

Select Committee on Communications and Digital

Corrected oral evidence: The future of journalism

Tuesday 17 March 2020

3.50 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Gilbert of Panteg (The Chair); Baroness Buscombe; Viscount Colville of Culross; Baroness Greender; The Lord Bishop of Worcester.

Evidence Session No. 6

Heard in Public

Questions 50 - 55

Witness

I: Matteo Bergamini, CEO and Founder, Shout Out UK.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witness

Matteo Bergamini.

Q50 **The Chair:** Matteo Bergamini, from Shout Out UK, thank you very much for coming to give evidence to our inquiry into the future of British journalism and the media. As you know, our focus today is on media literacy. Please introduce yourself briefly and give us a quick outline of the work of Shout Out UK.

Matteo Bergamini: I run an organisation called Shout Out UK, a youth network that tries to get more young people engaged and involved in politics and media by running political literacy and media literacy programmes in secondary schools, colleges and youth clubs. What we mean by political literacy is the barebones, basic understanding of how our political system works—understanding how this building works, what your roles are, how MPs get elected through first past the post, councils—all the barebones basics of our democracy.

Media literacy, as I am sure you guys are aware, is how to critically understand the media we consume—online, offline, radio and TV, et cetera—as well as understanding misinformation, disinformation and fake news. We primarily do this in schools and colleges in two ways. One is through offline workshops, where we physically go into schools and deliver either one-off workshops or six or 12-week programmes.

We also have an online offer, an e-portal platform, which is getting quite popular at the moment, as I am sure you are aware. Teachers get the resources, they get training, and they deliver the programmes themselves via online lessons. All the students get their own login, so they do all the activities online. That allows us to check up and make sure that schools have the support they need. If they require a bit more support, if they are not hitting certain lessons, or whatever else, we can always give additional support to that teacher. At the end of the programme, we tend to turn it into a bit of an event, and the parents or carers get to come in and listen to the students give a speech or a presentation about an article they have written or something they care about.

We also do a lot of bespoke programmes. We recently ran a series of events called Media Minded, which we ran across the UK. We went to Cardiff, Glasgow, et cetera, to bring 10-plus schools together, primarily from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, to discuss and debate news and get engaged with media literacy. We run entire-day conferences with workshops on understanding how to be critical when engaging with the media, not cynical, and how to do basic fact checking. They would get a series of articles on the same topic from a variety of different publications, they would fact-check, come up with their own conclusions and break that down into a 10-step guide to dealing with online information.

It is unrealistic to assume that every time young people look at an Instagram post, they say “Okay, before I share that, let me look at my

10-step guide". That will never happen, but we can start to build a culture of, "This has triggered my mind"—for whatever reason. "Is that entirely accurate? Let me go and check". You start to build a culture of being critical, but not cynical, about everything you read.

We also do a lot of work with other organisations, such as the Greater London authorities and councils, working with young people who are designated as NEETs, and so forth.

Baroness Grender: How media-literate are people in the UK? When Ofcom tells us that media literacy over the last 15 years has made some progress but has now stalled, do you think that is an accurate reflection?

Matteo Bergamini: Sort of. I say that, because we have found that young people, at least the young people we have engaged with and worked with in just over 700 schools across the UK now, are not necessarily media literate, because that needs to be taught and understood, along with the need to do basic fact checking. You need to be educated in that kind of stuff

However, they are tech-savvy. From a young age, they have engaged in media and consumed online content more than most of us, so they are more used to seeing certain bits of misinformation. They are used to catching things out online more easily than a slightly older generation. However, I would not necessarily class that as media literacy. Media literacy is more than just, "Oh, that image looks a bit wrong, it has been Photoshopped, and I can see that because I know how Photoshop works". There is more to it than that. When it is just about being tech-savvy and learning as you go, there is a ceiling to what you can pick up.

Baroness Grender: Can I clarify something? I apologise if you have explained it, but I cannot find it anywhere in the briefing either. What key stage do you concentrate on? Is it key stage 2? Is it key stage 3?

Matteo Bergamini: Key stages 3, 4 and 5: we do secondary schools.

Baroness Grender: Does that mean that you hope the school will run your course in parallel with its GCSE programme?

Matteo Bergamini: Some schools do, yes. It sometimes gets run in enrichments, or as part of citizenship. Sometimes schools run it in English classes. It gets paired up with different subjects, depending on the school.

Baroness Grender: You do not think that critical thinking abilities and skills should start at an earlier stage.

Matteo Bergamini: I completely do.

Baroness Grender: It is just that you do not do that at the moment.

Matteo Bergamini: Our organisation focuses on secondary schools. Other organisations deal with primaries. I think it should be throughout—100%. We wanted to hyper-focus on a certain demographic. The way you deal with media literacy and education in general differs, of course, based on age.

Q51 Baroness Grender: Talk to us about the impact that your initiatives have had. Do not think of this as scrutiny by a Select Committee. What we are looking for is great initiatives to foster and grow brilliant journalism in the future. That is our agenda here; it is not about whether or not your organisation is working. Can you give us a sense of which of your initiatives you feel have been most successful? How did you assess and quantify that?

Matteo Bergamini: Sure. We do basic pre and post-school programme surveys; we survey the young people before and after and get teacher feedback further down the line to see how they have reacted. Obviously, it is a work in progress, and we are speaking to other organisations in this space to find better ways of assessing our impacts. It is a constant learning process.

On the impacts we have found, I would highlight two programmes. One is our political literacy programme in secondary schools. We found that at the end of the programme a couple of things tend to happen; I have the stats with me. We ask them to rate their knowledge of how to critically analyse a news source. Before the programme, 43.18% of all students rated it as 4 or 5 out of 5. That shot up to 72.6% after the programme.

That is clear engagement, and we found that young people tend to be less cynical after it. The reaction that "I believe nothing, because everything is a lie" changes. Once you start to build skills on, "Well, this is how I can check. If I really want to know whether this is true or not, these are the organisations I can connect with, this is how I can do some basic fact checking to be a little bit sure of myself as to whether this is true or not," you retain that healthy scepticism, which is important, but you do not have the level of cynicism you had initially. That is one of the major improvements we have found.

Another thing we have seen is that young people tend to move away from their social media bubble. What we find before the programme is that young people are not aware that social media creates a bubble—I think this applies to any age—because they want to sell you stuff, essentially. Whenever you are on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or wherever else, the sponsored posts you see eventually aggregate based on what you click. If you buy shoes, bags, or whatever it may be, you will then see more of that product.

News and social media work in exactly the same way. If you click on articles that are—I am trying to think of something apolitical, an article that for example is pro-Brexit—

Baroness Grender: Coronavirus.

Matteo Bergamini: Yes, that is a better example—then you will start to see images and articles that fit around that topic. After the programme, when they become aware of social media aggregation, they make more of an effort to get out of that bubble. If they see an article and wonder whether that is the entire truth, they try to find an alternative viewpoint or try to get out of that social media bubble. That has the added benefit

that if you start to click and engage on both sides of the argument, the bubble ends up giving you both sides of the argument. It starts to improve their consumption of online media, based purely on the algorithm on a lot of these social media networks.

Finally, a lot of the work that we do is quite practically based, so we get the young people to write articles. At the end of our programmes, all the articles on the shoutoutuk.org website are written by young people, so we give them a platform to voice their opinions.

What is nice about that is that once they go through the programmes to learn how to do basic fact checking, the ones who wanted to start writing and maybe go into journalism can get a bit of a feel for what it is to write an article. We are starting a programme with a funder soon, linking local journalists with our programmes to make sure that young people who want to go into journalism, regardless of their background, can have that engagement and start to nurture some of those potential employability skills.

Baroness Grender: Would you be happy to send us a bit more information about that?

Matteo Bergamini: Definitely. I can send that, no problem.

The Lord Bishop of Worcester: You heard our last witness, I think. You are clearly doing brilliant work, but you are not sitting under the Ministry of Education being centrally organised and supported as in France. I presume you have to raise money for what you do. I am wondering about the different models that exist and what you are doing with other organisations doing good works here, as opposed to the more centrally organised work that is being done by our previous witness's organisation. Do you have any thoughts, from your own experience and elsewhere, about what you have come across?

Matteo Bergamini: Sure. I have thoughts about financial sustainability and funding in general. It varies across the sector. There are a lot of straight-up charities that just get funders and donations in from various bodies. We are a bit different; we are a social enterprise, so we are not quite a charity and not quite a business but a weird mix in between. We have no core funding, so we rely on school subscriptions—schools subscribe to our programme and pay a yearly subscription for the online platform, or for whatever programme they are subscribing to—or we work with partner organisations that fund on a project by project basis.

The project that I spoke about, for example—I am pretty sure I can mention it—is funded by NESTA. Another programme will be funded by another organisation; we often partner with universities, which pay for their schools in their local catchment area.

It is a mish-mash of the two. There is definitely a lack of funding in the sector, but there are also creative ways of making sure that the work you do is funded. If the work you do is good, schools and other bodies will be willing to pay for it. I have found it quite interesting that the schools we tend to work with, because they are in low-socioeconomic areas, often have other pots of money which they can support their

students with. Schools tend to have money to spend on projects like this in those areas.

I hope that answers your question.

The Lord Bishop of Worcester: Yes. Thank you.

Q52 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** I want to go back to what media literacy is, and particularly the issue of trust. We have heard a lot from previous witnesses about the trust problem and the fact that trust is decreasing, particularly among young people. You have talked about fact checking and that sort of thing, but I am interested in trying to direct users towards trusted sources and how they can work out what is a trusted source and what is not. There is an extraordinary range on social media, without necessarily that differentiation, and you the user have to try to work that out. How do you help young users to differentiate?

Matteo Bergamini: There is one thing we found that does not work in the slightest. If you go in with the idea that, "This is what a trusted source looks like", or, "This is what you should be reading, and this is what you should not be reading", straightaway the reaction, especially when you are dealing with young people from low-socioeconomic areas—the ones most distant from society—is to brand you as part of "the establishment". You are one of them, so you are not to be trusted either. It automatically destroys your credibility with those young people.

The Chair: Is it not a good thing that when people tell you what you should and should not read you are sceptical about that? Is it not positive in itself that they react to being told what is a good source and what is not?

Matteo Bergamini: That they are sceptical about that? Yes, in a way, that is a good thing. It becomes difficult, however, when everything that anyone tells them, especially on social media, is seen as, "Oh well, this is part of the Government", or, "This is part of the society", or whatever, "so it can't be trusted".

Young people in particular tend, therefore, to veer towards sources that get shared quite widely, specifically on closed networks more than on Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, or whatever else. Because those sources are shared so often by their peers, they seem more trustworthy than a scientist, for example, on a scientific topic.

Going back to your question, with our programmes we take young people almost on a journey. You start with a blanket understanding of all the different sources, different news sites—from the online, more obscure ones to the more traditional; the BBC or whatever else—and you look at them as if they are completely evil, because in those young people's eyes they are. Then you start to introduce basic levels of fact checking and look at how articles are created and the kinds of quotes that are used.

You have to engage with this and get them to fact check and critically analyse those pieces themselves. That tends to create a change in the behaviour of deciding what a trusted source should look like. So even if

they are seeing a news piece on Instagram, Telegram, or wherever it may be, they start to build in the thinking: “Does it have a quote?”, “Does it have open sources?”, “Does it quote who the journalist is?”, “Does it do this, that and the other?”

You start to build almost a culture of checking whether a news source is realistically credible, but you have to start by looking at various articles, videos or whatever it may be, and being able to break those down: “This one has a quote from an academic. I can see that academic, on Twitter or wherever, but this one has a quote from a Twitter account that got banned two days after the article got published”. Do you know what I mean?

Again, it is about building those things by making them see that for themselves and getting them to go through the steps. It is almost like making them re-enact what journalists should be doing when they are conducting that news source. That automatically builds a culture of what to do when they are online.

Viscount Colville of Culross: That is great, because we have been looking at the different ways in which people receive their news, and the vast majority of young people receive it from social media.

Matteo Bergamini: Social media, yes.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Is it ever possible to migrate them so they get news that is sourced directly from newspapers? The BBC in particular is supposed to be such a trusted source, and it is on iPlayer and has its own website. Can you direct them so that they go to the source of material rather than allowing it to be filtered through social media?

Matteo Bergamini: It would almost be fighting against technology at that point. It would be very hard to get young people from any type of background to start reading newspapers or any of that kind of stuff. News needs to move forward, and social media is just the go-to at the moment. So rather than getting people to revert back to that, we need to gear them up to be prepared to engage with social media, because that is what they will do regardless.

In our programmes, we bring in articles and videos from news sites—we do all of that as well—but their go-to is social media. That is just where they are. That is where their friends are. To give you a really small example, most young people’s communication is now on Instagram; they do not even use WhatsApp any more. Social media is how they communicate with their friends and is therefore the way they will get news and information, and so forth.

In an ideal world, you would love them to go to source, but in reality I cannot see that happening.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Is it really important, then, that those trusted sources are branded in some way—that that branding comes through in social media?

Matteo Bergamini: It can be. The trouble with that, again, is the cynicism. If you do not have that basic culture of knowing how to be a healthy sceptic and able to see what a trusted source is, if you suddenly see Instagram having badges or whatever for certain media sources, you will start questioning those sources: “Are they part of the Government?”, “Are they this?”, “Are they that?”

You automatically start falling into that trap, almost, so you need to build that culture in schools from a very young age and then carry on. That would be a lot healthier than trying to get social media companies to have specific badges. I would love to see something like that come in, but it has to come in at the same time as media literacy, and media literacy is probably more important, because if you change the culture, you change the way they consume social media. That, for me, is the crux of the issue.

Q53 **Baroness Buscombe:** I think my question has been answered in a number of ways. It is simply: how should media literacy be taught in schools? In asking that question, and listening to everything you have been saying, which is incredibly helpful, there is another question: how much freedom do you have to teach in the way you think is right? You have already said that it would be so good if you could start with students at an earlier age, because, generally speaking, they are less cynical and their minds are wonderfully open and free.

When you go into schools, do you have to say, “This is what we’re going to do”, and stick to that? How much freedom do you have to focus on ensuring that those young people, indeed on occasion, are not being cynical? I found when talking to students in their secondary years that they are very often hard to communicate with. I have just come back from Bhutan, where trainee monks aged seven have mobile phones and are on those mobile phones.

Who are you to come in when they are 14 or 15 and start telling them how to work with this machine and compare with other media, like traditional broadcasting?

Matteo Bergamini: Of course. On the question of freedom and how much manoeuvrability you should have when delivering, using our example, the subject matter of what we cover is quite fluid, because quite often young people will bring in their own examples, and we encourage that because it is always good to see what they are sharing and engaging with, and so forth.

However, the tools and skills for engaging critically with the media are—I would not say rigid, but we have a set structure for delivering that. The tools are quite stringent—“This is how we do fact checking”, “This is how we do critical thinking”, et cetera—but for the topic, the subject matter, we have obvious examples of different means, articles and so forth, that we have come across, but we often encourage young people to talk about them and discuss them among themselves.

Most of our programmes are youth-led, by which I mean that they are led by the discussions among the young people themselves. We still

teach them critical thinking and media literacy skills, but base them on the discussions and so forth that they have.

On the question “Who are we to talk to them about their phone?” and all that, the learning is not so much about how to use that device; it is more about how to navigate the social media landscape. One thing that we find quite relevant is that young people almost always want to talk about mental health and the impact on it of social media, particularly platforms like Instagram, because they often see the best side of someone’s life, and no one will pick up that they are having a terrible day and stick that on social media. It does not work like that.

That is important, because it almost always triggers a conversation about critical thinking and media literacy; they want to understand whether something is the reality or just a version of it. That then triggers all sorts of different conversations, because if it is happening with their friends’ posts, why can it not happen with media that you see online or wherever else? They want to have this information and they welcome people talking about it.

Baroness Buscombe: In all the other parts of their curriculum, they are probably being encouraged to accept everything they are taught—

Matteo Bergamini: Yes.

Baroness Buscombe: —whereas you are focusing on critical thinking, which is brilliant. You are teaching them to discriminate between what they are reading and thinking so that they can form a view, and to do something which the rest of the curriculum perhaps avoids or does the opposite of. Are you conscious of that?

Matteo Bergamini: We are. It is an issue. There is a much wider conversation to be had about how we do education in the UK. There are massive issues in the way we teach. You are right; when I was in school, there was the teacher, the teacher dictated, and that was it—they are God in that classroom—you got the information, you regurgitated it in an exam, got a grade and moved on. That is problematic in the sense that when you are told to do that, you take that lesson to the media landscape and just suck in anything, which becomes problematic.

There is a much wider conversation to be had about how we do education.

Q54 **Baroness Buscombe:** That is very helpful. When I was at school all those years ago I did something called critical thinking, but it was seen as incredibly niche and only a few of us were chosen to do it, as if it were particularly special. That is worth thinking about.

My supplementary question is about how media literacy can support young people from a lower socioeconomic background. I have already heard you say, in a sense, that you cut through that. I know you were here listening to our previous contributor this afternoon. You are in several hundred schools, so you cut across all backgrounds. Do you see a difference in responsiveness to what you are doing among children from different backgrounds?

Matteo Bergamini: Definitely. They are the ones who have the biggest arc of change. Young people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, not always but quite often, will feel more distanced from society, more alienated, more abandoned. That breeds a lot of anger and disenchantment with the Government, with society, with institutions in general.

I am not saying that some of that is not founded, but there is a lot of cynicism that then pushes them away from any news that is seen as part of the establishment, as we talked about earlier. Media literacy helps to cut through that, in the sense that it builds healthy scepticism as opposed to the cynicism that, "Everything's garbage, none of it's true and I want to push away from it".

Another thing that we find really interesting is the potential link between media literacy and preventing radicalisation. Young people who have the potential for radicalisation are often isolated, pushed away and marginalised—or feel marginalised, anyway.

Baroness Buscombe: And who often do not have much freedom to think in their own homes.

Matteo Bergamini: Yes.

Baroness Buscombe: And then you appear and teach them to think critically.

Matteo Bergamini: Exactly. You also start to cut through some of the information that you may receive online from, say, hate preachers or whoever, because you can essentially fact-check that as well. There are a lot of benefits.

As a small point, it is also important to note the employability skills that come from media literacy, because your critical thinking is key to pretty much any employment prospect. The ability to do basic fact checking, the ability to engage, the ability to understand how to research basic things are all really important skills. Whether you go to university or not, you will still need them at some point. That is where we see the biggest improvement. Some of other kids from slightly more privileged backgrounds have those kinds of skills in some form, depending on which school and background they come from, but young people specifically from low-socioeconomic backgrounds show huge improvement in those skills.

Baroness Buscombe: Great. Thank you very much.

The Chair: To me there is a worrying inconsistency in the way this is taught in schools. You have described two inconsistencies. You teach at key stage 3 plus, I think.

Matteo Bergamini: Key stages 3, 4 and 5, yes.

The Chair: Other organisations are teaching at other stages. You teach in different places and different schools and in different parts of the curriculum, which must impact on the consistency of what you teach. There are other organisations out there with other programmes that may

or may not be completely consistent and may occasionally be in conflict with yours, but we have all agreed that it is important. Whose job is it to bring some greater consistency to this, across the curriculum?

Matteo Bergamini: You are right; there are a lot of organisations that do similar work. Some work with different age groups, so there is no overlap in that respect. Whose job is it to bring it all together? A couple of organisations have tried. I know that Ofcom does quite a bit in bringing media literacy organisations together, and the BBC is trying to do the same.

It should fall to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, because it comes under media, or, ideally, the Department for Education, because if we are talking about young people learning in schools, it is the Department for Education that should be supporting those organisations and creating greater consistency, frameworks and so forth, so that what we deliver is the same across the piece.

The Chair: Does the department, at ministerial or official level, take sufficient interest in it? Do you engage with them? Do they talk to you?

Matteo Bergamini: We engage with both, yes. We engage with the Department for Education more on the citizenship side than the political or media literacy side, and DCMS is probably more interested in media literacy than the Department for Education. In fact, the NESTA project is part supported by DCMS. DCMS takes more interest, because it links up with media. I think the Department for Education needs to take more of a role; at the moment, it is very much a free-for-all.

Q55 **The Lord Bishop of Worcester:** That takes us back to the contrast with what is happening in France, which we heard about from our last witness, and what is happening with you and other organisations. Do you know of other models in other countries? What changes can we recommend that might help this crucial work?

Matteo Bergamini: Having NGOs and so forth doing this work works quite well. We have worked with a lot of organisations in the US, for example, that do amazing work on this. They have quite a loose framework; the US is obviously a much bigger country, which affects delivery.

In terms of recommendations, it is crucial for the Department for Education to start bringing organisations like us, like NewsWise, and whoever else, together to talk and create a much more joined-up, succinct approach. It does not necessarily have to come directly from the Department for Education; it just needs to say, "This is the curriculum. Go do it".

The beauty of NGOs is that they have a much fresher approach to delivering the stuff, and they have a lot of creative ideas about how to do it. If DfE took the initiative and said, "We're going to bring you all together, we're going to create a framework, these are the key areas" and build it into the Ofsted framework, for example, suddenly there would be a necessity for schools. It would be clear that these are the key

things that schools need to hit, so they will go after programmes that hit those key points, suddenly creating a standardised level, because all other NGOs in my sector will then gear their programmes to make sure that they hit those key points. It definitely needs to start with the DfE taking a serious interest in media literacy.

Baroness Grender: Given that there has been such a significant change in the Ofsted guidelines in recent months, the push to a much more enriched curriculum that is much more holistic and less data-led, less exam-led, have you had any direct engagement with Ofsted about this, given the shift in the mood music about what inspectors are now asking for?

Matteo Bergamini: Not so much on the media literacy side, more on the political literacy side. There is more of a push on emotional resilience and debating, which is a big step in the right direction for us. There has not been much on media literacy, but emotional resilience is already a step in the right direction, because to be emotionally resilient you need to be media literate so that you understand how not to be governed purely by emotions or triggered by certain things online. You need to be media literate in order to combat that, but we have not had much communication with Ofsted as yet.

The Chair: Sadly, we need to wrap it up there. Thank you, it has been a very interesting session and we have explored some important themes, including some that this Committee has visited over a number of inquiries and which have become common themes. Follow our inquiry. There may be a slight pause, but we may get back to you for further thoughts in future.

Matteo Bergamini: Amazing, thank you so much and stay healthy.