robert Specterman-Green: Our desire is to future-proof this regime; you have just outlined some of the gaps in the current legislation and the Secretary of State has made clear her intention to adapt the current regime to circumstances both now and moving forward. One also has to think about the proportionality of any new regulatory regime. These are the kind of principles that must be balanced in determining how we move forward. You are quite right that, through the amendments to the Enterprise Act enacted through the digital markets Act, with which you are intimately familiar, the foreign state ownership regime applies more broadly than the core Enterprise Act regime. We are very mindful of that discrepancy and are thinking carefully about how to address it.

Q173 **The Chair:** That leads me to my final two points. First, there is an outstanding piece of secondary legislation to allow for what we called during our debates on the primary legislation the “carve-out” to permit a limited amount of indirect foreign investment, through a sovereign pension fund or what have you. It would be helpful to know where that is. Secondly, to move us on to the next topic of transparency and funding, we know that there is a bid from Tortoise to purchase the *Observer*. It would be helpful to know whether you, Minister, have sought any further information on this issue or are minded to refer it in any way to Ofcom. As I ask this, I am mindful of what I was talking about before; Tortoise is an online-only news provider not caught by existing designations and definitions, so if it buys a newspaper, we start entering new territory.

Stephanie Peacock MP: I appreciate all the work that the committee and you, Chair, have done on this area, but I cannot comment on ongoing cases. I am sure you will understand why. On the secondary legislation and the outstanding issue around carve-outs, the Government

are considering the consultation from the previous Government. We understand the importance of this and that action needs to be taken in a timely fashion, and we will make an announcement in due course. I assure the committee that the Secretary of State and I are looking at the details of this.

Q174 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** Given what has been said about so much news being online globally and that there are no barriers, is there any justification for or sense in having a separate regime for what we think of as British newspapers?

Stephanie Peacock MP: We need to explore that. That is why this issue of online news and the regulatory framework it finds itself in is really important. The Secretary of State has indicated early on in her tenure what action she wants to take on this. She has not given specifics and details, but we appreciate the pressing nature of this.

Baroness Wheatcroft: It seems slightly weird, does it not?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I can understand that perspective.

The Chair: Just to clarify, you said that you cannot comment on ongoing cases. Does mean that the Tortoise acquisition of the *Observer* is a case?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I would prefer not to comment on specific issues. I appreciate what you are asking about cases, but I do not want to comment on that aspect.

Robert Specterman-Green: There has been speculation about the future of the *Observer* in the press. The point at which this is considered a "case" in the context of the regulatory regime is when the Secretary of State, acting in a quasi-judicial function, says that it is one. She has not said anything yet. In supporting her in the exercise of her statutory duties, we keep an eye on what is going on in the media market on an ongoing basis.

The Chair: It is good to hear that you are keeping an eye on something on an ongoing basis.

Robert Specterman-Green: To come back to the point you made, if I understood, you said that an online organisation might purchase or look to purchase a print newspaper or "a newspaper" under the definitions in the Act, which focuses on an existing entity. There may be a merger within an existing entity. For example, the *Observer*, the *Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* are print newspapers, so I am not sure the distinction necessarily applies in the way I understood you to make it.

The Chair: I was just trying to make the point about transparency and understanding ownership in some of these transactions, and whether you are satisfied that there is sufficient understanding of what is going on in any particular acquisition such that, should you wish to intervene, you can.

Robert Specterman-Green: I am very confident on behalf of the Secretary of State that, with the resources we have in the department,

we can keep a close eye on what is going on in the marketplace and advise Ministers appropriately.

The Chair: You will know that there have been examples of the boat being missed before any action was sought to be taken.

Robert Specterman-Green: That is true—or it was considered to be true by some. To a certain degree, we are reliant on the willingness of parties to provide us with information, but that does not stop us from asking the questions.

Lord McNally: To push you a little further, it would be a major step—and without Parliament's permission, in my view—for the Tortoise bid for the *Observer* to be seen to be outside the powers of the Government. This is what the Chair is trying to watch out for. Do we have the right powers in place for this rapidly changing technological ownership field and, if not—I think the Minister indicated that the Secretary of State was constructively thinking along these lines—do we need to put more safeguards in place? If not, we will suddenly find out that bid X has been cleared, setting a precedent for a whole lot of other activities in the area.

Stephanie Peacock MP: I completely understand the committee's concern about this. You are right that I am indicating that the Secretary of State is taking this incredibly seriously. I am not in a position to give timelines, but I appreciate that time is of the essence on this.

Q175 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** I want to turn to the interesting issues of copyright and the impact of generative AI on news media in particular.

Maggie Jones, I will start with you, if I may. Yesterday, we had the investment summit and we heard the Prime Minister talk about removing obstacles for business and growth, with an emphasis on AI and data centres as a key part. As key as data centres is training data, and it is clear that relevant, authoritative, up-to-date data from news sources is valued by AI.

Some of the committee was in San Francisco last week talking to AI companies, some of which were arguing that we should be regulating the copy right of outputs of AI, not inputs. That was important as an obstacle to their development. As we noted, Patrick Vallance—now Minister—in his review last year was favourable towards the idea of allowing text and data mining by tech firms. Do you agree with that approach?

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: We absolutely see these two things moving in parallel. It is important to us that we protect the content creators in this whole process but, as the committee knows, AI is moving at a pace. It was originally felt to be the purview of a few elite companies, but smaller AI companies are now getting involved in the creativity side of it. As we look back and forward, we see that more and more people who might have been against the role of AI are seeing the opportunities that they can have from it and how they can use it as part of a creative process going forward.

Within all that, we have to protect the rights holders and those people who originate content. That work is ongoing piece, and it is very

important that we get it right. The answer will be somewhere down the middle, with some form of partnership and understanding. You know that some rights holders are striking licensing deals with some AI providers and these things are all in the mix.

My colleagues Chris Bryant and Feryal Clark had a round table on this last week with a number of key players. We are trying to find a way through that is acceptable to all sides. Again, as per the earlier discussion, we are moving a pace on all this. We understand that this needs to be resolved, but there is no easy answer. Maybe 18 months ago, we felt that there might be some voluntary agreement across the piece, but that is clearly not the case now.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Do you think you will restart that code of practice with the Intellectual Property Office?

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: All of that is in the mix. Obviously it is ideal, for a host of reasons, to come to a voluntary agreement. That would be much better than waiting for the next piece of legislation or regulation to come down the track, but I cannot say that that looks terribly positive at the moment. That is ultimately the way forward. If not, we will find another way, the right way, to protect the content creators. If we do not do that, we will not have a vibrant media and vibrant new stories, because we need to protect journalists' content. We are very alive to that issue; it is just a question of finding the right way through.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Stephanie Peacock, how are you involved in these difficult discussions as the Media Minister?

Stephanie Peacock MP: Chris Bryant obviously sits between DCMS and DSIT, which is a useful bridge between the two departments, because they work specifically on some of the copyright issues.

As Media Minister, I meet with a number of different stakeholders who share with me their concerns and challenges, and some of the opportunities. As we said earlier, we cannot escape the role that intermediaries are playing in the way people access their news and information.

On AI, I think it was Newsquest that gave the committee the example of a press release that is long, you want it to be shorter, so you use AI to shorten it. I have heard from a range of different stakeholders that there is potential here with AI, but there are obviously also real concerns, particularly in the copyright space but not exclusively, about generative AI.

Q176 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Okay. Let me then explore a few alternatives that we have heard that could be in the mix. The first is market-led initiatives such as supporting licensing. Maggie, you have referenced that some of the tech companies have been doing deals with some of the media companies, and at the same time the *New York Times* has spent over \$1 million on a court case against OpenAI that we are waiting to hear the outcome of. Is the licensing approach part of the

future?

Stephanie Peacock MP: We have seen some of that. The *FT*, for example, has an agreement with Google.¹ Where we have seen it, it is obviously welcome, but we have seen that there is no consistency to it. It is quite piecemeal, and there is definitely a question around making it more consistent.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: And is Google not just buying out its vulnerability to legal challenge? It is a small change for Google, and it can bung a few hundred million dollars here and there and get off scot-free. A smaller company does not have that option.

Stephanie Peacock MP: No. That is a completely fair point, and that is why some of the legislation that we are seeing implemented right now should not be underestimated. We want to see how that implementation, particularly of digital markets and the new Digital Markets Unit in the CMA, works and operates. There is no doubt that there are huge challenges in this space, and you are absolutely right that it is the smaller providers and publishers that will find it more challenging.

Q177 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Do you have a view, then, of the issues that media companies tell us they are concerned about? Google, with its search function—perhaps other search engines are available—can crawl sites. It is important to those businesses that they do crawl their sites in order to get the search rankings, but in doing so they are also crawling for content which they are then able to use to train their eye. Is that something that we should regulate against?

Stephanie Peacock MP: There is a real concern. Obviously when we talk about content creators in this conversation, this sphere, journalism is absolutely in the same sphere as that. The point is that there are advantages, and there are things that journalists can use AI to help, but nothing will replace high-quality trained journalism. So even if the AI is using the content, and although it is a DSIT lead and is a real concern, it is really important that we hang on and support that trained journalism. That is something that I heard when I held a round table with some of the stakeholders on this.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: The Minister is absolutely right about the role that the digital markets can play in all this. If it does look like the big players are manipulating the rankings unfairly, that is something that we could expect the DMU in the CMA to intervene on to make sure that there was a fair market.

The only other thing I would say on that is that in, all of that, you listed some things that you thought might help. One thing that would help is transparency.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: We will go on to talk about that.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: So, if nothing else, we need to start with that to make sure that if web crawlers take your content, at least

¹ Amended by witness: This should refer to “OpenAI” rather than “Google”.

people know and can see that that has happened. That is first base in terms of regulating on this.

- Q178 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Do you think there is room for regulation on that, so that we could require robots.txt or other similar technologies to flag what has been used in order to come up with the AI and to have transparency around that?

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: That is a really good idea. I do not know how far we have got in setting that as the gold standard, but various models have been floated around that that would provide that transparency, and it seems to me that that is a very good place to start.

Sam Cannicott: Transparency is clearly an issue that rights holders in particular are keen to explore; at the moment, many rights holders would argue that they do not know whether the content they produce is being used in these models. We want to explore this, and, as the Minister said, we recently started a couple of round tables with rights holders looking at what they want from transparency and technically how you enable that. There are different questions, such as about the granularity of the transparency that you need in this space. It is not straightforward, but it is one that we want to explore and are exploring with AI companies and with rights holders in order to understand what that could look like.

- Q179 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** Will all this be published in the AI strategy? When can we expect the outcome of this parallel balance that you were talking about?

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: There are two things going forward. First, as you know, we are working on a draft AI frontiers Act, which has been promised. Also, we have a more major piece of work, the Matt Clifford AI action plan. He is working on that and talking to stakeholders, not only in the UK but elsewhere, about what “good” looks like and what good models there are out there. We await the outcome of his report with great interest, because he will be able to give us some indicators of the way forward.

- Q180 **The Lord Bishop of Leeds:** In the past few days, two things have been reported. One was Tim Davie’s speech on the World Service, which we will come to later, and the real challenge of democratic vacation of the media space—he talked about 40% of World Service listeners having gone to China and Russia—into which there has been the deliberate propagandistic insertion of disinformation and misinformation. The other report was on the riots and where they were driven by social media.

Disinformation is significant, but how are you making sure that the Government act against it? I should be interested to know what action is being taken against it. How do you ensure that it is balanced and does not undermine freedom of expression or public trust?

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: The first good news in all this is that misinformation and disinformation will be captured by the Online Safety

Act, particularly where it is illegal or harmful for children. That Act is coming forward in a phased way and some of those provisions will come into effect in the New year, including the false communications offence and the foreign interference offences, which Ofcom will be required to take action on.

We are very much looking forward to the code of practice and the way in which Ofcom will implement that. Part of that will be holding the platforms to account for making sure that their terms of service reflect the need to provide those protections, and that they uphold their responsibilities to implement their terms of service.

That is what is happening in terms of legislation. Also, Ofcom is expected to establish an advisory committee on disinformation and misinformation, we hope by the end of this year.

That is the legislative background but, in amongst all that, a huge amount of dialogue is going on. This is not simply about the legislation but about telling the social media companies what their responsibilities are now. Indeed, we did that during the riots over the summer. There was a huge amount of dialogue in advance of any legislation, saying, "We expect you to take down these posts that we flagged to you". We had a very sophisticated process of monitoring what was going on during the summer. Where we saw illegal content, we reported it to the social media companies. By and large, they were taking the content down. It was not the perfect process but, given that it was from a standing start when the riots happened, it certainly helped. So that process was going on.

It is not just a responsibility of my colleagues in DSIT; there is obviously a Home Office role in all of that as well. It is hugely important to liaise with the Home Office, because a lot of the content that was being posted was and will be illegal, and the Home Office has a responsibility even now to act against the racist incitement to violence and lots of other things that we saw over the summer. There was a process in place. I would not say it was perfect but, given that we had to put it in place very quickly, we responded well to the demands.

The Lord Bishop of Leeds: How do you strike the balance? There will be a huge pushback—there already is—in a post-truth world that any infringement on what people want to say, whether it is true or not, is an infringement on freedom of speech.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: There are particular protections in the Online Safety Act to make sure that freedom of speech is protected. It is only where content is illegal or harmful that the regulators will get involved. But there is a particular protection for recognised news publishers and for those people who want to have genuine democratic debate around the issues. They are protected under the regulations, so Ofcom obviously has a responsibility to make sure that that balance is operated in the right way.

The Lord Bishop of Leeds: A lot does not come into the category of illegal or harmful but is still disinformation or wrong; it is just fabricated

nonsense. But, by the time it gets taken down, it is too late. We know that once it is out there, it is out there. The taking of stuff down then shapes a narrative of censorship or reduction of freedom.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: Yes. That is why social media platforms have a responsibility to step up to that. Rather than us as the third party pointing out to them what is misinformation and disinformation already on their platforms, they need to have much more rigorous measures in place to make sure it does not happen in the first place. It is easier said than done, and I would be the first to admit that. Certainly as we see it, that is the way forward in the current process to deal with this issue.

Q181 The Lord Bishop of Leeds: The other wing of that is media literacy among people. I was at a primary school two days ago where they are starting the reception class on media literacy, which I was encouraged by. The previous Government had an online media literacy strategy. Do you plan to continue that? It is due for review.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: The current strategy runs, I think, until next year. We are continuing to fund, as were the previous Government, a number of pilots and programmes in schools to deal with the whole issue of media literacy. There is a whole lot of learning that we can draw from those pilots.

In parallel, Ofcom has now produced its new media literacy strategy. We are seeing the end of one media literacy strategy moving on to another in parallel. The new Ofcom media literacy strategy makes it clear that media literacy has to cover every format, including online and offline services, and has a whole programme of research and engaging with the platforms to make sure that they carry out their functions to drive up media literacy.

It comes back to education, and what you said. A lot of this needs to go on in schools. We are looking now at the independent curriculum and assessment review into education in schools. Digital skills need to be very much part of that, including media literacy. We are talking to the Department for Education to make sure that that is the case.

The Lord Bishop of Leeds: The Government's online media literacy action plan for 2023-24 is in place, but it is due for an impact assessment when it comes to an end in 2024. Will anything replace it, or will you simply go with the Ofcom media literacy guidelines?

Sam Cannicott: The immediate focus is getting the Online Safety Act implemented, as you say, and then to look beyond that if we need to.

Q182 The Lord Bishop of Leeds: Finally, a 2023 report by the LSE for the Government found that media literacy plans were characterised by "fragmentation, duplication, administrative burdens and limited co-ordination". That is a good list, is it not? Do you have any plans to sort this out to get proper alignment? It is no good having a whole number of them competing.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: A number of the initiatives that were funded by the current government literacy scheme were not universal—a number of different schemes were being funded—and we need to learn the lessons of all that. Going forward, that is not enough; we need a comprehensive strategy. Part of that is about making sure that education takes place in schools, but also about educating adults to be able to distinguish between respected news providers and those that are trying to imitate them and distort the news.

We have a number of ways to approach this. Some areas are easier than others, and some of it is about legislation. A lot of it is a public debate about how you can trust the news you receive, and we need to give people a lot more advice about how they can navigate that so they can access trusted media sources, particularly during events like the riots, when people were completely distorting the news, as we well know.

Stephanie Peacock MP: Media literacy is a DSIT lead, rather peculiarly, so it speaks to the fact that it is cross-government. I was struck by Ofcom's evidence to this committee about how it does a lot of work on this, but it alone cannot carry it. It is incumbent not only on Ofcom but across government to tackle this. We are seeing a trajectory where the press, as we are discussing in this inquiry, is struggling. The traditional news media has a number of challenges at a time when we most need them to do what they do best and provide trusted media. It is our challenge to address and balance that. The challenges created by the events in August and the misinformation highlight how important that is.

Media literacy is central to this, not only across the population but particularly for young people. I am a former secondary school teacher who taught 10 to 12 years ago, and there was not quite the prevalence of phones and social media that you have in the classroom now. Certainly, when I was growing up you did not have any of that. It presents teachers and parents with a real challenge. Media literacy—what we would have called “critical thinking” when I was at school—is so important for young people, because they are growing up in a completely different age. It is important that they are given the tools to cope with that. As the Baroness said, although the curriculum is independent, the Education Secretary indicated that she is interested in this and concerned about it.

Q183 **Lord McNally:** Baroness Jones will appreciate that one of the things about the House of Lords is that some of us hang around for a long time. I was on the 2003 Act, which gave specific responsibility to Ofcom to promote media literacy. The truth is that the speech just made by Stephanie Peacock could have been made by a new incoming Minister under successive Governments. I can only say, yet again, that media literacy is key to this. In the summer, we suffered from some of the problems that 20 years of not addressing and giving enough priority to media literacy inflicts on society. I strongly suspect that the Department of Education does not take media literacy seriously enough, so while you are still filled with the enthusiasm of new office, please push on.

Stephanie Peacock MP: The challenges we face now as opposed to 2003, when the Act you are referring to was passed—

Lord McNally: Now you are going to tell me what you were doing in 2003.

Stephanie Peacock MP: I had just started my GCSEs. The media landscape that we faced then, and the ideas of media literacy when I was doing my GCSEs and then A-levels compared to now, 20 years on, are completely different. The principles of critical thinking and being able to identify trusted, thought-through research, journalism or information might be similar, but the media has become much more of two-way conversation, as this committee has discussed more than once. Everyone can have a voice and be heard quickly in a way they simply could not back in 2003.

I completely appreciate the fair challenge you put to us as a Government that we need to take this seriously and it cannot just be words. The challenges are altogether different from what they were 20 years ago.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: I reiterate that media literacy is part of the Online Safety Act now, so the Government will hold Ofcom perhaps more rigorously to account for carrying out their functions under the Act. So there is a route for keeping an eye on what Ofcom are doing. It is ongoing, so it will not be just one strategy that is written up before we move on. The Government hopefully have a more longitudinal responsibility for Ofcom.

Q184 **The Chair:** I want to ask a question of Ms Peacock that there is not time for you to answer now. I will see whether there is time at the end and, if not, I will say how I want you deal with it then.

Can you look at this from the other end of the telescope? Another issue about disinformation is the use of brand safety organisations and those agencies' impact on some publishers who are ranked down because they carry contentious but legitimate views on topics. It would be helpful to understand whether you are aware of this and looking at it, and how you and the Government are going to consider the use of brand safety organisations in the context of disinformation and the online advertising programme. But park that thought for now, as we will move on.

Q185 **Lord Dunlop:** Could I move on to how the media reflects a diversity of opinion? I think Stephanie Peacock mentioned people feeling disenfranchised. The committee recently took evidence from the chair and director-general of the BBC. In his evidence, Samir Shah acknowledged the problem for the BBC of serving underserved audiences—the C2DEs—and tackling the issue of metropolitan bias. Do you recognise this problem? Do you think the public service broadcasters are collectively offering enough diversity of opinion?

Stephanie Peacock MP: We are fortunate in this country to have a thriving public service broadcasting sector, which is underpinned by the BBC. It is important that all sections of the media, particularly the public service broadcasters, reflect the population and seek to provide news

and information for them. We know that people will have a greater sense of trust and reliance on media the more they see themselves reflected in it. That is possibly why local media, for example, is much more trusted.

Lord Dunlop: Can I press you a bit harder on how you think the public sector broadcasters are doing in reflecting the totality of the country? Do you think the success and popularity of some of the GB News or TalkTV commentators is because there is a section of the population who feel disenfranchised in some way? They are not seeing their priorities reflected in the output of some of the more established public service broadcasters.

Stephanie Peacock MP: I think that is a fair challenge to some of the public service broadcasters. I was struck by the evidence the chief executive of GB News gave to this committee. He made much of it being British channel; that was his argument for their unique selling point. Clearly, it is their commercial decision to do that. The BBC is a huge asset to this country, one that underpins our creative economy. It does not always get everything right, but it does a really good job of covering the length and breadth of the country, particularly in its more local output. We could also debate the challenges in that sphere.

We are talking a lot about online intermediaries versus the traditional media. Obviously, on traditional broadcast television, that package of "News at Six" and "News at Ten" attempts to serve all the country and its different interests—we all have different interests in this room—compared to the online space.

Lord Dunlop: Given that the chair recognised that there was a problem, from your standpoint what could it be doing better to tackle this perception that living or working within the M25 drives a lot of the editorial choices?

Stephanie Peacock MP: MediaCity in Salford has been a very good change in the media landscape in the last few years. The Secretary of State has spoken passionately about this area. Whenever we meet news providers, whether it is the BBC, Channel 4 or ITV, she always asks them where the commissioning is. She is keen that we widen out the commissioning. It is one of her priorities that we try to do what we can to move things out of London and the south-east. How we do that poses a potential challenge, but it can only benefit the country to have a much wider geographical spread of voices, stories and views.

Q186 **Lord Dunlop:** I turn to the way the media impartiality rules are enforced. The chief executive of Ofcom recently suggested that expectations in enforcing the impartiality regime differ according to audience reach, with the implication that the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News should be held to a higher standard than smaller channels such as GB News. On the back of this, some have criticised Ofcom for operating a two-tier regime. Do you have a view on this?

Stephanie Peacock MP: It is for Ofcom to decide how it implements the regime, holds people to account and uses the tools at its disposal.

The public really value impartiality. When they see something they do not like or think does not pass the smell test, they complain to Ofcom—they are not backwards in coming forward. You can see different examples with different channels where the public have seen something, not liked it and complained. It is Ofcom's responsibility to implement its guidance.

Lord Dunlop: In operating that guidance, is it fair to employ a bit of flexibility? Is that justified to protect free speech and that diversity of opinion that we have talked about?

Stephanie Peacock MP: As an independent regulator, it is for Ofcom to implement its guidance and I will not comment on its decisions. I would not expect it to operate a two-tier system, as you put it, but being an independent regulator it has flexibility to implement its rules and guidance and has sanctions at its disposal, should it wish.

The Chair: We will move on to the BBC more specifically.

Q187 **Lord Young of Norwood Green:** Fairly recently, Secretary of State Lisa Nancy posed the interesting concept of mutual membership for the BBC. Would you like to put some flesh on the bones of that concept?

Stephanie Peacock MP: The Secretary of State and I are big supporters of the BBC. It is for the charter review to decide what future models may be applied to it. I believe the Secretary of State's comments about mutualisation, although they have been reported and she has spoken about them, date back to a previous article she wrote some years ago. She has made it very clear that she does not have a preferred outcome or option; it is for the charter review to make that decision and have those debates. That will start to take place towards the end of this year and throughout next year.

Q188 **Lord McNally:** It is very refreshing to find a Minister saying that she believes in the BBC. Keep up the good work. I want to turn to its impact on local news and how the BBC can help in the development of news sources. It is difficult; we talk about news deserts and everything else, and it is a challenge at a time when the BBC is facing a squeeze on its resources.

Stephanie Peacock MP: It is a huge challenge. The BBC plays a huge role in local areas. I think about my local area of South Yorkshire, the broadcasting role that the BBC plays and its relationship with radio and the press. It is a fragile ecosystem. We have discussed the importance and fragility of and some of the challenges around the local news market. The BBC can play a positive role, but it also presents challenges and I know that some local providers have had concerns about some of their impacts. It is a fine balance, but it plays an important role in underpinning that fragile local ecosystem.

Lord McNally: Do you think the Local Democracy Reporting Service has worked and should continue to be part of that architecture?

Stephanie Peacock MP: Yes, I think it should continue. Nothing is perfect, and you could probably point to examples where it has not worked as well as it could or should have, but by and large it has been very welcome and the principles that underpin it are really important. We want to see it continue.

Q189 **Lord McNally:** On regional voices, it is not only Parkinson, but you are quite right about Yorkshire voices; I am just old enough to remember JB Priestley, who also spoke with a very distinctive accent. There was another crucial point, which the Bishop mentioned, in the recent speech by the director-general. I cannot imagine any other country in the world that would place all the burdens of keeping one of our great national assets functioning effectively on an organisation that had a specific role in broadcasting but had very limited resources.

How will we properly fund the BBC World Service to cover the wide range of issues from trade to promotion of our English language, which is one of our great soft powers? It is profligate that we have squeezed and squeezed and now suddenly we have the problem that the Chinese and Russians are moving into our space. Where is the sense of proper priority that would give us a World Service that meets our national need?

Stephanie Peacock MP: That is a completely fair point. I share some of your concerns. As a Government, we are fully committed to the World Service; we see its benefit and recognise the pressures it has been under in recent times. I cannot comment ahead of the spending review, but we completely appreciate the pressures you have outlined on local BBC output. There are challenges across the board, whether for the World Service or local news provision. The charter review provides us with an opportunity to explore all these issues thoroughly. The Secretary of State has talked about not just looking for a settlement for the next 10 years but future-proofing it for the next 50, because we recognise that, unlike in previous charter reviews, the world has changed significantly in the last 15 years. That presents challenges across the board for media and the press, but unique ones for the BBC. As big supporters, we want to see it thrive into the future. That is why the charter review is incredibly important.

Q190 **Lord Kamall:** In answer to Lord Young's question on the concept of a mutualisation of the BBC, you obviously did not want to commit, quite rightly, to one particular model. Are you ruling out any models or options across the spectrum that have been suggested over time?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I do not want to be drawn on it, because we have a very open mind. I do not want to give platitudes or glib answers. We recognise what is at stake here, as I said in answer to the previous question on the changing nature of the media landscape, and we recognise the importance of the BBC not just to the UK but across the world.

So we are keeping a very open mind, but we want to make sure that we get it right. I completely understand why there is interest in that model, because of the comments made and the article written by the Secretary

of State, but I do not want to give the impression that we have a preference.

Lord Kamall: So you are not ruling it in or out.

Stephanie Peacock MP: No, we are keeping everything open.

The Chair: By the way, on the issue of the BBC, I am sure Mr Specterman-Green will point you to the report that we produced on the future of the funding of the BBC. One of our central recommendations was not to leave this matter until charter review. It is more urgent than that, because if you want to make changes it will take time and will require a transition period. Leaving it as a charter review issue could narrow your options, and I am sure that is not what you want to do.

Q191 **Baroness Wheatcroft:** Could you say, Minister, whether you believe it is right to prosecute people for not paying their licence fee and whether you intend to continue doing so?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I am concerned that the prosecution rates are disproportionately women, as the statistics show. There are lots of reasons behind that, but I do not think anyone wants to see people going to jail where there is something in place. Obviously where people have not paid their licence fee there is a criminal sanction in place, but I would prefer not to see people going to prison and I am concerned about the disproportionate statistics for women.

Baroness Wheatcroft: So are you going to continue prosecuting women, or do you have a policy change in mind?

Stephanie Peacock MP: We do not have a policy change at the moment—the Government do not have a changed position on that—but I made clear to the committee my concerns about the high number of women who face this prosecution.

Q192 **The Chair:** We move on to SLAPPs, strategic lawsuits against public participation. The committee has been concerned about this issue for well over two years and has had several hearings on it. As you will know, changes made in the last Parliament to the economic crime Bill, but that was very much restricted to that kind of category of SLAPP. Then there was a Private Member's Bill from a Labour MP that was supported by the last Government, which sadly fell because of the election being called. Although it was not perfect, with the right amendments and agreements that the last Government were minded to make, it would have been a huge step forward. What are your Government going to do about SLAPPs?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I appreciate all the work that this committee has done on this issue and that you have done, Chair. We recognise how important it is. You will understand that the legislative power sits with the Ministry of Justice. Obviously I am familiar with the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act, which, as you rightly point out, is very focused on economic crime, although I will be interested to see how it is implemented and learn from the implementation of that Act. I am also

familiar with the Private Member's Bill from Wayne David that you refer to, and I know there is a difference of opinion on how successful it would have been.

I take this issue incredibly seriously. I am not in a position to make commitments on legislation, partly because it sits within the MoJ, but I will say that we recognise how important it is. It speaks to the broader issue of the role of being a journalist in modern Britain and some of the issues that are faced around the safety of journalists.

Q193 The Chair: How much pressure are you at DCMS applying to the MoJ to move on this?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I am keen to meet my counterpart at the MoJ. I am also familiar with the work that the SLAPPs taskforce did, and I am keen to meet members of that taskforce to understand more about this issue. I completely appreciate why we want to see action on it. The non-legislative actions that have been taken are welcome. You are right to say that the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act is focused on economic crime, but I would like to see how it is implemented and if we can learn lessons, positive and negative, from that implementation for any future legislation.

We at the DCMS are alive to the fact that this is a real concern for a number of our stakeholders. The NUJ shared with me very concerning examples of its members who had gone through this situation. More broadly, I was pleased to make clear in the summer that we are going to continue with the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, which will be co-chaired with the Home Office, although I know that is more specifically around online abuse and physical intimidation. I spoke to journalists first hand in August who had experienced that during the riots. That is about a linked issue, not SLAPPs, but I think the committee can look at this as a whole. I am particularly interested to meet members of the taskforce and to meet my counterpart at the MoJ.

The Chair: It is good to hear that you are taking the steps that you are, but the real need is for legislative change to deal with this issue. The problem with just waiting to see how the economic crime Act is applied is that in some respects there are weaknesses with it that will be properly addressed only with the wholesale removal of the possibility of SLAPPs.

Stephanie Peacock MP: I completely understand that. I am not saying that we will see how that goes and just copy it. We can learn lessons both positive and negative in the implementation. However, it was not in the King's Speech, so it will not be in this first legislative programme in the coming year. It is an MoJ lead, so I am simply not in a position to give you a timeline. What I can say is that I genuinely appreciate the significance and importance of this. While we have seen steps in the right direction on this issue in recent times, I appreciate that legislation is needed if we are going to tackle it fully. I am keen to meet the committee further and to meet members of that taskforce, which did a lot of good work on it, to understand specifically what can be done.

The Chair: But you would acknowledge that there is a victims, courts

and public protection Bill in the King's Speech, which sounds like a suitable vehicle to me.

Stephanie Peacock MP: Yes, I appreciate that legislative vehicles—for example, a Private Member's Bill, as Wayne David's was—can be found. I completely appreciate the importance of the issue and am keen to meet my MoJ counterpart to discuss it further. Coming at this issue as the Media Minister, when I talk to journalists, particularly members of the NUJ, I appreciate not just the huge impact these have on individuals who suffer the terrible effects of SLAPPs but the impact this has on journalism and their ability to do their jobs.

The Chair: You are keen to meet your opposite number at the MoJ. Is your opposite number at the MoJ keen to meet you?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I will write to you on that.

The Chair: It is all very well the MoJ being the lead on this, expressing concerns about complexities and so on, but it clearly needs to have a lot of pressure applied to it within government.

Stephanie Peacock MP: I appreciate that. That is why the members of the SLAPPs taskforce have a huge amount to give. I understand that, while it is an MoJ lead, there are different departments, including mine, that have something really important to say to the MoJ about it.

The Chair: They seem to lean on the fact that this is a cross-departmental or cross-Whitehall issue that makes it difficult to achieve. If you are banging on their door, that rather betrays their lack of enthusiasm for cracking on.

Stephanie Peacock MP: You are right that Bills can be found, amendments can be tabled and Private Members' Bills can be found, but you will appreciate that the Government have set out our legislative agenda in the King's Speech and it is not part of that. I do not believe it will be a Private Member's Bill like Wayne David's, so it is unlikely to have legislation in the coming months. However, it is an incredibly important issue, and I am keen to work with stakeholders, in the press and more widely, to see whether we can come up with a legislative solution that works.

The Chair: Have you had a chance to think about the other end of the telescope on the question of disinformation?

Stephanie Peacock MP: On the specifics of disinformation, the best example of misinformation and disinformation I have witnessed as Media Minister is the riots in August. I went to Leeds and met the Yorkshire Post, ITV and ITN about their reporting and their experience. This speaks to both ends of the question about misinformation and disinformation. ITN in particular faced challenges in reporting and met with pressure from the public—not all the public, I should make that clear, but from some members of the public, who were behaving criminally and now face sanctions for that.

The challenge that struck me, as it was powerful, was that the journalists could not take traditional equipment or even film on their mobile phones

in landscape. They faced all sorts of intimidation, which was a huge challenge for journalists in reporting.

The flip side of that is people being whipped up and believing misinformation and disinformation online. There is the real challenge, which sits between both our departments, about how we tackle that misinformation and disinformation, and make sure that there is trusted media that people can access and rely on.

- Q194 **The Chair:** It is a different aspect from the one you described, but we took evidence earlier in our inquiry from what might be described as the newer news organisations—predominantly online-only news organisations. They are not alone in this, but are subject, when they seek to attract advertising, to an increased use of brand safety organisations. They were set up with the primary purpose of rooting out disinformation. Some of those organisations have morphed into applying a kind of a qualitative judgment or commentary on news that is not disinformation but may not be to some people's tastes. That is then impacting the revenue that legitimate news sites are able to attract.

At one point, these branding agencies were in receipt of public funding, because their original purpose was part of a more clear-cut disinformation regime. Are you aware of this? Are you conscious of making sure that the Government have not retreated, where they have moved away from using these branding agencies? Is this something that you are thinking about specifically for the online advertising programme, because it is another area where disinformation can be weaponised politically, against people who are writing things that may be disagreeable but are perfectly legitimate?

Stephanie Peacock MP: I am with you and am familiar with the issue. I believe that the public funding was from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and ended in 2023. As you say, it started, rightly, as a way to promote initiatives that tackled disinformation. I am interested in exploring this area more, but it is not for the Government to dictate which brands choose to advertise. I do not think we should be doing that, but I am happy to take the issue away and look more at it.

The Chair: Obviously it is perfectly legitimate for anyone to advertise, wherever they choose to. It is about ensuring a proper balance.

- Q195 **Lord Young of Norwood Green:** This comes back to the crucial role of impartiality in public service broadcasting. In today's polarised world, what somebody thinks as fair somebody else regards as partial. Do you recognise the challenge that is for public service broadcasters?

Stephanie Peacock MP: Of course I recognise that it is a challenge. There is no doubt that it is a challenge for our public service broadcasters. However, the majority of the public value that and we see that in the way that they engage with our media landscape. As I said in answer to an earlier question, if the public see something that they do not like, they complain to Ofcom and, as we have discussed, there is a

process in place to deal with that. That does not mean that there are no challenges for our media organisations. I recognise that.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch: I just underline that a free press and the free exchange of views are very important to us, but the Online Safety Act requires platforms to ensure that we can access diverse news sources online. Ofcom has a whole series of measures that it can take if that is not the case. It goes back to Ofcom again: it has a responsibility to make sure that people can access diverse news sources, as long as those news sources are responsible. That has to be at the heart of our policies going forward.

The Chair: We are very grateful to you. I will just say to Mr Specterman-Green that, when I was speaking earlier about being slow off the mark about foreign government ownership, I did not necessarily have the *Telegraph* in mind; it was more about the Saudis' 30% stake in the *Independent*.

Robert Specterman-Green: Yes, I assumed that was what you meant.

The Chair: I thought you thought that we meant the *Telegraph*. I am very grateful to all of you for your time this afternoon.