



Select Committee on Communications and Digital

Corrected oral evidence: Freedom of expression online

Tuesday 27 April 2021

4.05 pm

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Members present: Lord Gilbert of Panteg (The Chair); Baroness Bull; Baroness Buscombe; Viscount Colville of Culross; Baroness Featherstone; Baroness Grender; Lord Griffiths of Burry Port; Lord Lipsey; Baroness Rebuck; Lord Stevenson of Balmacara; Lord Vaizey of Didcot; The Lord Bishop of Worcester.

Evidence Session No. 27

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 214 - 220

Witnesses

I: David Shelley, Chief Executive Officer, Hachette UK; Clare Alexander, Chair, Aitken Alexander Associates.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of Witnesses

David Shelley and Clare Alexander.

Q214 **The Chair:** We are now joined by David Shelley and Clare Alexander. We are going to turn our attention to the world of publishing. David Shelley is the chief executive officer of Hachette UK. Clare Alexander is a literary agent of long experience, with a list of prize winners in her stable. David Shelley and Clare Alexander, welcome. Thank you very much for joining us.

As I said, we are going to look at publishing today. Our inquiry is into freedom of expression online, but some of the issues that have arisen in the debate in and around the publishing industry, about freedom of expression and cancel culture, are relevant to the inquiry, albeit in a different context. We are very grateful to you today for coming and giving evidence. The session will be broadcast online and a transcript will be taken.

Do you want to kick off by giving us any further words of introduction that you would like to? Give us your general perspective on the issue of freedom of expression from where you see it in your roles in the publishing world. Then we will move on and take questions from members of the committee.

Clare Alexander: I am a literary agent, as you said. I was a publisher beforehand. To briefly say a word about our agency, we have a range of well-known heritage authors such as Sebastian Faulks and Pat Barker, but we are also unusually diverse, in both our staff and our authors. We represent people such as Bernardine Evaristo, who was the first ever black woman to win the Booker. I feel that we are across the piece.

My job is very much author-facing. My job is curation. I make that point because a lot of people talk about us as gatekeepers. Gatekeepers keep people out, whereas my job is bringing people in, but I have to judge their talent first. A lot of people nowadays feel very entitled. They all feel that they have a book inside them. I am here to tell you that they do not all have a book inside them, although some of them might do. They can self-publish what they like, which is a bit of a relief really. I am not really about making sure everyone can be published. I am here to help people who I think are talented or have something important to say.

Curation versus entitlement is one of the interfaces of all this. We are at a watershed moment. I know this is a question you will come up with, but one of the things that I deal with a lot is self-censorship, before we even talk to a publisher. David will know more about how they deal with the general public. I do not really deal with the general public; I sit between authors and publishers.

The Chair: Self-censorship is definitely something we will want to touch on.

David Shelley: Thank you for asking me to contribute today. I am here as chief executive of Hachette UK. We are the second largest consumer

publisher in the UK after Penguin Random House. We have about 13% market share. Our publishing is actually several autonomous publishing units, so publishers such as Little, Brown, Hodder & Stoughton, Orion and John Murray, within which we have imprints. We have about 65 imprints in total and each of those has a publisher. We have over 200 people who commission books in our organisation.

I welcome this session because, as Clare said, we are at a very interesting point in time, in terms of discussions about what should and should not be published or what is and is not permissible. To some extent, these conversations have always been going on in publishing. In the 20th century we had the obscenity trials and things such as that, so it is a perennial question in publishing that we wrestle with. I am pleased to be here, contributing today.

The Chair: Let us move on and start by discussing how you make a decision to publish, particularly in areas of controversy, for example.

Q215 **Baroness Grender:** Hello and welcome. Thank you so much for joining us. Getting your perspectives in particular will be really helpful. If anything, you are slow media and we have been dealing all along with very fast media. You have the joyful friction of being able to explain context. We would first like to understand from you, before we ask more specialised questions about what we are particularly examining, how in the first place you make the decision to edit or not to publish a particular author. If you could describe that to us in the context of books for children as well, that would be very helpful.

As I was preparing this question, I remembered that I embarked, rather foolishly, on reading my son the Enid Blyton Famous Five series a few years ago. I then suddenly realised that I had to explain so much context: that not all foreigners are dodgy and that kind of thing. Give us a sense of how you create a context as well for historical writers and people that you want to place in the public domain now who may appear terribly dated.

Clare Alexander: I would not have much of a role to play with what we call backlist, which is to say somebody such as Enid Blyton. We do have some of those sorts of estates, but David would have more to say, I think, about children's books. Although I am aware that I am stating an opinion rather than experience, there is a difference, which I think you are trying to tease out, between children's publishing and adult publishing. In adult publishing, you can provide a context with introductions and notes. In children's publishing, there is a whole other set of considerations that David might want to speak to.

All the time, I am second-guessing what publishers want. I suppose I am using the two hemispheres of my brain. I am judging the quality of something and then thinking about the market. The market is affected by what we are talking about today.

I will tell a very short anecdote, which has a happy ending. It sort of explains what I mean. One of the very distinguished historians I represent, who is a white English woman, wanted to write a book about

a black American slave who ended up as a man of property in Ireland and London. Both American and British editors said, "You cannot do that. You are a white woman. We cannot publish that book". We were stood down before this process even began, because everyone was so fearful.

Having said that, she is a clever girl, so she went away and wrote a proposal about four men, of whom he is one, and we sold it for a lot of money. Historians write all the time about people. They cannot be the people they are writing about, any more than novelists can be the product of their imagination. We are in a very judgmental time, where imagination and research come up against cultural appropriation in a way that is quite tiresome.

Baroness Grender: Is there any author about whom you have said, "You clearly have the talent, but I just cannot sell you in the current climate"? They are not one of the people you have just described who all think they have a book in them but do not. They have a book in them, but you have said to them, "It is not going to work". Have you ever had that experience?

Clare Alexander: I would hope that I would not say exactly that. If I really thought someone was talented, I would try to find a way, but it might be a bit like that story about the historian. The way would not be to go head to head with the market, where we would not be able to sell it, but to be smarter than the market and think of a way to come at a subject. There is no doubt that at the moment, there are very difficult subjects for authors to touch on at all.

David Shelley: In our publishing house, an editor for any imprint or division is always looking at what the market wants. We start with what the potential readership is, rather than necessarily what our own tastes or opinions are. What is the market for a book? If an editor wants to buy a book, they would take it to an acquisition meeting that would comprise all their colleagues. There would be a discussion about that book.

The only times, in my experience, where we would refuse to publish a book are if people feel there is no market for that book, so we cannot sell enough copies to make a profitable publication, or if that book contravenes the law in some respect. We have a very active legal department and we have rejected books before, decided not to publish them, because in some respect we feel they would contravene the law, be defamatory or incite hate speech. We are fairly precise about that. We try as much as possible not to take value judgments in there at all. It is looking at the strict legal definitions.

To your question about children's publishing, in all the decisions the children's publishing team makes, they are very minded that children are not like adults. When they read a book, they do not necessarily have the same critical thought process that an adult would have. I think it is fair to say that, in the whole industry, children's books are treated with an extra degree of care and sensitivity, to make sure that any child who picks up that book will find something to enjoy in it and it will not have a detrimental effect on children who pick those books up.

Baroness Grender: Can I ask you the question I asked Clare? Have you ever had a difficult conversation with an author, saying, "Your talent is clear, but this is the current context"? Clare would put it in a much better way than I have, which is why she does what she does. Have you had to have that conversation?

David Shelley: I am not in those meetings, so my role does not involve that. I can think of occasions when people have reported things like that to me, but that is to do with a book not being saleable. We are part of an ecosystem. We sell books into bookshops, bookshops sell them on to consumers and newspapers review them. If there is a book that bookshops would not want to stock and newspapers would not want to review, there are conversations such as, "There is great writing here, but we do not think that the bookshops would stock this book and we do not think that the newspapers would review them".

We have published books where we worried about those things and, in due course, the bookshops did not stock them in great numbers and the newspapers did not review them. We are part of a complex ecosystem.

Clare Alexander: Could I say one thing about the legal point? There is an additional nicety about that. There are some very eminent people on this panel who will know more about it than I do. Because of the British legal system and defamation, a publisher will quite possibly factor in not only whether it is legal, but whether it is expensive. There are situations where a book is going to be very expensive to publish. Although it is published, I am going to reference *Putin's People*. It is by someone called Catherine Belton. It is in the bestseller list, but she is being sued and it could prove very expensive indeed. Publishers will factor that in. It is not just whether it is illegal but whether it is costly or likely to be.

David Shelley: To Clare's point, we are commercial businesses. It is a risk to reward ratio. One example I would give is Michael Wolff's book, *Fire and Fury*, about Donald Trump. In that case, that was a costly book in legal terms, but it also sold extremely well. We will always be weighing that up as well.

Q216 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Good afternoon. Thanks both for coming this afternoon. You have just been talking about what is and is not legal. At the moment, we are mainly talking about the offline world. However, our inquiry is looking into the online world. Although the online harms White Paper has been looking at transferring what is illegal offline into online, proposals have also been put forward which will make a special category for online content which will be legal but harmful. That will still have to be taken down. Some of our witnesses have expressed concern about this creating of a difference between publishing online and offline. That might create a threat to the freedom of speech. Quite a lot of your content will appear online. How concerned are you by the idea of there being a particular online category of these legal but harmful posts?

David Shelley: The online harms area is not one that I, or we as a business, specialise in. My worry would be about any unintended consequences for our sort of business if you were to do something such

as that. What one person considers harmful is very different from what another person considers harmful. If you asked some people, I am sure they would regard a very wide variety of our publications as harmful. If something such as that were to be done, it would need to be with absolute clarity, with a view to preserving the sort of plurality of publishing that I feel we should be proud of in the UK, and not creating a situation where we become too scared to publish things for fear of them falling foul.

To the point earlier about the fast media versus the slow media, they are different things. Publishing something online can be a quick, fiery reaction, versus a book, which is a slow, thought-out cultural object. In my view, there should perhaps be different criteria. I would want to make sure that anything that happened did not stifle free expression.

Viscount Colville of Culross: It is very interesting that you would like a definition of what is legal but harmful. At the moment, the suggestion is that the regulator, Ofcom, will outsource that to the different tech platforms to decide. I do not know how that is going to work for publishers trying to go online. For you, is it very important that whoever the regulator is has a very clear definition of what they think is legal and harmful, so you can then work against that? Explain how they might even do that.

David Shelley: It is very important that we, as publishers, are agnostic on those sorts of issues, and that there is clear regulation and a legal framework that we operate in, rather than us making those decisions. There is a very slippery slope when we make those decisions. Then you have a lot of questions about cancel culture and things. There are lots more worries that I would have about how different groups would lobby publishers with different interests in mind. We need to be able to say to people, "This is the system. We operate within it", and then we are as creative and plural as possible to publish within that. I would not want a situation where we have to create a framework of what we believe is harmful. That would be dangerous.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Clare, you talked about books being expensive. Do you think that having a difference in online regulation and offline regulation in this sort of area could make it more expensive, particularly when it comes to something as apparently nebulous as what is legal but harmful?

Clare Alexander: I dare say that, if it is just legal but harmful and there is no clear definition, as David says, that gives rise to all sorts of complexity around the legal clauses in contracts, the protections publishers will then want from authors and so on.

Although we are saying they are different, they are of course connected. I know this is not quite your question, so forgive me. When a book gets published, the online world gets busy if it does not like it. Even though they are different as platforms, they are ultimately connected. David and I were talking earlier today about *American Dirt*, which was a book that got published and was a bestseller, but a lot of people did not like it and

felt that it was racist. The publishers got an enormous amount of flak online, with really personal attacks.

Even though the platforms are different, they are very connected. Publishing remains somehow the thing of record, but then online responds, and it can be absolutely crippling for people in the publishing industry when they receive hate for what they have done.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Would you then be in favour of legal but harmful posts being regulated, in order to protect the publishing industry?

Clare Alexander: I would like it regulated, but I worry, as David does, about definition. My “harmful” is not your “harmful”. Maybe it is your “harmful”, but it may not be Baroness Greender’s “harmful”. Who decides what is harmful? At the moment, this whole thing has come up—let us not forget—because, for my generation, free speech is something ultimately important. I was at Penguin when we published Salman Rushdie and went through all that. My assistant hates the expression “cancel culture” and calls it “consequence culture”. For her generation, that is her natural hinterland. That is why you cannot define harm. My harm is not her harm.

Viscount Colville of Culross: That is very helpful. Thank you so much.

Q217 **Baroness Rebuck:** Thank you both for all your remarks so far. It has been really interesting. I have learned a lot about modern publishing. I want to go back to cancel culture and self-censorship. I thought that Kazuo Ishiguro put it well for an established cadre of authors when he said that young authors nowadays are being exposed to a climate of fear and, he suggested, even forced to self-censor because of the anxiety of precisely what Clare has just been talking about. Other authors have written about a changing and, on occasion, more invasive editing process, which is something David might want to comment on.

There are all the examples that all of you know of translators being stood down not because of their skills but because of their identity, and young publishers, in particular, expressing concern over writers as diverse as JK Rowling and Jordan Peterson. This is not a publishing world I recognise from when I was around, given, as Clare says, the commitment of all publishers to freedom of expression and publishing a variety of voices.

My question is to both of you. You are in the curation and discovery business. Has curation gone too far? Is it a bit out of control? Are you in control of it? Has cancel culture, which we have to acknowledge, given rise to self-censorship?

David Shelley: I would like to reframe it not as cancel culture, but as the incredible rise of big tech and the role that social media platforms play in our lives. I have not seen an instance of so-called cancel culture or people getting exercised by anything that has not originated from Twitter, Instagram or one of a few big tech platforms. Their algorithms thrive on conflict. The posts that often get the most traction and see the

most views are the ones that are most stormy and involve conflict. Talking about generational conflict, they thrive on generational conflict.

The big thing that has changed since you were in your previous role has been the rise of those social media platforms. I agree with Clare that there are a lot of young people who view the words “cancel culture” as inflammatory. I do not believe there is such a thing as cancel culture, but I believe that the social media platforms absolutely have a hold of all of us and are influencing decision-making in all spheres of life in a very big way. More of a light needs to be shone on to that.

Baroness Rebuck: I will come back to you in a minute on the young people in your company and how you deal with that generational issue. Clare, you must be closer to emerging writers. You talked about an established historian who, very cleverly, possibly with your help, found a way round the problem. Do you sense that younger authors are actually coming to you with censorship already built into their work?

Clare Alexander: Yes, I suppose they are a bit, although I also think—and we are going to come on to age—that it is a natural part of the younger culture. There is much more pressure on them wanting to agree with one another. It is not only online. America is more extreme than we are. For example, you will know, Gail, and perhaps the others do not, that this week Simon & Schuster in America is having a lot of problems. Over 200 members of staff signed a petition, so this is not just online. It is now within a company. They are demanding that nobody associated with Donald Trump be published by the publishing house.

This comes then to a sort of flashpoint about who runs the publishing house. I would not want to be in the position of running that publishing house. They may even have to get to a position where probably the older management says to the younger refuseniks, “You can always leave”. This is getting quite inflammatory.

The people who are having to self-censor more are older. People over 40 and certainly over 60 are very worried about how they are going to fit into the current sort of culture. They are very anxious about what sorts of subjects they can write about. It is across the piece, but it is slightly different according to age, ethnicity and sex. There are all sorts of things. We did not used to have to think about that.

Baroness Rebuck: Have you come across instances, as Lionel Shriver talks about, of parts of authors’—established or not for that matter—manuscripts being edited by this younger generation precisely because of this culture clash? In her case, she was accused of othering. She went with it because she did not think it was an essential part of her story. Is this something you are seeing more of with your authors?

Clare Alexander: I have not had that direct experience, but I am just lucky. I am surprised I have not. I am sure it happens.

Baroness Rebuck: I would like to pick up on this question of social media, for both of you really. David, it has become an essential tool of your publishing company to get authors’ books discovered, and for authors to reach their audience, build their brands or whatever. You

obviously put a premium on a generation that knows its way round social media. Every generation has its own worldview, but it is this empowerment of young millennials and gen Z that I am particularly interested in. They are the ones that are writing, I assume, letters in America.

They have developed a worldview, which is their own worldview, but to what extent do you think that many opinions have been shaped by the kind of groupthink that can be a result of social media? David, you were talking about the big difference between then and now being the fact that there is social media. How do you see its role in terms of the cultural industry that you are in?

David Shelley: It is a really interesting question. I think we are all guilty of groupthink, as is anyone who engages with social media. Back in the day, 20 years ago, you would not have control over your own media in the way you have now. Now you can filter out, not just in social media but everywhere, the things you do not agree with and the things that do not interest you. As groups, we are all becoming more siloed.

I am actually speaking universally. There are more groups of people of similar ages having conversations where they agree with each other. There is less room for ambivalence. There is less room for contrary points of view coming together and finding resolution. We are living in a much less centrist age.

Personally speaking—I know I am saying it again—I would put this down to the social media side and the internet generally, in the way it can serve up bespoke media to each of us that accords with our worldviews and personalities, and does not challenge us. That is something we need to contend with and find ways around, but I see that. I do not see it as just about gen Z. It is all of us in this.

Baroness Rebuck: Staying with a different kind of worldview or a generational issue, how do you deal with the young publishers in your organisation? You have had the odd issue, so I do not want to go into the specifics. Generally, how do you onboard a new generation? How do you get them into that place where they are open to all manner of voices?

David Shelley: The one crucial thing is to be very open with people from the interview stage about what the organisation stands for. We have our mission; we have pillars. We are very open that people might need to work on books they do not agree with. We are an organisation that believes in a plurality of voices. We want to find readers everywhere. In the past, not having seen this coming, maybe we have not been clear enough with people about what sort of organisation we are. We need to be very clear with people.

One thing I have really valued is talking a lot with people of a different age group. I am 45. I talk to 21 year-olds and 70 year-olds in the organisation, so people are really coming together and talking. It is very important to talk and understand. To use the word “othering”, it is very easy to have this sort of other perspective about a group of people. When you actually talk to individuals, you get a more nuanced view of it

and a greater understanding. We are trying to encourage more intergenerational conversations that help everyone understand a bit better.

Baroness Rebuck: Clare, what is your perspective on this issue of the role of social media and the extent to which you, at the centre of things, see this generational play continue out among many different publishers?

Clare Alexander: It is sort of Janus-faced, is it not? Particularly during Covid, there were very few ways of getting attention for books, because we did not have independent bookshops for discovery. We did not have Waterstones. We had only Amazon, which we are coming on to. Publishing needed social media and has used it more than ever. It also comes back at us and not always in ways that we like.

It is very different from the way that I grew up in publishing, where in fact the response to books was as curated as the books. By that, I mean that there were literary editors at newspapers who could reach millions of people and their review would count. I ask young people, even people coming into publishing, and they do not read reviews. They listen to one another about what they should read. I do not like social media. I do not really understand it, but I do Instagram and people do endless pictures of what they are reading. Sometimes it is really only about the colour of the spine. It has become a way that people are defining themselves, rather than a reviewer saying, "This is the book you have to read".

We still have prizes and prizes are a sort of curation. As an aside, prize judges hate big publishing and love nothing more than discovering books that nobody has heard of and putting them on a prize list. It is interesting. It is much more challenging than it used to be. Some of it is very good, but some of it is quite poisonous.

Baroness Rebuck: Thank you, both of you. I am going to hand back to the Chair. I have lots of other questions.

The Chair: I am sure you have, Baroness Rebuck.

Q218 **Lord Griffiths of Burry Port:** Hello to both of you. I woke up with you, David, this morning on Radio 4. There was a nice mention for our committee indirectly. Thank you for that. I am sure I heard you say, although at 6.25 am I am never quite sure what I remember and what I do not, that, in your business, your job is to sell as many books as you can. You try not to have any views. You have talked about being agnostic here and so on. I can understand all that. You are in the world of business.

When it comes to publishing works that might have substantial sales in countries with large populations, such as China, it may be necessary to look at what you are sending there in a slightly modified way. That is a big decision and it will require you to do a bit more thinking than just to say, "I do not have any views", but that happens.

It is 50 years since I travelled to Haiti. I lived in Haiti for 10 years and I had to smuggle Graham Greene's *The Comedians* in with me. If I had had it found on me, that would have been curtains for me. I know about

how powerful literature can be, or the social sciences, if it comes to that, in challenging the nostrums of these authoritarian states, and therefore how important it is for our global community that such pieces of work get written and disseminated as far as is possible.

I have nothing but admiration for Thomas Piketty, who has written two absolutely wonderful books. He refuses to kowtow to the Chinese by modifying them in any way, so of course they do not get sold there. Your business of selling as many as possible would be challenged by such a decision on the part of an author. I suppose at times it is you, as a publisher, who must think about such judgments. How do you go about negotiating those waters? Thank you once again for waking me up this morning.

David Shelley: That is a great question. I will talk more specifically about China in a moment. The view I have is that the text is the text. I think the vast majority of authors and their agents would agree with that. When we decide upon a text we are going to publish, that is the text for all our markets. We come at it from that angle. Therefore, we do not modify the text for particular markets to suit the particular political regimes.

I will give the same book example that I gave earlier. We were told that, if we just took a page of Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury* out, we would sell tens of thousands of copies in China. If we refused to take that page out, we would not be able to sell the book in China. In consultation with the author, we did not take that page out. We left the page in, because we feel the text is the text is the text.

As you said, it is important for these documents to stand. We value fact checking and accuracy very highly as part of what we do. The books that we make will be part of history. While a book is being edited or constructed, there are many conversations to ask: "How do we sell a lot of copies? How do we make this appealing?" Once the text is decided on and it is printed, that is the book.

I do not think I am speaking just for Hachette. I know lots of other examples in publishing where people will not kowtow to particular regimes by changing books for them. It is obviously someone's commercial decision if they want to, but there are a lot of great examples in publishing of people refusing to change books, particularly for China, and then those books not being available in China as a result. I hope that answered it.

Lord Griffiths of Burry Port: A much more problematical example for me was not an authoritarian regime in the sense of a foreign Government. One of the most outstanding writers of recent times on social affairs and spiritual affairs was the late Jonathan Sacks, truly a giant in his field. One of his best books was called *The Dignity of Difference*, which is a world-changing book. His own constituency in Britain decided that he was too loose in his readiness to trade his Jewish religion with other religions and the book was recalled. He had to rewrite passages before it was republished.

That is a case where the text was not the text. The text became what others decided it needed to be, as opposed to what the author thought it should be. I found that terrifically difficult to understand. It was not your publishing house and nor was it anything to do with Clare of course. I wonder how you would look at that sort of pressure on people to write the books that others decide they should write.

David Shelley: I would like to think that we are always incredibly supportive of our authors. We have had situations where an author themselves has said, "That book has gone out into the world. I have had letters from readers. Actually, I regret that thing I said". In those cases, we would say, "What edition do you want out in the world?" We would work with them on that.

However, we would never say to an author, "People are saying this. We need you to change it". It is always in consultation with an author and preferably, from a logistical point of view if nothing else, it is much easier if the book is the book. You do not want to be having different editions going around. It is immensely complicated from a logistical perspective. I have not heard of any other examples like that. I would like to think that is a rarity in book publishing and that, on the majority of occasions, it is when an author wants to change a book that it is changed, and then the publisher works with them.

Lord Griffiths of Burry Port: I have the original edition from before it was pulped. It is a great book. Clare, how do you come in on these matters?

Clare Alexander: I come in before the publishers and before the book is the book. My angle on this will be that there are sorts of territories where publishers will not go. I will use as an example an author of mine who is an Arabist who spoke at Khashoggi's funeral. I could not sell a book about Mohammed bin Salman because publishers did not want to take the risk. Maybe it would not have been a good book, although I think it would have been a good book. That was not really the problem.

It is not self-censorship or censorship. It is that the market does not always answer everything and publishers do not want to take that sort of risk. I understand that. That would be where I come in.

Lord Griffiths of Burry Port: Thank you to both of you. The role of literature, not just the social media, in affecting views of complicated situations, and of course fiction as much as fact, is inestimable. Thank you for the work you do.

- Q219 **Lord Lipsey:** We are taking a quite general view of freedom of expression. I live in Hay-on-Wye, so I am still inclined to think that books are sold from bookshops. In the modern marketplace, a firm such as Amazon is in an extraordinarily powerful and dominant position. I wanted to ask both our witnesses to what extent such a firm is bringing pressure to change the content of the books people write and you publish or promote.

David Shelley: Thank you for the question. In my experience, at Hachette in the UK, we have never had any conversations with Amazon along those lines. It is a concern when any player becomes as big in a particular market as Amazon is. As you rightly say, if it was to do such a thing, it would have very big consequences. It has never done that with us. I am pleased to say that the leading book chains have not done that either. They believe in stocking a plurality of books. There are independent booksellers that have particular slants and that sometimes do or do not stock books. Certainly, we have not had that issue in the UK with Amazon. It would be a profound concern if it ever talked to us about the content of our books in that way.

Lord Lipsey: That is comforting. I am told that Amazon removed from sale, certainly in the United States, a book called *When Harry Became Sally*. I think I can guess what it was about. Are you worried about that kind of commercial censorship creeping in over here?

David Shelley: I have read the reports as well, so I cannot comment on what happened there. I do not know, but I know that it was apparently in the US. I know the team at Amazon well. We have a lot of conversations with them. It would concern me greatly if they ever brought anything such as that up. They never have to date. In the nature of our dealings with them, I would like to think that they are entirely consumer-focused as a business. I would like to think that such an action would go very much against that. They say they are all about the interest of the consumers and the interest of the consumers has to be plurality. They never have so far.

Lord Lipsey: If this committee were to recommend that, in the event of this happening with a concern such as Amazon, Parliament would undoubtedly need to get very swiftly and deeply involved, would you support such a recommendation?

David Shelley: Speaking in my capacity for Hachette, I would. I cannot speak for the whole publishing industry. With Amazon and other companies, it is always worth having constructive dialogue directly. It might reassure you, as a committee, if you did and asked the questions directly to them. Yes, I would obviously have a concern if they were ever to start not stocking our books. I repeat that we have never had that experience with them.

Clare Alexander: I have two things to add, which have to do not with them doing exactly what you described, but with the impact of the monopolistic position of Amazon. First, in the early days of Covid, Amazon preferenced other things. It said that it was going to preference medical supplies, which meant that there were no books at all. It was not taking books. In a way, that is worse. It is not messing with the content. It is saying, "You cannot get books". Since the independent bookshops were shut, that was the only way people could get books. They can turn off the tap if they want to turn off the tap.

Secondly, there is an unintended consequence of algorithms. To go back to social media, Amazon cannot really make a bestseller, but if something begins to sell somewhere else Amazon will amplify that

exponentially, because the algorithm will recommend it. You might think that is not censorship, but it means that the light is brighter at the high end but the darkness is darker everywhere else. Amazon is having an impact, either on whether you can get books or on what books come to the top of your search.

Lord Lipsey: That is fascinating. Thank you.

The Chair: Sadly, we have time for only one final question, but we have a good few minutes to focus on it.

Q220 **Lord Stevenson of Balmacara:** We have been talking about domination and the way in which Amazon may affect not only the ability of people to reach books, but, once the social media kick in and the publicity works, the supply as well. It has a sort of amplifying effect, which I think Clare caught very well in her remarks. Earlier, Clare, you said something about self-publishing, that it was a bit of a relief. I was going to ask you to come back and explain a little bit about that. You have made yourself clear during the conversation about what you were getting at there. It was that you did not have to worry about those of us who go around thinking we have the book in us and that you must be the only person in the world who would be able to help us realise our fame and get us the Nobel Prize in Literature that we want.

Clare Alexander: One of the key words of our times is "entitlement", is it not? A lot of people feel they are entitled to publication. They are and they can get publication, but it is not my role to enable that. David will speak to this himself, but commercial publishing will make a commercial judgment and I will make a qualitative and commercial judgment. The reason it is a relief is that I can say to people, "There is nothing stopping you being published. It is just not to my taste".

One of the things I always get upset about is this term "gatekeeper", because people talk a lot about agents and publishers as gatekeepers. I see my role as being an enabler, but I am an enabler, I like to think, of talent and of people who have something that I think needs to be said. There are plenty of other agents; there are plenty of publishers. I feel that I am an enabler. It seems to me that I am allowed to curate and it is easier to say to people, "You can always self-publish".

The two worlds are almost invisible to each other. Very occasionally, someone bubbles up through self-publishing and crosses over into commercial publishing. But I do not know of anybody, when given the opportunity of commercial publishing, who says, "No, I will carry on self-publishing, thank you very much".

Lord Stevenson of Balmacara: It is not publishing, is it? You are being incredibly self-deprecating about what you do, and I am sure David will be as well. I have been published myself, in a very modest way, and the skillset is far beyond that of anybody who might be tempted to self-publish. However, it is not really; it is simply changing the font size and getting it in proper pagination, is it not?

Clare Alexander: Our skills can be overstated too. We are actually gamblers, but we are gamblers with our sensibility. I have been reading for a very long time, so I have some judgment, but then, when I decide to represent someone, it is a gamble.

Lord Stevenson of Balmacara: I was saying that it is not really an escape valve for concerns we might have about market domination. It is another way of getting things to happen.

Clare Alexander: It means that there is even more out there.

Lord Stevenson of Balmacara: That is a good thing and we should support it, but it is not an alternative. David, would you agree? You publish and others make things available, they hope, for people to read, but do not publish in that sense.

David Shelley: I would broadly agree. There are some authors who are incredibly focused on marketing, particularly authors of crime and thrillers and some women's fiction, and who will almost get their own freelance team around them to do all the jobs that we do. I am enormously biased, but I think it is a very time and labour-intensive thing to do.

In all honesty, sometimes authors can effectively self-publish, but really only in e-book format. They cannot reach all the physical bookshops that we can. If an author wants to keep their market as e-book and audiobook, there are some authors who do that very successfully by themselves, with a lot of effort. If they want to reach all the bookshops, it is really essential, in my view, for them to work with a publisher.

Lord Stevenson of Balmacara: That is quite an interesting point. I do not know enough authors to give any generic views, but there are lots of people around us who probably can. Is the impulse in those who want to write seeing it in physical form, or is it the communication of their ideas to the wider world? Presumably, we are at a cusp here. We all thought the physical book was dead anyway, but obviously it has had a bit of a recovery over the pandemic. Is it really going to be there in 20, 30 or 40 years' time?

Clare Alexander: Yes, it is. David can give you chapter and verse. E-book has long since plateaued and physical books have grown, not only but especially in Covid. People like books, I am pleased to say. The e-book is very convenient, but it is not the same. Also, people used to say that the e-book was going to be the chosen platform for all young people. It turned out it is all of us who need reading glasses who are the biggest market.

David Shelley: That is completely true. I agree with what Clare said. The vast majority of authors want to see their work available in bookshops everywhere, in print, e-book and audiobook. There are some authors who really just care about the e-book format. Those are the authors who have often been very successful in self-publishing. I would not denigrate that, actually. Some of them are talented, have been very successful and have chosen not to publish with publishers, but they are in the minority.

Lord Stevenson of Balmacara: One of the things that we have not talked about and we perhaps ought to have registered is the question of how copyright plays into this world. It is too late to start a big conversation about it. Could you give a yes/no answer? Is copyright an issue we might want to come back to?

David Shelley: We have benefited from the most fantastic copyright regime. It is beneficial to everyone in the ecosystem. There would be profound worries from the whole publishing ecosystem if there were to be any large changes to the incredible framework we have here in the UK. I feel very strongly and positively about our existing copyright framework.

Clare Alexander: I do too and I do not see why authors should not have property rights like any other property. It is a property. It is the product of their imagination. They ought to be able to benefit from it and their children ought to be able to benefit from it, just as they could a house or piece of land.

Lord Stevenson of Balmacara: You can rest assured that Gail is on your side and is keeping me under tight rein. I would only say one thing: medicines in patent.

Clare Alexander: I have a doctor daughter. It is very different with the sciences.

The Chair: Lord Stevenson, you have started something. That is very interesting. I am really glad we ended up on a positive note when we were discussing the future of books and, by implication, bookstores and the whole industry. There was some worrying evidence in there about things that are happening in the publishing industry, which I think we are right to listen to and hear about when we consider the issue of freedom of expression online.

Clare Alexander and David Shelley, you have brought out those issues incredibly well for us. Thank you very much indeed for your evidence this afternoon. It has been a really useful and helpful session. Thank you for your time.