



Select Committee on Communications and Digital

Corrected oral evidence: The Future of Journalism

Tuesday 10 March 2020

4.30 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Gilbert of Panteg (The Chair); Lord Allen of Kensington; Baroness Bull; Viscount Colville of Culross; Baroness Grender; Lord McInnes of Kilwinning; Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall; Baroness Meyer; Baroness Quin; Lord Storey; The Lord Bishop of Worcester.

Evidence Session No. 4

Heard in Public

Questions 34 - 43

Witnesses

I: Rossalyn Warren, freelance journalist; Nic Newman, Senior Research Associate, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witnesses

Rossalyn Warren and Nic Newman.

Q34 **The Chair:** Thank you, and welcome to our second set of witnesses to our inquiry into the future of journalism. This is our second session this afternoon. The session will be broadcast online and a transcript will be taken. I will start in a moment by asking you to introduce yourselves and open up in response to an initial question. We will then go round the table. Just so the witnesses know, I will be vacating the chair during the proceedings and Lord Allen will take the chair around our second question. Thank you both very much for coming to talk to us.

Could you start by giving us a very brief introduction to tell us your background, and then, by way of introduction to the subject, give us an overview of the main changes taking place in the way that news is consumed and produced?

Rossalyn Warren: I am a freelance journalist. I entered journalism through a media company called BuzzFeed News, where I was a senior journalist for three years before becoming a freelancer for the last three years. Before that I was a freelancer. I have contributed to reporting in everything from the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* to CNN, focusing predominantly on, at first, international news and then social issues here in the UK. I did not study journalism. I come from a fairly untraditional background, as it were, as has been referred to. In my line of work today, I am deeply passionate about making journalism more accessible and engaging to people across the UK from all backgrounds.

Nic Newman: I am lead author of the Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report*, which charts change in consumption and has done over the last 10 years. It is the largest study of news consumption in the world, looking at 40 countries this year. I have also done research for the Reuters Institute on trust, social media, audio, voice, artificial intelligence—those forward-looking technologies and their impact on journalism. Before that I was a journalist for 20 years in radio, television and online. I was part of the launch team of the BBC News website 22 years ago. I then moved from journalism to head new media, products and technology for BBC News for almost a decade, bridging technology, if you like. I am passionate about that interface.

The Chair: Rossalyn, do you want to start off on this issue of the changing consumption and production of news?

Rossalyn Warren: I will focus on a couple of key areas that I have been looking at quite closely in the last few years. First, consumption of news in itself is chaotic. There is no single source or place where people consume news today. It used to be the case that people would get a newspaper, read the top stories front to back, and go about their day. That is still the case for predominantly older readers and consumers of news in the UK, but today most younger people are consuming a lot of news from a lot of sources and in smaller chunks—a headline here, a push alert there, an Instagram story—or they might occasionally search

for an issue on Google and then not know what source is the most reliable one to trust. They consume the news during short breaks at work, fitting it into their lives in snippets. As journalists, we need to understand that there are hundreds of competing sources of news and there is little chance that you can break through that noise unless you have a clear, direct route into their day that is consistent and reliable.

That leads me to my next, broader point. There is a significant shift in people around the world consuming information through private messaging, including in the UK, whether in Facebook groups, Messenger, DMs, or WhatsApp, which is not only the fastest-growing app in the UK but increasingly being turned to for news. The problem with these closed networks is that all the issues that exist on public platforms, such as misinformation, become only harder to tackle as people switch from public to private means of communication.

Lastly, although for the younger generations there is an increase of these private channels, video is still hugely popular. Places such as YouTube are becoming a source of news for a lot of younger people and teenagers. Newspapers are no longer the gatekeeper for the news. Instead, video personalities form an intimate bond with viewers over time, also making them a ground for amplifying misinformation and, more importantly, blurring the line between what is reporting, what is opinion and what is a personality online.

I will specifically highlight how younger people consume this news. YouTube enables things such as autoplay, meaning that viewers are sucked into a rotating cycle of videos led by algorithms that push related content. You are just sucked into that world; it is ongoing. It makes it harder for you to switch off that platform to go to a news source. Younger people will not be changing these consumption habits any time soon. Instead, as journalists, we need to understand how newsrooms can adapt and work to fit into that fairly chaotic digital landscape.

Nic Newman: We have seen two phases. In the early days of online it was about media companies getting on to the internet. Disruption was relatively slow, but in the last 10 years we have seen a combination of mobile and social, which have really come together to speed up the rate of change. That has changed the way we consume news. Now we can consume it at any time, at any place. We have these very powerful personal devices in our pocket. It is hugely transformative. It has also sped up news and placed new pressures on journalists, which I am sure we will talk about later.

That combination of social and mobile has also fundamentally changed economics. It has disrupted the commercial business model, so the unbundling of a newspaper package has made it much harder just to make ads work. They did not work very well on desktop with adjacent display; they work even less well on mobile. It has also given a lot more power to the big platforms that are able to aggregate and target audiences with ads. This is as much a disruption on the business side as the consumer side.

I agree with all the stuff about the difference between young and old, which we have drawn attention to in much of our research at the Reuters Institute, but I will just say a few words about the production side.

When I started, digital was very much the unloved bit; we were literally in the attic of Television Centre. There were about 20 people; nobody from television came anywhere near us. Now, it is absolutely central to everything that people do. It is central to the future of print organisations; it is central to the future of television operations. Digital has moved to the heart. Go to any news organisation now and you will see that digital is broadly integrated. It has brought 24-hour working; it has brought a story-based approach where you start each day thinking about what the agenda is, how you will cover it and how you deploy resources.

Then you work out the best way to tell that story across print, online, social media, email, podcast, TikTok, et cetera, for different audiences. That has led to new skills being needed in the newsroom. One used to have writers and subs, or people making television packages; today, one has videographers, people making podcasts, data visualisation specialists, audience engagement teams and Snapchat teams. It is much more complicated, with more effort put into versioning and re-versioning rather than just telling a story in one medium.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Nic, you have said that you asked a number of news organisations about their ability to retain talent and that, in response, only some 24% of them said they felt confident that they could keep their technical staff, whereas 76% thought that they could keep their editorial staff. In the world that you have just described, where digital technology is ever more important, how damaging is that for news organisations moving to the digital world, and what can be done to try to rectify it when you know the huge salaries being paid by competitive platforms?

Nic Newman: It is damaging. Media companies are not just about the content any more; it is about the packaging; it is how you use technology, how you distribute and get to people. That combination of editors and technology in newsrooms is incredibly important. So many people want to be journalists, but there is a shortage of really good technical talent, particularly around skills such as data science—that is a really hot skill. People want to work for media organisations because they want to do something worth while, but if they find that the salary is three, four or five times as much working for a big platform, it is a real issue in certain areas.

Baroness Quin: Thinking about the somewhat alarming picture that Rossalyn painted a few minutes ago, is one answer promoting media literacy? I am thinking particularly about schools. What can government and Parliament do to promote media literacy?

Rossalyn Warren: Media literacy for students in school would certainly help. I do not necessarily mean looking at how technology works, because kids are smart and digital natives—they know how these platforms operate and all that. Rather, it is about understanding which

sources are reliable, understanding that some news may be biased, or understanding some of the broader, ongoing issues that we have had in journalism for a long time.

Older generations would also benefit from such awareness. Studies looking at who might have fallen for fake news and misinformation in America during the 2016 election showed that it was older people on Facebook. That was a breeding ground for a lot of misinformation. I agree that media literacy will always be a crucial component of education for young people today, but there is benefit in it for older generations as well when it comes to new technology and the pitfalls that we have seen.

Q35 **Baroness Meyer:** You may have answered my question, but will all this change plateau at some stage? There is an ageing population. We talk about young people, but they grow up and become old. You need time. If you are a middle-aged person who works, do you have the time to watch news on YouTube as often as young people? Is the trend going to continue, or will it plateau a little?

Nic Newman: As Rossalyn has said, young people are not suddenly going to start watching television news. We might want them to, but 18 to 24s in particular—that gen Z group—are behaving very differently from young millennials. These people grew up digital; they have not learned to watch television news and I do not think that they are going to. We need to adapt to the way in which they find media.

Obviously, younger people are going to grow into responsibility and will therefore become interested in different things. I certainly was not interested in news when I was much younger, but I grew more interested as it became more relevant to my work. That will clearly happen, but the way in which they will want that to be delivered—the formats, the channels, the distribution—is completely different. I cannot emphasise enough the difference. It is very hard for us to understand, because, essentially, we like the media that we grew up with; we like the habits of watching television news. I still buy a printed newspaper every day and I have grafted digital habits on to that. Young people have grown up with habits, too, and they are going to cling on to them. They might occasionally pick up a free newspaper or watch a television news bulletin on coronavirus, but that is about it.

Rossalyn Warren: My parents read newspapers, but I am digital through and through. As a journalist, I have worked mostly for digital and that is how I have always consumed the news. We should not be too alarmed; it is about adapting to digital. It does not need to be flashy new initiatives. We should focus on simple, creative ideas that work and really think about readership and audience. If anything, digital has now given us an amazing opportunity to understand who our readers are, where they consume the news, what they want to read and what would be most beneficial for them and their communities. While it has brought a set of huge new challenges, it has also allowed us to figure out what we need to be doing to talk to readers.

Q36 **Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** You have gone half way towards

answering the question that I wanted to ask. Rossalyn, you used in your opening remarks words such as chaotic. I want to know: does any of this matter? If so, why does it matter? Beyond that, what are we working towards? What will journalism look like in your world? From where you are sitting now, with all the experience that you have, what do you expect it to look like in 10 years' time and will that affect how journalists learn to work?

Rossalyn Warren: A lot of the fundamentals of what journalism is when it comes to telling stories and breaking news will not change, but how it is distributed will. It can be overwhelming even as a reporter to consider whether new technology will shift the way in which people consume and distribute news. While it is important to recognise the role of new technology in changing how people consume news, there is huge potential to engage more people than before. The challenges that we have always faced in journalism about mistrust and misinformation have existed for years. They have not come with the digital age; they have just been amplified by a lot of these platforms.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: But does that matter?

Rossalyn Warren: It always matters.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: The amplification, I mean, not the core proposition.

Rossalyn Warren: Yes. Little regulation is happening with a lot of the larger tech companies. Every time one of them steps in to suggest that it will tackle this or that problem on its platform, it never really does. In my opinion at least, very limited effort has been made by a lot of them to understand how such information is amplified on their platforms. Hiring a dozen fact-checkers will not cut it. Facebook is used by billions of people.

This is will not change overnight either. A lot of media companies have really suffered at the hands of the larger tech companies because they are media companies in themselves and distributors of the news. So, yes, amplification is a serious problem. How that is solved is a huge journalism question. There are partnerships between newsrooms and the tech companies, but that is not enough.

I do not think that Google or Facebook setting up local news initiatives is enough. It is an answer, but ultimately that will not solve the local news crisis or the funding crisis because it still feels limited. It still feels like they are not taking responsibility for the fact that Facebook feeds have really harmed local and public interest news in many ways. Simply funding a handful of reporters for a year and then wiping their hands clean—sorry, this is probably a bit much—is not really enough to resolve the serious damage that they have caused.

Nic Newman: This is slightly different. It is hard to be sure what journalism will look like, but we need to hold on to some of the things that we have had before. I think that a linear three-minute television package will continue and people will still want to look to have news in that form. A narrative article that takes you from the start to the end will

still be part of the armoury. However, I just think that there will be so many other ways to tell the story of coronavirus, for example, such as amazing graphics. We will be consuming this in short videos with text underneath. These are all innovations, some of which started at BuzzFeed.

There will be new interfaces. We have only just got used to the smartphone, but there will be augmented reality, so there will be snippets and moments of information as part of this chaotic world of getting little headlines in different ways through augmented reality or glasses, which will be part of the picture. Voice is already starting to be part of that picture. You will start asking for information, as well as just reading it.

News will be and is more participative than it has been before, so it is not just about broadcasting at people. Part of what BuzzFeed, the *Guardian* and others have taught us is the value of tapping into the knowledge of the audience. That has been one of the positives of digital journalism. People often think about the negatives, but there are huge positives that do not get talked about enough in terms of what participative journalism and network journalism can be, particularly locally. There are huge opportunities to reinvigorate local in a way that is much more participative and networked.

Q37 The Chair: You have both touched on the changes that technology has brought to journalism. I am interested in what the most innovative thing that you can think of is, for either the journalist or the news producer. What are the best examples that we can look back on and learn from as we look forward?

Nic Newman: There are many different ways of defining innovation. There is innovation in storytelling. The *Financial Times* and the BBC have done fantastic jobs over the past few years on visual storytelling: how do you tell these really complex stories in ways that are really accessible, using a whole load of new visual techniques? You have amazing innovations in investigations using data, such as the Panama papers. Bureau Local, the *Guardian* and BuzzFeed News have done amazing investigations using big data that were not possible before and popularised them. There are open-source investigations, if anyone has heard on Bellingcat, such as Eliot Higgins's investigations into MH17 using community and network journalism. Its podcasts are fantastic; do download and listen to them. They will really open your minds.

There are other kinds of innovation around formats. I have already mentioned short videos with text underneath. I do not know whether you have seen some of the ones about coronavirus, of accessibly getting out the ones where nurses in Iran or Ecuador are jumping around, singing songs and explaining how you wash your hands. They are really incredibly important pieces of public interest journalism, in many ways. There are daily news podcast formats. The Daily has essentially created a new way of doing audio that involves sound design and narrative storytelling, which is now being copied by the *Guardian* and others.

It is proving a huge hit with younger audiences: under-35s are listening to linear programming, going all the way through from start to finish. There is a huge list of email newsletters. I do not know whether anyone gets the Spoon, which is three minutes, compressed and tells you everything you need to know for your day ahead. ITV News is doing "The Rundown", which is a very short digest, told by young people for young people as a video bulletin, distributed through social channels. The media are involved with a huge range of great innovations.

Rossalyn Warren: I completely agree with all of that, especially beyond podcasts, looking at smart audio and Alexa apps. I know that the BBC is working on audio news updates that become part of people's daily routine. The audio is so successful because it is accessible and affordable for people to consume, relatively straightforward and can be used every day at home.

That is one of the most effective ways to think about how we produce journalism: it does not necessarily have to be these flashy ideas. I am thinking about some of the simple, creative ideas. You mentioned newsletters. The *Guardian* and iNews have been making a newsletter push. Some people might think, "Newsletters have existed forever. What makes it different now?" Actually, their thinking is really savvy about how they can build not necessarily paid subscribers, but even just email lists that they can occasionally send updates to. Then, if people are able to donate, they can. These financial models are interlinked with these quite simple but effective ways of communicating and distributing this news. I agree that digital has been amazing when it comes to really understanding audiences.

The only point I would be wary of when we talk about innovation in journalism concerns something that we have already mentioned about some of these flashy new initiatives. I worked in a newsroom when live-streaming was a key new innovation that everybody was going to be doing. Lots of reporters' efforts were directed towards live-stream and video. It was called the great "pivot to video" era, which you are probably familiar with. A year or so later it collapsed. Quite a few reporters of my generation all lost their jobs because of it. My only word of caution is that when newsrooms think about innovation they should think about evaluating and testing it to ensure there is long-term thinking in mind, not just picking things up because they are fun. That is the only point I would add.

Q38 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** We have seen a massive increase in freelance journalism, particularly among the millennials and young people coming into the industry. Nic, you have written in your trends article that we have to deliver on an entirely different set of expectations for millennials. Could you both talk to us about how the industry and public policy could support this new wave of freelancers?

Rossalyn Warren: Certainly. As I mentioned, I have been a freelancer for three years. Freelancing is enjoyed by many journalists in the UK. Some freelancers choose to be freelancers; others who I know have been forced to be freelancers because of the nature of the industry. As much

as I have been a freelancer out of choice, I have still faced numerous challenges as a freelancer. For one, outlets rely on freelancers way more than they would like to admit, except that does not seem to be reflected because they still do not pay them well enough or on time. These are all very simple things in the industry, yet it is still so persistent. There do not seem to be any concrete efforts by a lot of newsrooms to try to understand and tackle that problem.

As you say, a lot of freelancers are also younger reporters. It would be irresponsible if I did not highlight how the rise of freelancing has, in part, stemmed from job insecurity in the industry. It is a job insecurity that did not really exist 10 years ago. I am not saying that there was no risk of losing a job in journalism 10 years ago, but if we compare the job security from then to today, the rise in freelancing for the most part is for those in my generation. It is younger reporters who are freelancers. I do not know why that is. While the internet offered opportunities to reporters like me, I do not think print was prepared for that transition to digital. When there were not no longer reliable ways for income to exist without newspapers it sort of fell apart, I guess.

Freelancing can be incredible. I work with Tortoise at the moment, with the *Guardian* and outlets that allow me to work on longer-form investigations and various reporting that I do not think would exist if I was a normal reporter in some of the newsrooms. There are benefits to both. I may have a chaotic income schedule. However, I also get to work on the stories that are important and that I want to report on. I know that the majority of freelancers enjoy freelancing, but there are obvious persistent challenges that still exist.

Nic Newman: Freelancing and low pay are obviously linked to the financial security and sustainability of the news industry in general. The key is to address the underlying problems of the news industry and the financial disruption—we may come back to that.

A freelance journalist working for multiple publications is different from another opportunity that we should be thinking about, which is that it has never been easier than it is now for individuals to get together and start a business. There is very little of this in the UK; there is a lot more in countries such as the US, which is a bigger market. This has to be relevant when we think about a local model—hyperlocal sites—or almost any niche which can be super-served by one person who really knows a subject well.

There are some great examples of that in the technology field. I think we will see a lot more of it in future. One can see a world where maybe some public funding or infrastructure, from the BBC, the Press Association or whoever, might enable talented individuals in one area, part-time or full-time, to drive amazing value through a combination of network journalism, some journalism of their own and really good services and data, thereby providing a completely different model of local news. I am really optimistic and excited about the possibilities there, and we should do a lot more thinking about it.

Q39 **Baroness Quin:** My questions pick up on some of the themes that we were discussing in the earlier session, part of which I think both of you sat in on; that is, whether the profession can become more representative of the population and, if so, how that could be achieved. We also heard how most people in journalism have gone to university and been through the degree process. What are your feelings about the non-degree routes into journalism and how could they be promoted?

Nic Newman: I am not an expert on this. Our research shows that journalism is now associated with the elites in a way that it was not before. It is seen as representing the status quo rather than the interests of ordinary people. We see this as one of the drivers of low trust in many countries. Last year, we saw an enormous drop in trust in France with the gilets jaunes protests. Much of that was directed at the media, because they were seen essentially as being part of the elites and not really paying attention to the grievances.

We have seen similar things in Germany, where legitimate concerns about the impact of immigration in local areas were not being talked about by the media. That sense of the politicians and the media working together has been a real issue, not helped by the fact that the Chancellor heads into the *Evening Standard's* editor's chair or Michael Gove goes into government. The optics matter here.

There is something else. It is not just about journalists being born into the elites; it is also that journalists do not get out of the office as much as they used to. Part of that of course is to do with digital, which chains you to your desk in your office as you have to do another update or respond to some Twitter thread that is going viral.

On responses, a huge amount is being done, particularly on gender representation. I shall give you a few examples. The *New York Times* has radically changed the make-up of its newsroom. It used to be much older, much more male, very white and very un-diverse in many ways. Over five or six years, it has really changed that make-up, with more racial diversity and a greater focus on young people.

Part of that was looking in different places for potential recruits but also recognising that it needed those younger skills if it was properly to represent younger audiences. Other people are using tactics such as bringing in digital disrupters, which is incredibly useful. CNN brought in Yusuf Omar, who is an amazing storyteller for young people, using tools such as Instagram Stories and Snapchat. He did not stay very long; it is very hard to keep people who are that creative and different. News UK has a gen Z board. These are members of an 18 to 24 group who advise the journalists about gender, tone of voice and ways in which they can make their journalism more accessible to young people.

It is also about a whole load of other initiatives around representation. The BBC's 50:50 scheme is a bottom-up project to ensure gender balance among contributors. Newsrooms in Scandinavia are doing the same. They have software tools that look at the gender balance of faces on website front pages and send emails to editors telling them to change if things are not right.

I think that there is huge recognition of this in newsrooms. We did a survey at the beginning of the year which showed that 76% of senior leaders of around 150 companies felt that they were doing a good job with gender diversity initiatives. There has been huge progress there, but I think they recognise that they are doing much less well on racial diversity. Political diversity is a real issue as well. The figure is less than 50% for both of those.

Rossalyn Warren: There are many barriers for people trying to enter journalism. I focus on low-income, working-class audiences. You can open a newspaper and read an article about a “benefit scrounger”. What kind of picture does that paint for poorer people in the UK? Poorer people are a key demographic already isolated from the press and public discourse. I would not say that it is all corners of the press, but that type of depiction is prevalent. Such people are underserved, so why would they think that journalism is for them? Why would Muslims see the media as being a welcoming industry when we have seen parts of the press routinely depict them in a negative light? Black, Asian, low-income and working-class people are disproportionately underrepresented in journalism. That is not because their communities are not engaged or interested in the news; it is because few outlets are really looking to offer fair, considerate reporting to those audiences.

There are ways to change this; there are codes of ethics. We need a real push for more responsible, ethical journalism. Work on building trust with those communities, whether through workshops or getting out and talking to them, would help news providers avoid mishaps or harmful tropes.

I feel passionately that we need to stop bringing journalists to London, with more effort made to provide funding to journalists elsewhere. The national papers have internship schemes, but they bring reporters to London. There are growing efforts. The BBC and Channel 4 are pushing for reporters to be based around the UK. It is not that we should not have reporters in London; it is just that media companies should make more of an effort to have real representation across the UK.

You mentioned universities. Your witness in the previous session spoke about funding and support to organisations which encourage students. You do not need a degree in journalism—I do not have a degree in journalism—but training, career support and financial support in those areas would be useful.

We already know that Oxford and Cambridge are disproportionately represented among journalists—I think that the figure is 90%-plus. I do not have an issue with those universities, but it seems that they are the only ones whose graduates who have been hired. No matter what people say, people hire who they know from universities and schools that they recognise. If that is not the case, we are not seeing it. Not having a degree is one thing, but even when you do, it is not always the right degree in the industry.

Evidence shows that publication of pay gaps means that companies are more likely to address and change their pay gaps accordingly.

Newspapers should do the same for private school/university breakdowns and figures for those who do not have university degrees. We talked earlier about positive discrimination. Are the media really committed to bringing in journalists from all universities and all backgrounds? Forgive me if this already exists, but if there was a breakdown for all these outlets showing how many of their journalists had attended private schools and how many had attended non-private schools, it would help us understand the full picture and see where any gaps could be addressed.

Baroness Quin: Thank you. I make an additional plea for you to send us any information you like with various international examples. I am thinking about what Nic was saying about the *New York Times* and things that are happening in other countries. Similarly, when it comes to the London monopoly on the media, are there examples from elsewhere? The only one that I can think of off the top of my head is Germany where, partly because of the devolved system there, they have big news outlets in different parts of Germany. It is not all concentrated in Berlin—far from it. If you have examples such as that you can send us, that would be helpful.

Q40 **Baroness Grender:** My question is about trust, and I think you have answered almost all of it already in a previous question. You have painted a picture for us, and I recognise it, with a teenager in my household, that is almost like medieval villagers gathered around the well swapping stories.

The contrast to that, of course, is that no longer do we have big-bucks media barons telling us what to think as we read from page 1 through to page 30. Therefore, thank you very much for the level of optimism that you have shown us about the future because that is really important for the work that we are doing; we want it to be an optimistic and positive future. I wondered if there was anything else that you would like to add to what you have already said about how we can improve the trust levels so that it is no longer the medieval villagers gathered around the well but they are actually starting to look at what has been written on a quill pen or whatever.

Nic Newman: There is so much that we can say about trust. In our data we are seeing a continuing decline in trust and rising concern about misinformation, or being able to tell what is true or false on the internet and distinguish trusted content from non-trusted content. There are lots of reasons behind that which we probably do not have time to go into. In a sense, declining trust may not be a problem. It is partly a product of abundance and the fact that people no longer see just the BBC or ITV but are seeing a whole range of sources, so they are suddenly seeing that maybe these journalists did not have all the answers and there are actually different perspectives on the same stories.

It is also about rising scepticism. That may be good but scepticism becomes a problem if it tips over into cynicism and the vilification or abuse of journalists, which is definitely where we are. We are getting to levels where it is really dangerous, especially when that low trust is then

fuelled by politicians who may have an interest in not having strong independent scrutiny of what they do.

In my view, low trust is a real problem now for democracy and society and we need to be talking about the fundamental solution of strengthened support for good journalism. We have had people in focus groups saying, "You can't trust anything that anyone says any more," which is deeply concerning, and that "You can't trust anything you read in the papers, they all tell lies." That is not everyone but it is becoming a much more widespread problem. We do not need a competing set of alternative facts about coronavirus.

When it comes to things that we can do about this, first, politicians, political parties and ordinary people need to respect good journalism and stop undermining it. Secondly, to an extent, news organisations could also do with not attacking each other. I am thinking particularly of some of the anti-BBC agendas that much of the press has pursued for some time.

Thirdly, journalists have responsibility too: they need to focus much more on the needs of audiences and less on the needs of advertisers in terms of clickbait and sensationalised headlines, and they need to respect the desire that we find in our journalism for agenda-free and unbiased news. This comes through again and again. People do not want agendas forced down their throats; they want to separate news and opinion.

Journalists need to do a lot more to show their workings, show their relevance and show that they are worthy of trust through their track record. Earlier I mentioned the Bellingcat podcast, which is a fantastic example of showing how journalists work forensically to uncover the truth and check facts. The editor of the *Yorkshire Post* was mentioned earlier. He also did a fantastic job on Twitter of explaining the incident in the Leeds infirmary and how the *Yorkshire Post* is not like what you see on social media but is about checking, and that this is the way in which they do journalism. Journalism needs to be distinguished from the mass of information available on the internet. We all need to do a lot more, not just journalists but politicians and ordinary people as well.

Rossalyn Warren: As I mentioned earlier, mistrust in the news is not necessarily new. I grew up in the shadow of the Iraq war and hacking. We are still seeing remnants of the latter happening now, with various out of court settlements and so forth. Today, though, mistrust looks different. It is no longer a case of "The media lied to us and spun a story." I would argue that now the mistrust looks like, "The media is biased and ignoring those stories instead." So it has gone from "The media lied to us" to "They are ignoring these stories," and that is coming from both the left and the right in the UK.

"Why isn't the media covering this?" is an ongoing question that we as reporters hear all the time. This is due in part to what information people see on their social media feeds and how often they see it; that is a big part of mistrust in the digital age. For example, if they see X amounts of public posts—not necessarily news articles—about an issue, pushed by

algorithms based on the groups that they are in or the pages that they like on Facebook, but they do not see any articles about that issue in their Facebook feed, they may presume that this is a conspiracy in which no media are discussing that issue. We are seeing that with quite a few issues here in the UK today, and I can give you examples of that if you want.

There are so many ways in which we need to be tackling mistrust and journalism. I agree that one of them is clearer transparency from reporters and a breakdown of how they report their stories. That has been an increasingly effective way of showing people, "Here's how we did this story," whether that is through a podcast or a Twitter thread. As Nic says, the editor of the *Yorkshire Post* addressed that in his tweet, saying, "Here's what we did. We called up these people, we fact-checked this and did that." Showing people the process is quite an effective way of helping people to understand that journalism is not just, as they think, writing up any old stuff that we think.

Baroness Meyer: I would like to follow that up. You said that people have to trust journalists more and journalists have to be more responsible, but is there not also a case that since newspapers are losing more and more money, they themselves have become more sensationalist in the stories that they publish? For instance, last week the *Times* published a story that all the Peers are going to work from home, while the *Guardian* has come out with this terrible picture of Priti Patel. Is there not a problem that, because the newspapers are losing money, they are going to become more and more aggressive against each other? How do you resolve that?

Nic Newman: This is partly to do with the intense competition, particularly with the national press, but it has always been so in a way. The business model of digital advertising has really pushed that to a new level over the last 10 years or so. I am a bit more optimistic than that because we are seeing changes to business models.

The advertising business model is not working for most, so they are either moving away from advertising or trying to get more of a subscription, membership or donation model. That essentially pushes you much more towards high-quality journalism, to writing things that are going to be of such value and distinctiveness to a particular audience that you need to really focus on what audiences are interested in. That is not just about popularity. One of the problems that we have had with digital is that it has pushed towards clickbait and sensationalism. That still exists, obviously, particularly with ad-supported media, but on the whole I am a bit more optimistic about that.

Q41 **Baroness Grender:** On the algorithmic issue, which is that the algorithms seem to push mostly towards being the curse of journalism, do you have examples of the use of algorithms that are part of the joy and the future of good journalism?

Nic Newman: Yes. The problem is that when we think of algorithms, we think of the Facebook algorithm that gives you more of what you want.

Baroness Grender: Or YouTube, mostly.

Nic Newman: Or YouTube, but there are some other fantastic algorithms out there. I do not know if anyone here uses Spotify but its Discover algorithm is essentially all about discovering new things. Indeed, some of the best journalism is about curating things that you do not know already. Organisations such as the BBC are looking at ideas around public service algorithms and how you combine these things.

There is no one algorithm; we decide how we programme the algorithms. That is not just the purview of platforms: I firmly believe that the future for publishers is to use algorithms and technology to distribute the right content to the right people, and to find algorithms that help you find the new podcast that you are going to be interested in as well as giving you stuff that is going to be valuable in your own niches. I use Twitter and social media a lot, and they are brilliant at bringing stuff to you in an area that you know you are interested in so that you can go really deep into more of what you like, but at the same time I look forward every Monday to my Spotify Discover to discover things that I do not know already. That is what we need to combine.

Rossalyn Warren: I agree. Spotify is a great source for news podcasts, and there are other such algorithms. It is not doom and gloom that everything is led by an algorithm. However, I still have not seen any way in which the algorithms of the two biggest platforms, YouTube and Facebook, have changed since 2015-16 that has been effective in pushing trustworthy public interest news into feeds. Those companies have hired teams and done this and that, but I am still not entirely convinced about the algorithms on most platforms. You talked about autoplay and what is presented to people; if they type "coronavirus conspiracy" into YouTube, what is recommended to them is still other conspiracy videos. That has not changed. I am still wary about that for journalists.

Q42 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Nic talked about the difference between journalism and mass information, and the importance of trying to ensure that we emphasise that. Inevitably, clickbait responds to our most visceral requirement for outrage and it drags us along, yet Rossalyn pointed out that sometimes you get on your Facebook or social media feed a series of bits of information that drag you on and are saying the same sort of thing, but there is no article to back them up. Are we seeing an increase in people's awareness and ability to resist the visceral onslaught of clickbait in their search for truth and facts? Is there anything that policymakers or the industry can do to try to support that literacy and directing users towards reliable sources?

Rossalyn Warren: That has been an issue with the digital age. You would be surprised by how many people do not actually click the story but just read the headline, regardless of whether or not it is an emotive, clickbait-y headline. That has been a consistent issue.

One of the ways in which we can tackle that constructively is to better support, for example, the local initiatives that you mentioned where

people are often reporting based on their community, as well as initiatives involving subscribers and direct forms of communication, whether that is newsletters or messaging apps, that do not necessarily rely on feeds but are direct forms of communication.

We should be looking at building subscribers in local communities. The newsletters that I mentioned earlier, as well as other forms that national newspapers are looking at, go into feeds directly and there is no risk of your attention being pulled 50 different ways at that point. So for me the way to tackle this is through direct forms of communication with better funding and support for those initiatives. Hopefully, that would mean that people relied less on clickbait.

Viscount Colville of Culross: It is like creating a community.

Rossalyn Warren: Yes. There are initiatives like that, and ultimately there should just be more of that.

Nic Newman: I think fragmentation is definitely an issue, along with the lack of context within feeds. On the other hand, it is interesting to see how people get around that or find out that information. We were doing some research with young people last year. They were finding out about the rainforest fires in Brazil and things that were going on in Sudan on Instagram, and then they were going to Google and reading stories about that. Sometimes social media is just about picking your interests and deciding what you want, and then in your own time you go and find the depth. It is not that people are not interested or not necessarily reading those stories.

I think we are seeing a bit of a backlash against this. Young people and old people feel a bit overwhelmed by this new environment, and we would like a bit more habit. To go back to the point about habit, it is interesting that young people are listening to podcasts in the morning, email newsletters are taking off again and the *Times* is putting its editions back together again. There is a sense that we actually want the package to be put back together again. It will be both aspects: it will be those moments when you just want the headlines to keep you going through the day, and the times of the day when you want something more substantial.

Q43 **The Lord Bishop of Worcester:** Thank you for all that you have said, which has been very thoughtful as well as positive. What would you like the result of this inquiry to be and what do you feel would be the most useful contribution that we can make as a Committee to the future of journalism?

Nic Newman: That is really difficult to answer, because the future of journalism is such a broad question and media companies are so different these days. They used to look like one another; I think that, increasingly, they are not going to, so there will not be a one-size-fits-all answer.

There is a lot of negativity around journalism coming from journalists themselves, politicians and ordinary people. It would be helpful to

restate the importance of high-quality, accurate journalism—never more important than right now—which is robust in its scrutiny and independent of powerful interests. Journalism, of course, does not always live up to that, but from much of what I read and hear, and going back to the optimistic nature of my testimony, it seems better than it has ever been—certainly better than a lot of journalism when I came into the industry. Therefore, the possibilities balance the real problems that the industry faces, which I think we all recognise.

We should also recognise that there are going to be gaps in the new world and that there will be a need for policy intervention. The market will not provide everything that we think we might need for sustainable journalism. Particularly in respect of public interest journalism, local journalism and accountability journalism, we are going to need short-term and long-term funding, however that is done. Frances Cairncross and her committee pointed that out, and we need to make the case for it. In previous testimony, there were some good, concrete examples of innovation and training really helping with the sustainable business models that I think are at the heart of this.

How do we fund journalism? Where are the gaps and where is the role? It is not just about a divide between commercial and non-commercial; it is about where we find hybrid models that fill gaps that we think are important.

Rossalyn Warren: I agree with all of that. We mentioned funding for improved media literacy education in schools. That would be a useful, constructive step. As we said, it is less about explaining how to consume the news online than about education on reliability of sources outside the channels that young people know on YouTube and so forth. It is also about breaking down some of the stigmas, stereotypes and so forth that they may see presented on social media, looking at how the press is trying to tackle that and engaging younger communities with journalism. That would be useful.

Public interest journalism is vital to democracy. As much as it holds power to account, there is little funding and support for it in the UK, or at least much less than perhaps there once was. While there are initiatives, I suggest that there is a case not only for funding local newsrooms but for putting forward a fund specifically for independent and local freelance reporters pursuing news projects within their communities. Rather than it being a lump sum for a local newsroom, we should have a system whereby local journalists dotted all over the UK can say, "Actually, I want to spend a month looking at the NHS in this corner of my town" or whatever it is. That exists in the US, which has various funds for freelancers; for example, through the Pulitzer Center and the International Women's Media Foundation. For some reason, such schemes do not seem to exist in the UK. From a freelance perspective, that is something I have come across.

Finally, news distribution in the UK is now more unequal than income. Studies have shown that if you live in poverty in the UK, you do not access as much high-quality news as wealthy people—I think that you

did a report on that—especially online. That has been the grounding of what I am deeply passionate about and it needs to be addressed. Although paywalls and subscriptions may work for some, they cut off other readers in the UK and we need to consider ways around that. We have talked about habit and trust and whether there are affordable ways in which people can access news, be it through direct channels, newsletters and so forth.

The Chair: On behalf of the Committee, Rossalyn and Nic, I thank you for coming. It has been great. From our perspective, it has been a positive and uplifting view of journalism. You have come at it in different ways, but that is a positive thing. You talked about how important it is. We clearly think so, too, which is why we have the inquiry. You talked about impartiality, which again is very important. You also talked about new funding models. As Baroness Quin said, if there are any practical examples, either international or domestic, that we were unable to cover—because it is quite a lot to get into an hour—please write to us. Be they funding models for training, development or whatever, it would be really helpful to learn about them. Thank you very much. Your time is appreciated.