HOUSE OF COMMONS

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: Influencer culture, HC 258

Tuesday 13 July 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Julian Knight (Chair); Steve Brine; Alex Davies-Jones; Clive Efford; Damian Green; Damian Hinds; John Nicolson; Giles Watling.

Questions 1 - 80

Witnesses

I: Dr Crystal Abidin, Associate Professor and Principal Research Fellow, Curtin University; Em Sheldon, content creator and influencer; and Dr Francesca Sobande, Lecturer, School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University.

II: Sarah Brin, Senior Outreach Producer, Media Molecule; and Keith Weed, President, Advertising Association.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Crystal Abidin, Em Sheldon and Dr Francesca Sobande.

Q1 **Chair:** This is the Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Select Committee and our first hearing into the culture of influencers. We are joined today by two panels. In our first panel we have: Dr Francesca Sobande, lecturer, School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University; Dr Crystal Abidin, associate professor and principal research fellow, Curtin University; and finally Em Sheldon, influencer, blogger and content creator. Good morning and thank you for joining us.

Damian Hinds: Dr Francesca and Dr Crystal, this is a basic question, but it seems to be a very hard question. Could we try some definitions? What are we actually talking about in this inquiry? What is online influencing?

Dr Sobande: When we are speaking of online influencing, we are speaking about a whole host of different experiences and activities. The term "influencer" is an ambiguous one and it is used in a wide range of ways by different people, organisations and institutions. However, often the term "influencer" is used in reference to someone identified as having a strong digital presence, specifically on various social media platforms, and whose digital presence or social media presence is regarded as contributing to some degree of influence. That might be influence in certain sectors, certain industries, certain parts of the world or among various demographics. Words such as "relatability" and "accessibility" sometimes feature as part of descriptions of the appeal of influencers and what some people think differentiates them from more traditional forms of celebrity.

As well as being associated with entertainment and the media, influencers can be viewed as a source of public information, commentary and even news, so the influential platform of such people can be used in ways that positively contribute to the rapid sharing and spreading of crucial information, as we have seen during the pandemic, and unfortunately it can also contribute to the contrastingly negative ways we have seen people sharing or fuelling misinformation and disinformation.

Q2 **Damian Hinds:** What would you say is the difference between an influencer and a celebrity with a merchandise deal or a celebrity with a strong opinion?

Dr Sobande: Depending on who you ask, you will get a whole host of different answers. It is difficult to pick up on that point.

Damian Hinds: I am asking you.

Dr Sobande: Yes, well, from my point of view the difference depends on the definition of "influencer" that we are working with. Unfortunately, sometimes conversations to do with influencer culture solely focus on commercial activity, but we know influence can also take a social and political form or nature. The difference perhaps, to respond to that

question, between somebody who might be regarded as an online user, let's say, somebody who creates content but isn't deemed to have a real sense of influence in a particular sector, industry and environment, in comparison to an individual who is perhaps viewed as a public figure or as having a relatively large audience.

The difference sometimes relates to follower accounts, to engagement rates, to whether or not there are brand partnerships in place, but something tricky that this inquiry really needs to wrestle with is that you cannot quantify influencer culture activity by solely looking at these various elements of someone's digital presence. It is never just about how many people follow someone on social media. In fact, there are hyperlocal influencers who might not have that many followers but can exert a pretty impactful form of influence in a very specific part of one place.

To wrap that up, I would say we need to be mindful of trying to imply that these definitions are incredibly fixed and unified. It is more important that we approach it with a critical understanding of the ambiguity that surrounds the notion of influencer culture, recognising that one person's influencer might be another's creator, artist or online user.

Q3 **Damian Hinds:** Dr Crystal, feel free to add to or critique that definition in any way you would like, but can I also ask if you can help us with a sense of scale? Lots of people influence lots of other people online every day, but if we just think about the commercial aspects of influencing, people making money out of it, can you give us an idea of how much money in the world, in the United States, in this country, however you would put it, and also an idea of how many people are making money out of this and how many of those people are making good money out of it?

Dr Abidin: I will get to the question on scalability and commerce in a while, but maybe an easier way to think of influencers for people who might not be very familiar with social media culture is that they are a specific genre of internet celebrity. Internet celebrities, these days, come in many different forms: someone who goes viral for a Facebook video; someone who is the face of a meme; someone who may have had a flash in the pan experience on a reality show, like *Britain's Got Talent* or *Love Island*, and is trying to parlay that into social media fame. All of these are forms of internet celebrity.

Influencers are a very specific genre of internet celebrities who are the epitome. They pursue internet celebrity as a career and, therefore, a lot of their profession is based on high visibility. This high visibility can be attributed to positive branding strategies and relatability strategies but, given internet culture is so saturated, there are also brands of influencers who are entirely premised on scandals and pursuing all different types of controversies. Do not only think of them as people with healthy messages or who look presentable and carry idealised notions of beauty and appearances.

Influencers also do not have to be human. Not too long ago, a few years back, one of the highest earning influencers was a cat, Grumpy Cat. Virtual influencers these days are also making a lot of money. There are lots of humanoid virtual influencers out there who are run by teams of people who never show their faces but have portfolios and profiles they control online.

If I can emphasise a few more things about influencers in contrast to traditional celebrity, one key qualifier is that they are ordinary people. Their backstory and origins are that they started out just like you and me, and we get to see their progression from being ordinary people to public influencers in a very transparent way on social media. This backstory of their journey invites people to grow different types of effects and intimacies with them. It is also important because it means that, on some level, we get to scrutinise the rapid growth of their fame at different parts of their journey and their career.

Also, being ordinary people, we tend to trust the word of influencers so much more. Whether they are providing influence or information on a politician, a cat food or a political decision, we believe they speak from the grassroots as opposed to a paid celebrity, although the truth is a little further from that these days.

In our current platform age, we need to remember that influencers are super-elite social media users. Depending on their partnerships with all sorts of platforms and companies, they are able to circumvent algorithms, get right to the front page of TikTok, YouTube, whatever platforms they are using, in partnership with these platforms to reach our screens and to reach the widest audience possible, so we need to remember them as superusers when we work with platforms.

Finally, Francesca alluded to misinformation. We need to think of influencers as conduits of information. We are living in an age where there is so much information saturation, but influencers are somehow able to cut through all that white noise and get the specific target message to a specific target audience. The mediums, the channels and the genres in which they do this may be through very persuasive methods, through humour, through clickbait, through sexy scandals, but the point is they get the message across.

We also need to remember that many influencers these days are not very visible to us. We need to think about the under-the-radar platforms, TikTok algorithms that do not show you exactly what is out there. Lots of subscription-only models where you need to pay to access this content. Lots of closed messaging groups that can fit between 1,000 and 4,000 people and have lots of influential people that the major news outlets don’t even know about because they are all gated communities.

To respond to the question, in terms of scalability, we need to consider what platform we are looking at. For a small-scale subscription platform, someone with 1,000 influences may be a mega-influencer because

everyone in that space listens and responds to them. If you are on a more public platform like YouTube, surely you need to be somewhere 1 million and above to be considered one of the mega-influencers. Likewise, we have to scale for genre and scale for country.

On the topic of money, anyone who earns an income is an influencer, so if you are earning a couple of dollars for a post as an aspirational person making your way there, you are an influencer. If you are one of those guys who has your hand in every genre, any pot of money, earning tens of millions of dollars, that also makes you an influencer, but perhaps something to offer the crew that we have here is looking at one of the newest platforms on TikTok.

Given it is still quite new, given that most of the influencers there are way younger than I am and earning probably a bigger combined income than all of us in this room, I can very safely say that a single TikTok post can earn someone anywhere between $1 up to a six-figure sum in American dollars, just for a one-minute video. That is the type of impact marketers are giving to influencers today.

Q4 **Damian Hinds:** There is a lot in what you just said but, specifically on scale, we understand there are a few people who make a vast amount of money. Presumably, there are a lot of people who make little money but spend quite a lot of time doing it. Give us an idea of how many people do this for their full-time job.

Dr Abidin: For their full-time job? Well, based on my interviews with agencies around the world, they tend to classify the influencers into four categories. There are the aspirants who they are grooming and who may be in influencer-parallel industries, like small businesses, artists, actors, actresses, the modelling industry. They consider them as in the incubator stage on the pathway to becoming full-time influencers the moment they can concentrate on that.

The second tier are the micro-influencers or meso-influencers who are earning a healthy income but not healthy enough that this is the only thing they can survive on. They may have site income going towards being able to pay their rent and bills, but it doesn't discount from the fact they put in more than a full-time amount of work hours into this craft.

In the third vein we have your bona fide full-time influencers. We say they do this as a day job, but really it is the kind of job that is taking you up to 20 hours a day to keep up with content production, content curation, putting your content outline, having to go through your feedback comments, protecting yourself against negativity and then, on the side, dealing with client engagements.

The top tier for many influencer agencies are the full-fledged influencers who are in themselves a brand. They might appear as the face of a namesake persona or a brand, but they have teams of people working around them, whether stylists, administrators, people who respond to their email or PR crew.

I would say that in general, maybe five to 10 years ago, out of every 10 people I interviewed in my studies only two or three of them could classify as being full-time influencers, because it was difficult to make money in that vein. These days, though, for every 10 people I interview in the Asia-Pacific region, concentrated in Australia as well as China, Japan and Korea, at least eight out of 10 consider themselves professionals, even if they are making only $2,000 to $3,000 a month, enough to pay rent and their living expenses. That to them is considered a full-time job, just based on the amount of hours they are putting into it.

Q5 **Damian Hinds:** Em, thanks for your patience. Perhaps you could tell us your story about how you got into this and how it has developed.

Em Sheldon: Hi, thank you for having me. It is such an interesting thing to listen to, because I started this as a complete accident. I did not realise it was a business and I feel like I wasn't looking. I missed the huge YouTube start of the girls who started years ago in, say, 2012 and then got 10 million YouTube subscribers because they rode out the algorithm because they were the only people doing it then.

I wanted to go to university, the University of Leeds, to study broadcast journalism. I asked the admissions tutor, "What should I do?" I had always wanted to be a magazine editor and he said, "Start a blog", so I started a blog. I did not really know what blogs were. I started as a traditional blogger. I wrote a blog and people were reading it. The crazy thing about it—it is definitely the same now—is that, unfortunately, the people who were reading it were a mix of people who liked me and people who hated me. Just like how people are on social media: they might not like you, they may be annoyed by what you are doing but they are still watching.

I quickly found when I started this blog that the page views were huge—*[Inaudible]*—and I was very late to the party with YouTube and Instagram. I just did not have the confidence. The people on there are so confident, and it has taken me years to get that level of confidence. Then I started YouTube and Instagram. I don't have millions of followers—my friends do—but I still make a very similar income and work with similar brands just because, as other people have said in the discussion, it is not just about numbers anymore.

Brands actually want good content. They just want authenticity. If you genuinely like their brand, for example, they are more likely to work with you, because you are that kind of girl next door. I am a normal girl from Yorkshire. People have watched me, as we said, from the start at the grassroots level. They watched my university journey. They have seen my break-ups. They have seen my heartbreaks. They have watched me move house. They have seen me move to London. I guess it is the reality of my life—not reality TV—that people like and people are growing up with me.

Q6 **Damian Hinds:** If a teenager said to you now, "I like what you do, I am

thinking of doing this as a career," what would your advice to them be?

Em Sheldon: I always say it is so interesting now that people see this as a career. When I started at the University of Leeds, I did a course that was all about entrepreneurship. It is only then that they said to me, "Put a business plan together. This could be a business. You are making money from this," and it suddenly switched my mind and I thought, "Wow, this is crazy. This is a whole industry." I had no idea you could make money from this. I went into it completely naive.

For the people who want to go into it just to make money, I say to them, "Don't have that as your sole mission." People seem to think you can just grab a camera and make money. The thing that people say to me the most when I tell them what I do is, "Oh, do you just take selfies all day?" I don't think they quite realise that it really is 20 hours of work a day. I started my blog in 2012 and I don't think I started making money until 2015, so it really was a long slog and a real passion project to get any money.

Obviously, there are some people who get on social networks and just boom, and they make loads and loads of money from the outset. I try to manage people's expectations that you should expect to work for free for quite a long time and, if you are passionate, hopefully it will turn into a business.

Q7 **Chair:** Just to explore some of the points you have just made, what do you actually get out of it personally? Not just a career as such, but living this existence in which your followers follow you, follow your life experiences. What do you get out of it emotionally?

Em Sheldon: That is a really interesting question, and it is something that I toy with in my mind every day. Some days are really good and I think, "This is so fulfilling." I tell people about my trip to New York. I went on this amazing trip and people followed my whole itinerary and because of me they found these hidden gems. They saw these amazing local restaurants and they had the best opportunity and best trip of their life. Somehow in my small bedroom at home I contributed to that. That really helps me.

Someone messages me about a heartbreak that they are going through, and I help them get through that, but then I think there is a level of escapism. I like that I can give people escapism. During the pandemic people were having a bad time and I got messages from people saying, "Wow, thank you so much for just baking." They just wanted to see me baking, working out. I guess it kept spirits high.

On the other side, unfortunately, there is a very dark side of it. I know a lot of people have quit the industry. When I say it is relentless, it is relentless and this isn't, "Woe is me." This is just the reality, and I am very concerned that there will be more suicides and more depression because in which other industry are you allowed to be constantly,

relentlessly attacked every single day just for existing? People hate influencers. They are so angry at us making money. It could be something crazy like me walking my dog and people are just so angry. There is this constant battle between giving people escapism and they are happy, and then there is this 1% of people who just report people. Every single day, it is their sole mission to ruin our lives, so it is this horrible balance between very nasty people and feeling great about what I do.

Q8 **Chair:** To a certain extent, do you think it is a type of acting or is it entirely real? Where does the influencer stop and you start?

Em Sheldon: I think it depends on the platform. On TikTok, for example, it is very scripted. It would be, "Hi, guys, this is the coolest restaurant in London, come with me." It is scripted. On YouTube, if it is a blog, it is actually very normal. It is, "Hey, guys, come with me. I am going to New York today. This is my trip." "Oh, I fell out with my boyfriend today." "Oh, I am bloated today." Whatever crazy reality it may be. Also, I am editing that video, so I can choose what the audience see. People think they are seeing 100% of someone's life in a way that they then feel they are allowed to comment on every element of your life, but they are actually only seeing a few minutes of your day.

Q9 **Chair:** In terms of the abuse that you see—you mentioned that—what is its main characteristic? Can you define a main characteristic? Is it sexism and misogyny? As you say, is it that they don't like the fact you are making money from this, or is it simply the fact they are just individuals who wish to be abusive, full stop? In politics you come across the same phenomena, to be honest with you.

Em Sheldon: Yes, unfortunately, I think it is the money. They all say the same thing, "I liked her," but they don't like that people are making money. In what other industry would you be attacked for making money and making a living? I feel it is one of those careers where they like you until you start to do well. Maybe do well but don't do too well. Unfortunately, there is a whole dark space of the internet where people sit all day, every day, writing about us. It is crazy, because these are grown women with children. These are not 15-year-old girls.

I don't mind if someone wants to call me fat; I don't mind if someone wants to call me ugly. They write, "I am going to ruin this person's life. I am going to destroy their business," and it is their sole mission. Depending on the person, I have seen that they report people to HMRC, the RSPCA or social services. It is something I hope the Government could look into, because it is just relevant—

Q10 **Chair:** You have set yourself up for stalking, to a certain degree, haven't you?

Em Sheldon: It really is. It is an obsession. I have spoken to a lot of peers about this, and they have had the police involved because these people are hell bent on finding addresses, finding out how much people

paid for their houses. It is not okay and it would not be okay in any other industry but, because we put ourselves online, we deserve it and this is what we ask for.

Q11 **Chair:** They view you as a sort of plaything, to a certain degree, I imagine. They see you as out there effectively. You are giving of your life and, therefore, they probably feel an involvement in that, and they want to manipulate it to a certain degree.

Em Sheldon: Yes, because you are putting your life out there, they are allowed to attack your life and we are not human. Then if you show a human expression, for example if you show that you are crying and you show that it bothers you, they get excited about it and it fuels them more. There is this situation where everyone is going through it, all of my peers, but none of us is allowed to speak about it because, if we talk about it, they win. It is a really difficult balancing act.

Q12 **Chair:** You said it is women, not 15-year-old girls. It is married women with kids.

Em Sheldon: Unfortunately, from my research, it isn't men who are doing this. It is grown women with very good jobs and seemingly very good lives who are doing this. That is the saddest part about it.

Q13 **Chair:** Is it because your influence is more geared towards women, or do you think it is a wider phenomenon?

Em Sheldon: Yes. Unfortunately, it seems to be the women in my industry that get attacked. I think there is a thing about women not being allowed to be successful, particularly in my industry. My mum worked in banking. She was very successful and she did not receive the same hate as I would in my industry. Yes, I think it is because my audience appeals to other women and they seem to be annoyed at everyone in my space for existing, really.

Q14 **Chair:** What you are describing to us is absolutely fascinating. In terms of the abuse that you receive, obviously people will be aware—presumably, you have put it out there—that you are appearing before us today. If so, what has been the response? What is your perception? Has the abuse stepped up as a result?

Em Sheldon: Yes, unfortunately, it has stepped up, and I have already been told that I am being reported to MPs, because how dare I talk about this? I do affiliate links, which basically are a way for me to make an income. If someone swipes up and buys something through my link on Instagram, for example, I might make 5p, 10p, £1. It depends on the item and that is very clearly disclosed, saying "Ad" in the corner, so that everyone knows I could make money if they make this purchase.

They are very angry that I use these links and that I make money, so that is a reason to report me to an MP. It is so sad. It is heart-breaking, to be honest but, yes, it has unfortunately just made them think, "Okay,

I am going to speak to the MPs about her and think of anything she has done that is wrong," but I haven't done anything wrong.

Q15 **Chair:** No, we are not suggesting that you are in any way. Finally, Dr Crystal very briefly mentioned AI-style influencers. Teams of people effectively using algorithms to create an influencer. How do you view it, as a human being, that there is this growing number of influencers who are not people? That they are a mishmash of people's ideas, rather than real flesh and blood?

Em Sheldon: I personally don't follow anyone like that. I follow a few dogs who are obviously run by their owner. The people I follow are real people. However, these real people do have teams behind them. I have three different people who work for me full-time because I simply would not be able to do all of the content creation, the admin and so on, but in terms of these kinds of characters, I feel it may be more in America and in Asia. Whereas in the UK I know that in my space it is real people, humans, who people are following.

Q16 **Chair:** Any idea why that is? Are we less down the road than perhaps they are in, say, Korea in terms of adopting this, or do you think it is a cultural thing?

Em Sheldon: I think it is a cultural thing. I also think we crave watching real people. It is like how people love to watch *Love Island* or *Big Brother*. People like to see real people. They want to know, "Where did she go in New York? Where did she eat in New York? Which restaurant does she go to in London?" so that they can then take real, genuine advice from that.

Q17 **John Nicolson:** Good morning, everybody. Thank you for joining us. Dr Francesca, I enjoyed your appearance on *The Nine* last night, BBC Scotland's news programme, which this Committee played a significant role in giving birth to, having recommended a separate Scottish hour-long news programme. I am interested that you said you aren't in favour of compulsory identification online. You believe that people should continue to remain anonymous. I know that is something we are going to be debating in an upcoming Bill very soon, but perhaps that is for another Committee hearing.

Em talked about how nobody in any other industry, apart from hers, probably suffers the level of abuse that social influencers face. The Chair is right to say that politics is one where people just hate you for being an MP without knowing you. As we have discovered, football is another one where people hate you because of the colour of your skin and will post the most poisonous, evil stuff about you. We are having a national debate about this at the moment, as you know, on the front pages of the papers and on social media.

Do you think influencers are representative enough of a range of different social characteristics, whether it is race or sexual orientation?

Dr Sobande: Thanks for that question. I want to pick up on some of the other points from earlier, and some of the points surrounding what you asked, but I will start by answering your question directly.

When we are dealing with influencer culture and questions to do with inequality, often what happens is the conversation will understandably involve a discussion of issues to do with gender but, more often than not, it stops there. Power dynamics shape who is identified as an influencer to start off with, as opposed to an online user, a creative, an artist or a creator. To be specific, matters regarding gender, race and class, among others, influence ideas about what constitutes being an influencer.

Unlike the creativity, the sense of self-expression and the prestige that is sometimes but not always linked to the experiences of artists, creatives or creators, the work of influencers seldom seems to be regarded in comparable terms, even if such works spans many dimensions of the arts and the creative and cultural industries.

Despite an extensive critique of how the harmful notions of so-called high and low culture are grounded in structural inequalities, including racism, sexism, misogyny and classism, this hierarchy and socially constructed distinction between different types of culture persists. As influencer culture is strongly associated with the work of women, it is imperative for this inquiry to be alert to how sexism and misogyny can contribute to the work of influencers being trivialised and deemed a performer of so-called low culture, if meaningfully deemed a form of culture at all.

Here it is important for me to highlight that the ideas about influencers and influencer culture in general are not just shaped by gender. Interconnected forms of oppression, including but not limited to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia and ablism impact on those whose work and labour as an influencer is recognised as that and adequately credited. As well as impacting specific forms of online harassment, abuse, and dangers that different influencers and their followers might face. It is important for—

Q18 **John Nicolson:** Is there a degree of snobbishness going on here? Em's description of what it is like to go to New York and to her favourite restaurants, is that any different from a restaurant reviewer in *The Guardian* or Condé Nast? I go online and look at people I like before I go to different countries, and I will go to Condé Nast quite often and see what their restaurant reviews are. Nobody is going to be snooty about the Condé Nast reviewer, are they? But they will be very snooty about the social influencer who is just doing the same thing and getting paid for it. Presumably, if they are good at their job, they don't recommend terrible restaurants, otherwise people will stop paying any attention to them.

Dr Sobande: Absolutely. There can be a real snobbishness involved in the different ways people discuss influencer culture. What is the real difference between a young woman's selfie and a self-portrait by a man

who might be viewed as contributing to the classics throughout time? We can speak about that at length, and that is not the point of this conversation, but I think this inquiry needs to look closely at issues to do with racism, sexism, misogyny and classism, among others.

It is important for this inquiry to account for how misinformation and disinformation can be fuelled by influencers. It is also important for the inquiry to acknowledge times when the harmful harassing and discriminatory policing of the influencer's self-expression can occur as well. I am thinking about when influencers face online abuse related to their racial identity, their gender identity or sexuality. Questions that I think have to be central to this inquiry include: how can online abuse and harassment, both faced and perpetuated by influencers, be more effectively tackled?

One closing comment, because I think it is important in light of the last 48 hours. The persistence of anti-black racism directed at the football players who have been facing so much is not specific to football. It is not specific to digital culture. It cuts across British society. It is sadly one of many examples of pervasive forms of abuse and harassment that impact influencers or which influencers can contribute to.

It is vital that this inquiry does not sideline the experiences of people from structurally marginalised groups and backgrounds, including by not skirting around issues concerning racism that impact influencer culture, digital culture and British society more widely.

Q19 **John Nicolson:** A lot of the abuse that has been directed at the young black footballers is jealousy because they are young, they are super fit, they are handsome. As we have discovered, they are incredibly articulate and they write very well. I imagine a lot of people who are attacking them—these anonymous trolls—are none of those things and are sitting in their mummy's bedroom eating cold tins of ravioli and grinding their teeth in rage at the success these clever, young black people have. Crystal, can I move on—

Dr Sobande: A very brief point on that if I could, because I think it is really important, especially for ongoing work to do with online abuse. We have seen many people posting abusive material with names attached to their account, with their images visible. We have seen organisations doing damage control since then, to try to manage those situations. Unfortunately, a lot of this boils down to racism. It is an issue in British society. It connects to digital culture. It connects to influencer culture. It connects to football. I think this needs to be considered as part of such an inquiry, because we know that social media doesn't spark the racism. The racism existed before that. There are influencers who face this sort of racist abuse and, unfortunately, there are influencers who contribute to it, too.

Q20 **John Nicolson:** Yes. I have often wondered what these people did before social media. People like them presumably went to public hangings or

perhaps witch burnings or some other form of mass hysterical abuse.

Crystal, moving on to you, we have been talking about lots of the negatives hitherto. One of the things I have noticed in social media—and I speak as a gay man—is the number of young gay couples who are online as social media influencers, who are pretty normal and who are getting a huge following from young women, and from young men as well, and presumably from young gay men, in particular. In the old days, pop stars had to stay in the closet. The social media influencers of their time had to stay in the closet because people thought their sales would drop dramatically if people discovered that a member of Boyzone was gay or whatever. We discovered subsequently that that did not happen. We have moved on, haven't we? Folk who are not gay can look at gay couples and see them in steady relationships, embraced by loving families and that has to be a healthy aspect of social media and social media influencing, doesn't it?

Dr Abidin: Thanks, John. I would like the opportunity also to respond to prior points, but I will first take this question head on.

I would say the vast amount of literature looking at LGBTQI influencers has focused on the UK, as well as to a certain degree on the US. A vast amount of this research has focused on gay men, predominantly white gay men who fit the stereotype of being fit or able bodied. There is vernacular on social media that some influencers often joke about, that to qualify in the LGBT influencer industry you have to be a pretty white boy, even if you are queer. Even here, a lot of Francesca's points about intersectionality still stand.

When you look at the gay couples who are in partnership and collaboration with brands and companies in order to drive up interest in the pink dollar, selectively mobilised every mid-year when Pride comes around, you see a specific trope, a specific template of how it is like to be a socially acceptable, visually acceptable, platform-possible gay young person on social media.

A case in point: if we were to look at different platforms, say Facebook, where not too long ago trans people and drag queens were fighting for the right to keep their updated names and not be deadnamed. They were fighting to do that. There are lots of other platforms where, if your queerness is played out on your body, if you are non-binary, if you are to show your characteristics and your persona, less so in your speech but more so in the way you dress yourself, that has sometimes also been shadow banned and removed from various platforms.

While I get your point that there is some representation here for different types of marginal communities and it may feel like a win, unfortunately within these marginal fringes there are often factions and hierarchies of who gets to be represented. Oftentimes, when we see the 1% of the 1% getting their win, we forget to continue pushing for everybody else to get this representation.

I would also like to stress that in the UK context, from my understanding, a lot of the research on queer influencers is situated on YouTube. On YouTube we need to keep two things in mind: first, there are YouTube legacies of young gay couples or gay couples who lived through the difficult years of their teenage times coming out to tell you, "It got better. We survived. We are adults with healthy relationships." There is that platform legacy, though, on YouTube that you may not have on other platforms.

Secondly, in the UK, I imagine more so than in the Asia-Pacific region I work with, queerness is more acceptable in the public eye. Therefore, when you are talking about representation, there is diversity here in how you can normalise having a healthy life, how you purchase things, make commercial decisions, align yourself with brands. But in this region of the world a lot of these influencers who are closeted and still relying on brands in order to survive, let alone make a living to appear heterosexual, are needing to hint at more basic survival resources. For instance, "If you are kicked out of the home, go here. If you are in an emergency and you need to be extracted, here is a number you can call."

I would say, overall, if there were any pivots we can think of it would be to look at the under-represented, marginalised people on the fringes, even within the LGBT community. I hope you will allow me, John, to return to some of your earlier points on influencers.

John Nicolson: Please, if you do not mind doing so relatively briefly, because I want to talk to Em very quickly before I move back to the Chair.

Dr Abidin: Sure. I feel it is very important to stress the name of this inquiry, and all of us are talking about this figure of the influencer, which in and of itself is already gendered to begin with. That is probably why Em is getting specific responses and why Francesca and I are trying to stress intersectionality, not just in the UK but in research in general.

In the last three to four years, with the rise of gamergate, misogyny and online harassment, "influencer" deliberately become an extremely feminised term to refer to women in specific genres to do with feminine types of content production, like makeup, beauty, fashion, parenting. The people who are producing games, gameplay, sportsmen and DIY science projects all over YouTube, we don't call them influencers. We think of them as content creators or YouTubers, because they make content and they make something.

What is really packed into the word "influencer"? We are implying that it is not just a person creating content but they are relying on their personal selves as a brand. They are showing their lives and having to put their lifestyles out there in order to gain a following, which is so different from a content creator who is only working on games and focused on something external to them. As this inquiry continues, we need to remember that the vocabulary itself affects how we see gender.

Q21 **John Nicolson:** Dr Crystal, I take that point and thank you for that. On the vocabulary issue, you mentioned a phrase that I think people might not necessarily know. When you talked about trans people, you mentioned "deadnamed". That word means continuing to insist on using somebody's birth name or childhood name when they have transitioned.

You also mentioned the It Gets Better campaign, where people try to tell kids online that they might be experiencing harassment, bullying and all sorts of trauma but when you get older, as a gay person, it gets better because you can choose your family. You can choose your friends. It does not have to be as grim as it might feel. Let me tell you, as a kid who grew up gay, I wish I had had that. Our role models, God help us, were Larry Grayson and folk who were just steeped in misery and appeared to be steeped in self-hatred. There were no role models for us. I know some of this stuff might seem regressive to you but, from somebody of my generation, I see grounds for optimism.

Let me finish with you, Em. Dr Crystal was talking about body shaming and body image. I know that is a problem for young gay men, as well as for women and young straight guys. There is a problem, isn't there, that the people who are social media influencers, of all the varying types we have discussed, tend to conform to a number of stereotypes, don't they?

No matter how well intentioned you are, or indeed how effective you are in the messages that you give out, perhaps one of the problems simply is that having attractive people on camera may make a lot of people feel inadequate. We have heard that the people on TikTok who spread disinformation conform to a very glamorous stereotype in order to get that disinformation out and to get young people to listen to it.

Em Sheldon: Yes, that is a really good question. I want to start by saying that I, as a straight white girl, receive a level of relentless abuse that makes me utterly sick. I would not put anyone through what I go through, so the attacks on the footballers and the racism on social media is just abhorrent. It is absolutely disgusting. I woke up feeling sick yesterday. It should not be a thing, and it means people like me, and hopefully all of us, should come together to talk about it. I talked about it yesterday on my Instagram story. I said, "This is disgusting. It will not be tolerated."

Similarly, about gay men, I feel privileged in the sense that I follow and have a friendship group of people who are very diverse. I follow a lot of young gay men who talk about body image, and I know they are helping young guys. I have watched their content and I just think, "This is amazing." I have friends who grew up and had struggles with coming out, for example. I know this content will help them so much, but I also see the dark side of it that, yes, people are seeing this magazine perfection.

It is kind of what we used to talk about when I was younger: are we only seeing perfection in magazines and how is that affecting us? I like to think that at least me, with my frizzy hair, my bad body days and my bad mental health days—because everyone has them—talking about them

makes people feel like, actually, this is more real. Yes, I might look okay on this photograph but, actually, here are the 100 takes that didn't make it to the grid. It is about being more real about that.

John Nicolson: That is how all the members of the Committee feel actually. Look around, there are a few bad hair days going on here among the members.

Em Sheldon: I think you all look great. I feel I am privileged in this bubble, where everyone in my bubble is very diverse. I follow so many amazing plus-size women who look phenomenal and they are saying to women, "You have a body, so you can be confident on a beach," and I think they are really hyping people up, whether it is gay men or women who maybe just do not have the body confidence. I hope that answers your question.

Chair: I have images of a makeover for the Committee, if you have a spare year.

John Nicolson: Too late.

Q22 **Steve Brine:** Hello, Em. I would like to point out to my colleague, Mr Nicolson, that there is no bad hair day here that I know of, but the comments will no doubt follow. Can I pick up on something you said earlier about people not liking that you have made money out of this and they want to attack that? It is otherwise known as jealousy, isn't it? You asked what other industry that would happen in. I would put to you, every other industry. Singers, sports stars, politicians, that is what happens in this country. We build people up and then we knock them down.

You mentioned your trip to New York, which people followed and then took up your suggestion and did things. Previously that was called the "Lonely Planet" guide. Equally you said about your cooking; that used to be called Delia Smith. It is just that it used to be on telly and in the newspapers, whereas the broadcast platform you now have is social media. I am trying to understand the difference. You are a modern-day celebrity who has a following. Is that not what you do?

Em Sheldon: Yes, great question and you are completely right. I acknowledge that MPs get horrific abuse. Unfortunately, like you say, in this country it seems that we want people to do well, but not too well, and many people like to knock people down. I am seeing it with the footballers. As I said, the behaviour of people in this country is disgusting.

You are right, technically what I do is a modern-day version. Delia Smith is still very modern, but I guess it is a more technologically advanced version of the cooking and cleaning. I do not think there is that much of a difference; it is just going back to the grassroots level that I am that normal girl next door. That is all I can think that it is, but the difference between seeing myself and other celebrities, yes, they do get abused, they absolutely should not. Sports stars, it makes me feel sick, the abuse

that they get. However, I feel they have a great level of protection. Whether it is a governing body or lawyers and solicitors, they are not constantly being attacked by people who are saying, "I am going to break your business. It is my mission to break your business," because these sports stars are untouchable. Mentally they might be upset by reading the comments, but their businesses, jobs and careers are solid, whereas for me, with the ASA, there is a standard that is not policed. It is inconsistent throughout the industry. We want to disclose, we want to be honest with our audience and say, "This is an ad," but unfortunately it is not a level playing field with traditional celebrities.

Steve Brine: I think that is the perfect answer. This is the core of what you do, whereas for others it is appendant to what they do. Your point about public policy is very useful for us in what we are doing.

Q23 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Thank you to our witnesses for joining us this morning. Em, you have talked a lot about the horrific harassment that you and other influencers and other celebrities experience online. How do you manage it? What do you do currently to tackle it? How do you report it and what support do you get from social media companies, or the police if it has escalated that far?

Em Sheldon: Unfortunately the best way to tackle it, and I do not think it is correct, is to ignore it. They say to just mute them, block them and ignore it, but if you block these people they make 10 different accounts. They make one account, you block it and they make another account. They then go to the ASA about you, they then go to HMRC about you, and before you know it they are calling your boyfriend's office just because he dares to be your boyfriend. It really is crazed and not okay.

The whole idea of ignoring it, unfortunately, is the best idea. When I have been to the police or my friends have been to the police—I have had really good experiences with the police—they basically say it is a Malicious Communications Act offence and these people cannot do this to you, but it is up to me to prosecute. Do I want to prosecute these not very nice people? No. I would prefer to get them in a room and say, "I have not done anything wrong. Can't we all just be friends?" but unfortunately life is not like that.

To answer your question, I do not think there is any support. Instagram basically says, "Okay, you can mute nasty words. You can restrict these people," so rather than blocking a troll, which fuels them and they love it, you can now restrict them, so they do not realise that they are restricted, but their comments go into an abyss and they still think they are going at you, but no one is seeing it. That is quite nice.

They also have this new tool where you can block a troll and it blocks all other accounts that person makes, which is a fantastic movement, because then they are not going to make 12 different accounts, but once you do that on Instagram they will move over to YouTube. The problem is the deep, dark forums online where these women are saying that they

are just giving you constructive criticism, but unfortunately they are all hyping each other up and saying, "Let's report her to this person. Let's do this, let's do that," and these forums need removing.

Q24 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Yes, I agree completely. I spent a lot of time on one of those forums yesterday, trawling through. I have an influencer who lives in my constituency and her address has been outed on this forum—not a dark web forum, just a forum—and it is an absolute gutter sewer of abuse on there. It is anonymous accounts, and from what I can see the majority are middle-aged women with families. It is horrendous. Part of the worry is that the long-awaited online safety Bill is not going to be able to tackle everything there.

Dr Francesca, if I bring you in here, because like my colleague John Nicolson said, you have been quite vocal about what you do not agree with or what you would not like to see in an online safety Bill. What do you think we can do to tackle this abuse that influencers are seeing online?

Dr Sobande: Any online safety Bill has to treat the online as completely tethered to the offline. Sometimes these conversations treat the digital as though it exists in a vacuum. Any questions to do with anonymity and the suggestion that challenging anonymity would change things, there needs to be a reflection on the fact that not everybody who wants access to a degree of anonymity has malicious intentions. What about intimate partner abuse survivors, domestic abuse survivors, people whose life would be at risk if they were forced to be outed online?

Any changes that are made need to account for the fact that anonymity is not the magic solution some people are suggesting it will be. A lot of abuse is posted from accounts that are not anonymous.

To pick up on some of the comments that have been made about the different experiences of abuse, I appreciate sometimes there might be moments when individuals are jealous and that is what motivates them, but I do not want that to distract us from when something much more sinister and systemic is occurring. It is not just women who are posting this abusive content; it is people from a host of demographics and often there is a stereotype in the media that suggests it is people from one demographic, people who are from a certain background or of a certain age. There are many people contributing to what is going on online, and more often than not it is not just about jealousy, especially when we are dealing with influencers who are among the most marginalised.

I want to wrap up with a few comments on this. There is no universal experience of being an influencer. Mounting research and media coverage appears to point to the existence of influencer pay gap disparities at the intersections of both gender and race. So for these reasons and many more I urge those involved in the inquiry to ensure that analysis of inequalities is not only confined to focusing on gender, which is unfortunately sometimes what happens—of course, gender must be

addressed—but looks at interconnected issues to do with inequality. Any consideration of matters related to gender must be sensitive to and respectful of the wide range of gender identities of influencers and the people who engage with them.

Q25 **Alex Davies-Jones:** My final question is probably best directed to you, Dr Crystal. Em, I am happy for you to chip in as well with your own personal experience.

I have been doing a lot of school visits recently, chatting to girls in the schools, and overwhelmingly when you ask them, "What do you want to do when you are older? What occupations are you looking at?" the vast majority of them say they want to be influencers. This is the job occupation of choice for these young girls. My worry is that they do not see the other occupational risks that influencers face. It is not a job that is monitored by the Health and Safety Executive. It is not looked at with that scrutiny, and there is no protection from a union, for example. What are the other occupational risks that are not being perceived or seen by these young girls and boys who want to become influencers when they are older?

Dr Abidin: I have been waiting for that question the whole evening here, so thank you for coming through. I will respond to it in a few beats, but first I want to reframe the question as an issue of children. I am surprised that, in an inquiry like this, we have not yet talked about child influencers or mummy and parenting influencers who feature their children front and centre. So much of our discussion so far has been conversations around is it jealousy, is it because people do not like pretty young women who have access to class and income, and it seems to hint that they are asking for it, "You chose this as a career. For politicians and celebrities it comes with the job." It suggests that there is agency here, "You chose to pursue this direction" but what about children?

I hate to be the "what about children" person here. A lot of children, especially in the UK, are involved in this industry without having any say. If I can speak as the token non-British person in this room, if there are things that stand out as exotic or very British about your influencer industry to me it is two things. One, tabloid culture, where oftentimes gossip about people, scandals, that online army trying to bring people down, has more popularity than the content that influencers produce. We see this in the magazine racks here in Australia, with the royal family every other day.

The second is the prevalence of children in your influencer industry, with family influencer units and mummy parent influencers. All the British kids who go viral get invited to the US, to star on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and then somehow they become some sort of cross-Atlantic celebrity. There is not a lot of conversation about what happens when you do not have agency to choose in this space.

In relation to this, on the occupational risks, there have been a number of inquiries in the Asia-Pacific region into influencer culture. The focus thus far has always been on income, taxation and transparency, which I understand because this is costing the Government lots of money, it is a very strong economy and industry, but the one thing this region of the world is very much lagging behind is with the sociocultural consequences. I cannot stress how much more we need to focus on moral harm.

Earlier Em alluded to suicide, and I can very sadly but confidently confirm that in the last two years in China, Japan and Korea the No. 1 issue plaguing influencers is suicide as a result of online bullying, not just women, not just online hate comments, not just stalking but a long-term stress related to this job from people googling you and doxing you in small amounts.

I have also interviewed influencers who consider themselves survivors and their agencies who intervene. In the interim, web platforms are not yet responding and Governments are still producing inquiries and reports. It is the influencers' management or managers who step in. They come in a very low fire method of, say, accompanying the influencer everywhere they go for a week, waking up earlier than them every morning to delete all the negative and mean comments, to filter out people. I think a lot of this dark side of the industry is not talked about in a healthy manner, because as part of UK YouTube culture the negative side of the influencer industry also tends to be super-sensationalised. It is taken as clickbait. There is a genre that we often laugh about online where a British YouTuber would fall off a step and then claim they almost died in the cover image of a YouTube photo or had a fly in their food and say a restaurant caused them food poisoning. We joke about that when influencers themselves are producing content to highlight some of the personal harms.

In addition, the longer-term issue we need to raise with children is digital literacy. Being an influencer is not a job that you can go home from and then switch off. Your brain does not let you do that. I can just go on leave and let it stop. The content continues whether or not you are online; the content continues the moment you step out of your house and you are photographable or videoable and people see you out there. We need to think not only about the glamour and highlight reel but also about what attaches to you, even when you attempt to leave the industry or to retire.

In my research I have interviewed people who are parents deciding to put their foetuses online by ultrasound, all the way to people who have to leave the industry for all sorts of reasons. One thing is constant from the start to the end, that no one has ever prepared for this, because the industry keeps changing, the social media ecology keeps changing. As much as you try to build a persona around yourself, the internet remembers. The internet remembers when you get to use a branded name, a persona, let alone when you are forced to use your legal name

and identity. I say this coming from having worked in a space in the Nordic countries for a number of years, where everything is able to be googled, your income, how much your car costs, how much your house costs. I have also lived for several years in east Asia where privacy is a very gated concept. You do not even tell people your parents' names, because that is crucial information.

In both of these contexts, influencers are caught in a bind in which they are not able to detach themselves from their job. The ability to have a brand name, to have a pseudonym, is very important for their mental health and for the aftercare, should they decide to leave the industry.

Em Sheldon: It is nice that people want to do this as a job. It means we are doing a good job, if they think it is such a dreamy lifestyle. I think that is because most of us are scared. We do not dare say there is a crazy dark side to it. If I spoke out publicly on Instagram about the level of abuse, people would honestly be disgusted. When I do tell people in person, they are so shocked.

You asked about the dangers of doing this. Privacy is a huge one. I cannot go on a run by myself, because I have had people say they have seen me on a run, say that they are going to get me on my run, say, "I am going to come to your address next time you go and pick up your bread" or something. That is really quite scary.

There are some not very nice people in the world. In terms of privacy, if you are going to put your life online, even like me where I am literally a watered down version of myself and I do not tell people many details about me, people are still hunting as if it is their right to know exactly how much I paid for my house, exactly where I live, which street I live on, which house number. That is illegal. It is not fair.

In terms of the safety of my family and my friends—it is a bit like, "what about the children?"—I do not have children, but my friends and family are not on social media. They do not ask to be scrutinised. They do not need their addresses dragging up just because people do not like me. People need to realise that, if you are going to be an influencer, there is no handbook. Mistakes are going to be made; they are going to be made publicly. You probably will be annihilated for those mistakes. Safety and privacy is something that needs looking into. There is no holiday, no time off, and not everything is paid for. Me going to New York, going to a hotel and so on, I am not being paid to do that, but I am still working because I am passionate and I want to work.

The last thing I wanted to touch on, because I did not get a chance to earlier, is about anonymity. I am a survivor of domestic abuse and I fully relate to everything you have said. I know I am on social media but everyone has a different story about their anonymity, so I completely understand about some people requiring that anonymity. I wish there was a way for them to pause everyone's social media accounts and tell people privately that Facebook would not steal the data or whatever, and

upload some form of identification whether it is a birth certificate, I know not everyone has one, but whatever it may be, because I think it would stop the level of abuse. While some people do abuse you under their real name, a lot of the abuse I see in my industry is anonymous people hiding and that is not okay. I do not think we should allow that in our world, and it would save the police and the Government a lot of problems if—yes, people can still make a fake account and can still be anonymous—there is still some form of ID, whatever that may be, behind it so that the police can get it if they need it.

Q26 **Alex Davies-Jones:** I was going to ask you, before you made that comment, what would be the ideal solution for you? With this legislation coming forward, we parliamentarians have the power to help you. As an influencer, what would be your ideal solution for us to try to stop this, or for social media companies to stop this? What do you want?

Em Sheldon: Yesterday alone, 500,000 people signed a petition about ID. This is not saying that there are not much deeper things, for instance people who are domestic abuse survivors and refugees. I completely respect and understand that side of it, but if we can protect those people at the same time. People can make an Instagram account called "I love my cat" with no picture, but I would like to see some form of ID hidden behind these accounts so that if people need to access it they can. These dark forums need shutting down. There is no place for them. They hype these people up. If one person is mad about something, they tell another person and then before you know it there are 30 people all reporting you.

I would like the ASA to be more of a fair playground. I cannot stand that the ASA is a Government-run body, yet we have to tell them all the time, "Unfortunately, you are opening people up to harassment," because they report and, even if a claim is not upheld, they still put your name on their website and trolls get a real kick out of it even when you have not broken any rules. I think the ASA needs to be looked into, because it is just an avenue for people with a vendetta unfortunately and we are making it easier for trolls.

Alex Davies-Jones: Thank you, Em. That is helpful.

Dr Sobande: If it is okay, I have one very brief point on this.

Chair: If we could keep it brief. We are overrunning, but please go on.

Dr Sobande: Sure, I will keep it very brief. As you said, not everybody has access to these forms of identification. The second point is there are times when companies can identify these people using IP addresses, but what happens next? For me, the bigger issue is how these issues to do with abuse are going to be addressed once the person is identified? Also this final point again, to reiterate, abuse, racism, sexism, misogyny is not a byproduct of the technology. We need to look within British society and ask what is enabling this, what can politicians be doing better and how can people take a stronger stance against abuse online as well as offline?

Chair: Brief and perfect, thank you.

Q27 **Damian Green:** Can I contribute to the great Committee makeover debate by pointing out that, for some of us, having a bad hair day is a luxury that we can only dream about?

I want to start by picking up on a really interesting point that Crystal made when she said, and I paraphrase, that if you do good and influential stuff on social media and you are a man you are a content creator, whereas if you are a woman you are an influencer and that is a much more ambiguous phrase with perhaps negative undertones that do not apply to content creators. Factually, of the great universe of influencers, how does it break down in percentage terms male-female, broadly speaking?

Dr Abidin: This is a terribly difficult question for me to answer, because a lot of the self-surveys from agencies, depending on the vocabulary they use, have people respond differently. Maybe the closest accurate estimate we can get is to look at platforms and their profiles, how many people they assign as formal partners and influencers on the platform, or creative partners. In general it is true that there are a lot more women than men for various reasons.

Pointing back to the grassroots, the very earliest origins of what we now call influencer culture in that form began about 2005, at least in the Asia-Pacific region and in the Nordic countries around 2007. The earliest beginnings of both were parenting blogs, so mums out here sharing content, information, trying to get networks, trying to get resource sharing. This style of influencing by sharing your personal narrative as a woman, sharing your lifestyle, has its legacy in those origins, whereas when we talk about men and the content they produce, sometimes if they are a producer, sometimes if they have just put in money, sometimes if they are a music arranger, they would very much align themselves as being a TV producer, a musician just to break out of that label being so feminised.

I can safely say from the data we have from the interviews I do with agencies that they always claim that male influencers are a scarcity if they are not gay and if they are not queer, because that is how they frame a lot of their marketing with their clients. If you are trying to sell products or commodities, women are the biggest spenders in most dual-income heterosexual households as opposed to men, but if you are looking at same-sex partnerships then they pander more to the pink dollar.

To sell to the masculine, straight men, you go through the route of having women use their partners as human billboards to sell the products to other women who then buy the products for their partners. You sometimes have even the most feminine, female influencer selling you gaming equipment, sports equipment, four-wheel driving equipment, just

to go through the route of women sharing and exchanging that knowledge.

Q28 **Damian Green:** I appreciate it is an almost impossible thing to come up with a definitive figure on, but has it changed over time and has influencing become more feminised over time?

Dr Abidin: That is rather strange framing for me, having worked in the Asia-Pacific region. If I can point to some examples from here, if we look at China, not a lot of the words we use for influencer are gendered. We have words like—*[Chinese spoken]*—and they refer either to your function as an influencer, whether to drive traffic, sell something, be a role model, rally people around your community, and different platforms in Japan like net idols, blogger, influencer, that refers to your platform. It seems to me it is really only in the global north, maybe in the UK and the US, that there is so much tension around the gender of this label you use for your work, because of the wider spread of misogyny on online cultures, unfortunately. I would not say there are more women in the influencer industry, but I will say that there are fewer and fewer men willing to identify themselves as being part of the industry, even though by research standards technically they are influencers.

Q29 **Damian Green:** Em, you used the word "authentic" earlier. What makes you authentic? What makes an influencer authentic and, therefore, able to gather an audience?

Em Sheldon: It is a good question because there are so many people who question authenticity. People think that if you are being paid to promote something, there is no possible way you can be authentic. There are a lot of bad eggs in the industry, as there are in every industry, but there are a lot of good eggs too. I have turned down a lot of money, life-changing amounts of money that I could do with to pay my mortgage, because I would not promote a product that is not authentic to me. For example, it could be something that is quite a toxic product to promote and I just would not promote it personally.

For me, I know I am authentic because I will only work with brands or take money from brands, even if I would like that money in my life, if it is a product that I truly will use and love. Unfortunately, as with everything, there is a dark side and I know that some people will take money to do whatever, and maybe they have not even used the product. I just think that if I suddenly start promoting things or even recommending restaurants—by the way, no one is paying me to promote this brand and restaurant in New York—and it is really rubbish, people will very quickly see through me. I feel like I am a very transparent person and it is very obvious if I do not like something. I would say my authenticity comes from that. I feel like I know I am an authentic person, and hopefully that comes across online.

Q30 **Damian Green:** Do you assume that the audience can spot inauthenticity, someone just doing it for the money? There will be plenty

of people through the history of TV advertising who are popular celebrities who sponsored products they would not dream of using, but they get away with it because the script is good and the acting is good, all that kind of thing. Does that not apply in the influencer sector?

Em Sheldon: I think it is very different from a TV advert where a celebrity is the face for it and she is, for example, eating a yoghurt or something, I would hope that person does eat the yoghurt, but the likelihood is maybe that person does not eat the yoghurt. For some reason there is this difference between celebrities and influencers, and because the influencer is the brand, they are the person, it is about my diet and what I eat or my hair and what I put on it. For some reason it has to be authentic. I do not know why a celebrity can get away with promoting a yoghurt but not eating that yoghurt.

It all goes back to this advertising thing that I might be offered a free trip, just like a journalist or a traditional celebrity has been offered, and I will have to say "Ad". I am not being paid to be on this trip, but because it has been gifted to me I have to say it is an ad. It is quite frustrating to see celebrities on the same trip or in the same gym class, or even traditional journalists, and they are not being forced to say "Ad". For some reason, influencers have a much stricter guideline, which does not make sense.

Q31 **Damian Green:** Can your audience always tell when you are doing something you have been paid for, as opposed to putting something out there because you want to talk about it?

Em Sheldon: I think the lines are blurred. For me personally, if I tag a brand, I write "Ad" even if I am not being paid, and sadly this is because the ASA is not correctly policed. It saves their time and it saves my anxiety to write "Ad" if I feature a brand, because maybe I worked with the brand three years ago. I over-disclose, which unfortunately confuses audience members, but that is the state of our world at the moment with the ASA because there are these people with a vendetta who are looking to report you to the ASA. It is safer to protect my business and just write "Ad" everywhere.

I find myself saying to my audience all the time, "This is not an ad but I am going to put those two letters there" just to satisfy the ASA, because I know someone is looking to report me and my peers for this. Yes, I think audiences have become used to it—people with millions of followers having the same free things and not disclosing it—and I think we should disclose.

Q32 **Damian Green:** On the analogy of pop bands, a pop band that had a hit would probably sensibly think to themselves, "We have five years now and that is when we need to make all the money, and after that it is nostalgia tours" or whatever. What is the influencer equivalent? How long does an influencer last?

Em Sheldon: It depends on the person. If you are a genuine good person and people want to follow you, the lifespan is years. There is a guy called Grandad Joe on TikTok, and I think he is maybe 90. He is just doing so well, and there are grandma bloggers now. One of the biggest areas of blogging is mummy bloggers. I know my mum is 55. She follows a lot of women who are mid-60s for style inspiration. It is really exciting to see people growing up, so in the future if I have a baby I think my audience who are a similar age to me might be going through pregnancy at the same time and get married at the same time. It is almost as if we grow up together, which is quite nice.

To answer your question, I do not think there is a ceiling on it. You may get to 50 and think, "I do not want to do this now. This is too much" or maybe you have a baby and you think the lack of privacy gets too much, but I do not think there is an answer. I think it is a personal opinion.

Q33 **Damian Green:** Crystal, I saw you grinning. Is there research on this?

Dr Abidin: I was grinning, Damian, because I was thinking, "That is right." There is no ceiling, but there should be a floor, which we are still not talking about, so how old you need to be to work in this industry. I would say that of the first batch of people I interviewed for any of my research, and I started in 2007, a very good group of them are still doing this as they move across life stages and across genres, but they also move across the industry. They might not be the face of a brand or an influencer anymore, but they might go on to join an agency, be a manager, work on the creative back end for all types of brands.

I should also say that there are a lot of influencers who take breaks and come back. I love Em's point of her mum enjoying these elderly influencers. There is a market for this, and one of the two Governments in the Asia-Pacific that I was lucky to consult for were looking for elderly influencers to spread healthy Covid-19 messaging and to talk about healthy ageing. They are now also on Facebook and are not wanting to look at newspapers or news reports, so there is definitely a demographic for everything that needs to be represented in the social media space now.

Q34 **Damian Green:** Francesca, you made some very strong points about discrimination against certain groups. I am slightly puzzled about who is doing the discriminating. Presumably there are no barriers to entry and anyone can get on to social media, so is it the audience doing the discriminating? I am not quite clear who the discriminators are in this case.

Dr Sobande: Many different people post online, whether it is an influencer retweeting or posting racist material, whether it is somebody with a small following. When accounting for people's interests in anonymity and the idea that addressing it solves everything, to take the example of football, people have stood in stadiums with their faces broadcast on TV, shouting, booing and making racist comments for

decades. What is tricky with these conversations is sometimes they become more abstract than they need to be.

When I am speaking about discrimination, many different people can perpetuate discrimination. Many people of different gender identities, different backgrounds, different ages. I am not speaking about one specific group, but I worry that sometimes in our conversation when we move towards discussions of jealousy, as Crystal picked up on, and we focus on individual experiences that we might not be looking at bigger-picture issues to do with inequality that are not new. They have been around for a very long time and have to be addressed alongside anything to do with an online harassment Bill.

The point I was making earlier, when I said the online is always connected to the offline, is how do we make sure that people do not feel emboldened to say these things in any setting, whether in a public place that is not digitally mediated or on a social media platform? When it comes to big tech and the issues to do with ID, I think some people have a lot of faith in big tech and do not necessarily think critically about how that data is going to be used. There is this idea that it is potentially only going to be used to identify people when they are posting abusive material behind anonymous accounts, but how might we see surveillance rise in ways that enable big tech and result in those who are most vulnerable and marginalised experiencing negative forms of monitoring and their data being used in some really worrying ways?

Q35 **Giles Watling:** Thank you all for turning up today. It is an interesting discussion and debate. Em, we have established during this session that it is all-pervading. You do not put it down, you do not go home at the end of the day and leave it. It is part of your life and you wake up in the morning and it is part of what you do. I imagine that applies across the industry. Do you have help? Do you have advice or backup of any sort?

Em Sheldon: It is 24/7. Growing up, I thought my mum worked long hours and here I am working triple time. I feel like I am a hamster on a wheel and if I am not constantly replying to people or creating content I am going to get left behind. I think a lot of business owners feel like that, so it might not just be this space; it might just be business owners in general. That is what we are, we are young women or men running our own businesses. Sorry, I have completely gone off on a tangent.

Q36 **Giles Watling:** No, I just want to know if you get backup. For instance, I can imagine you could get pushed into a position where you might need counselling. Do you have easy access to that? Does anybody guide you?

Em Sheldon: There is no handbook. There really isn't any help and things that are there to help us, so the CMA guidelines or the ASA guidelines, are constantly changing. People will make mistakes because we are learning and a lot of these guidelines are open to interpretation, which makes things a bit more sticky. When you decide to do this as a job, there is no handbook. No one sits you down and gives you training.

There is no free counselling you can take. I would not take free counselling from the NHS when someone else needs it more. Any counselling and therapy that my peers and I have had we have paid for ourselves. I have a team of people that I personally employ. I think that is great because my industry is creating new jobs, and they support me in running my business.

In terms of mental support, no, we do not have that. We do not have a governing body to complain to or to fight our battles. I reached out to a few cyberbullying charities, who told me that they had been trying to contact the Government about these dark forums. I have reached out to the police before. They are the only avenues I can go to, but because it is such a new thing unfortunately the help is not there.

Q37 **Giles Watling:** As Alex Davies-Jones pointed out, there is no union. Do you influencers reach out to each other?

Em Sheldon: Yes, we definitely do. All of my friends do the same thing as me, and it is so helpful. Even with things like understanding how much to charge for things or should we do this or that, we help each other and we have a very supportive system, thank goodness.

Q38 **Giles Watling:** Which moves me on to my next question, do you have an agent of any sort?

Em Sheldon: I personally don't. I have had agents in the past and a lot of my peers do have agents. I do everything in-house. It just depends on the person. I think having an agent gives you that level of help, in that the agent would reply to the ASA, the agent would be the one who maybe comes with a lawyer, whereas for me I have all of that in-house.

Q39 **Giles Watling:** That moves me on to drilling down a bit further on Damian Green's point about branding. How do you choose brands? How do you do deals with the brands? What are you looking for and what are they looking for?

Em Sheldon: For me the brand would email, saying, "Hello, we have a new summer campaign" for example, "we have this new SPF. Here are the details about it. We would like to work with you on a campaign." I would then say, "Can you send the product?" I have a thing where I must trial something for at least two to four weeks, depending on what the product is, and if I like it, yes, we can go ahead and work together.

Usually for brands nowadays it is up to me and they say to me, "The brief is completely up to you. As long as you get the key messaging across, for example it is UVA-friendly and it is SPF 50 then we are happy." Most brands now know that my authentic voice is what sells things better, so there is no point in them saying to me, "You need to squirt the sun cream in this way and apply it in this way." It is generally up to me to decide how to sell that product.

Q40 **Giles Watling:** How do you assess your value to the brands? How do you

know what you are worth to the brands, and how do you monetise that?

Em Sheldon: I have a lot of data that shows sales from affiliate links or clicks. For example, the other day I linked a foundation and I know how many of that foundation I sold. I very clearly disclosed that I was making a commission for each sale, and I can then go to brands and say, "I do sell things. I do not have a million followers, but I know my value and I do know I sell things" or, "I am going on a trip to New York and here are a hundred people who told me they also booked that hotel" so it is anecdotal evidence with a bit of statistics blended together. You guess your value and then the brand assesses that.

Q41 **Giles Watling:** It would be fair to say that pretty much this entire industry is make it up as you go along?

Em Sheldon: Yes, although there are industry standards. That is why speaking to my friends who have agents is great, because we are all very much on the same wavelength in terms of how much we charge and value and that kind of thing. The difficulty comes when maybe someone comes out of a new reality TV show and they have a million followers and they undercut everyone. That can be quite damaging for the industry because we have set this rate that works for everyone and people are happy to pay for our time and effort, but then people undercut it because maybe they do not know their own value.

Q42 **Giles Watling:** Good point. I saw Dr Crystal wincing just then. Did you have a point to make?

Dr Abidin: Sorry, my facial muscles are very transparent and authentic. I was thinking about the benchmarking. It is the same problem we have in academia here in Australia. One of the movements from the union was to make public our pay, so it is easier for us to do enterprise bargaining and to make sure we are not being undercut. In the same way in the Asia-Pacific, most developed probably in the Chinese market, influencers are undergoing countrywide benchmarking, so you know what your peers are being paid, so that when there are new forms of stars coming off reality TV you do not get that undercutting. In place of unions, which take some time to be formed, a lot of agencies are leading the charge.

I would like to point the Committee to some examples, for instance looking at influencers in Sweden. I know Sweden is a tiny country compared with the UK, but that is certainly one step they are moving towards with the benchmarking. I have also been looking at a 12-country Asia-Pacific benchmarking survey looking at which Government regulations are law, which are guidelines and which are just best practice. I cannot stress enough how much we have been focused on tax, income and transparency, and yet there is no recourse for what happens if you do not abide by these things. There may be avenues for you to report, but not everyone who flouts the law gets reported. Every time there is a sociocultural issue like suicide, it becomes an issue of just girls or women, rather than an industry-wide issue.

I would also like to make another recommendation for the Committee to consider, a very prolific case study from Japan. In May 2020 a reality TV star who became an influencer known as Hana Kimura passed away due to suicide directly related to online bullying on social media. The immediate reactions from platforms on Twitter was to take down her content. She had livestreamed herself self-harming and put up pictures, so the platforms responded by removing her content. The TV network that she was on took a very long time to respond. Her friends flocked to her house. After her death the news agencies, the Government, were still debating how to prosecute her cyberbullies. There was no way of tracking them down and they were still in a society with privileged anonymity. However, they revisited an Act from 2002, I think it was the Provider Limitation Liability Act, where they needed to work with internet providers to see if they could trace IPs to these specific people so that they could be brought to court and held to arms.

Even though they were not made to put their legal names and identify themselves, there was still an understanding that the internet providers would be able to give this information to the court or the Government if need be. It took them a whole year to respond to say, "Okay, we can now identify these cyberbullies and review these cases." What happened between May and now, it has been 13 months, there were another five deaths, all related to online social media cyberbullying and that is how long it took for a Government that was a little bit more efficient but lagging behind in internet culture. I implore this Committee to look at the sociocultural issues, especially in the pandemic where more people are online, where younger children are online. This must be a priority.

Q43 **Giles Watling:** Thank you, Dr Crystal. I think we are ahead of you there. We do want to look at that, but we have gone slightly off piste. I wanted to turn now to fraud and people pretending to be who they are not. Em, how much evidence do you have of that and how much have you seen of it?

Em Sheldon: Yes, there are a few different examples of this. I saw an example, I think it was an Australian maybe, who pretended to have cancer and basically fooled people into thinking she had cancer so that she could sell a diet plan or something. There have been examples where I have had people make fake accounts of me and email brands pretending to be me, and then the brands have sent them free products. It is crazy.

Then obviously there are deeper, darker sides where I guess people pretend to be someone and maybe do a racist tweet or something and it is not that person. Unfortunately, the internet leaves people wide open to all of these things and it is quite scary that people can pretend to be who they want to be online.

Q44 **Giles Watling:** Going back to your grouping of fellow influencers, do you talk to each other about fraud? Do you call each other out?

Em Sheldon: We do not talk about it, really, because we are quite lucky in the sense that it does not happen to us. Luckily, touch wood, we have not had many instances where we have been defrauded online, but I know that many people have.

Q45 **Giles Watling:** Dr Francesca, in your research have you ever come across fraud? Have you seen fraud in the influencing world?

Dr Sobande: Yes. Fraud in general is a huge issue, whether it is in the influencer world, or even thinking about these questions to do with anonymity and people advocating for the need for IDs to set up a social media account. What sorts of fraud might occur as a result of that? Absolutely, fraud is an issue, both in the sense of somebody claiming to have had experiences, or claiming to have done something that they have not, and then individuals who may be posing online as somebody they are not. Fraud is an issue that needs to be investigated as part of an inquiry such as this one. Throughout the pandemic there have been times when some influencers have shared content that contributes to misinformation and disinformation. There have been times when other influencers, though, have been sharing helpful resources.

Q46 **Giles Watling:** It could be very dangerous, because you would have the anti-vaxxers sharing that sort of information. If they are influencers, they can be extremely powerful. What can we do about it?

Dr Sobande: The questions today about regulations are important. I do agree with people's calls for big tech to do more, not only to address online abuse but to address these types of disinformation and misinformation that are being discussed. I will keep coming back to this point—I am a bit like a broken record—we need to treat these issues as not being specific to digital culture. Fraud is something that exists beyond the confines of a social media platform. What policies in place more widely can address some of what we are speaking about today? We do not want to treat all these issues as though they exist in isolation.

To bring it back once more to the types of abuse and harm we have spoken about, in terms of education within society and in terms of the positions, the messages or the policies that politicians contribute to, what can be done to address these sorts of issues we are speaking about today? It is not lost on me that over these last 48 hours we have had some people who are dismissive of the right of those footballers to take the knee suddenly calling on big tech to do more to address racism online. Which is it? We need to treat these issues to do with digital culture and to do with inequality and oppression in Britain as completely interconnected.

Giles Watling: I take your point but, of course, online influencing can be so much more powerful. Thank you for all that.

Chair: That concludes our first panel. Thank you, Em Sheldon, Dr Crystal and Dr Francesca for your evidence today. Thank you very much indeed. It was most illuminating. We are going to take a short adjournment,

probably about two minutes, while we set up our second panel.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Sarah Brin and Keith Weed.

Q47 **Chair:** Welcome to Keith Weed, president of the Advertising Association, and Sarah Brin, senior outreach producer at Media Molecule. Keith and Sarah, thank you very much for joining us this morning. Good morning.

What are the brands that you work for and with, and others like them, looking for when they partner with an influencer?

Keith Weed: To frame the broader conversation that has been going on for a long time, we are looking at a particular application now that has been accelerated through social media, but if you go back to the old Hollywood stars of the 1950s, they were playing an influencing role with brands and helping brands connect with their consumers and customers. The role of PR and getting journalists or beauty editors to talk about products is also an influencing strategy. What has changed dramatically with the internet—let us be clear, this industry is probably only 20 years old and still very much in its development, and in your last panel you heard a lot of the growing pains of a young industry—is it has enabled people to connect relatively small groups of people with brands.

On a brand side, it has enabled people to enter the market in a way they probably could not have done before. Brands that could not afford to go on television or buy magazine adverts, for a much lower entry price can engage on social media through advertising, but of course through influence as well.

Brands are looking for a way to connect with customers, and if they can connect with customers in a way that has greater authority, of course that is of greater interest. If you are trying to target people who are interested in Cajun cooking, because you are selling a spice for Cajun cooking, clearly speaking to an influencer who has an audience of people who are already committed around Cajun cooking is a very effective thing. It is a much lower price, but also you are not speaking to lots and lots of people and hoping to pick up someone interested in Cajun cooking, you are picking an audience that is already self-declared. From a brand's perspective, it is about connecting with an audience and, in doing so, servicing their needs and promoting the brand as well.

Q48 **Chair:** Basically, it is smaller and better targeted. That is what the brands get out of influencers.

Keith Weed: Not necessarily smaller. As you have heard, there are some very big influencers. The way brands look at this now is as part of a broad campaign. Big brands use influencers as well. You will still see people advertising on more traditional channels and also using this as a way to enhance their engagement, but yes, you are absolutely right, with a more specific focus. Although some of these influencers are quite small,

you could work with 10 to 50 influencers in a particular area to build your message and build scale.

Q49 **Chair:** I used to work in advertising many, many years ago, and for the brief period that I graced the advertising industry—I am sure it does not feel the same—the big talk was always about response. "What is the response rate?" It was very difficult to define exactly what a response rate was. I presume one of the beauties of influencers is that you get the response, because you know directly if someone goes through from the YouTube channel, or whatever, and then buys the product.

Keith Weed: The identification of advertising effectiveness has grown a lot over the years. First, I reassure you that traditional advertising has a lot more measures now, and increasingly everything is going digital. Even television is digital. The idea of being able to track someone, what they are viewing and what they are reacting on is a lot better than it has been historically. The beauty of digital, digital media and advertising on social media is the data, and understanding better who you are targeting and how they are responding. That is why engagement is so important.

In the previous panel we were very much looking through the eyes of the impact on culture and the impact on communities. On the other side, brands engaging with influencers have been impacted over the years by fake followers. I challenged this back in 2018 when we realised there were a lot of very good influencers out there, but then there were people buying fake followers. If you are trying to get hold of someone to advertise a Yorkshire hotpot and you find that most of their followers are people in the Philippines, that is not going to be of much use to you. Beyond buying fake humans, you can also buy bots, and bots do not eat a lot of ice cream or do a lot of consuming. There was a whole area around fake followers, which grew quite strongly in those early years. You can understand, in a new industry, things grow up, there are unintended consequences and bad apples in the barrel.

The move that has happened in the industry from the brand or advertising side is to understand a lot more about engagement. Whether a person has 10,000, 100,000 or 1 million followers is less interesting. There are now tools to have a better view of whether they are fake or not. What is more interesting is how engaged the audience is. How responsive is the audience to the influencer? That is where the influencer power comes. If you are now a brand just buying influencers on the basis of followers, you are really missing a beat and are potentially being misled. What you need to do is understand how engaged those followers are and how real those followers are.

Q50 **Chair:** Sarah, when you are identifying influencers, what do you look for in order to help clients? Also, what is it you are looking for in terms of what they bring to the party as partners?

Sarah Brin: That is an excellent question. I should clarify that my work with influencers is a little different from the roles that were discussed

earlier. I specialise in technological innovations, specifically with creative digital tools. I work at a company called Media Molecule. We make a game that is also a digital-creation platform called Dreams. I previously worked for a software company called Autodesk, where I worked with loads of influencers, and perhaps we might refer to them as content creators as well. I am always looking for the ability to push our creative tools to their absolute limits, because I see influencers as innovators.

As companies, we are likely to make decisions based on what will yield economic profit. What strategies and what methods have been historically profitable? However, influencers, and individuals, and their own specific use cases are often not what companies anticipate at all and can demonstrate whole new business cases, whole new industries and whole new applications for our tools. That is extremely valuable to us in the creative industries.

I am always looking, similarly, to expand our brands' reach. Specifically working in the games industry at this particular moment, and in technology, I am always looking to broaden our market and broaden our audiences by bringing in voices that have historically not been as active or as invited to sit at the table in terms of what technology innovation can and should be.

Of course, I am always keen to work with women, people of colour and LGBTQ folks, because I see that not only is there an important social function there but there is also a very valuable economic function in bringing more consumers and more innovators into the conversation to continue to help our businesses grow. Additionally—and this is quite obvious—I always look at the ability to communicate well, and perhaps even authentically, and to connect with audiences. Many of my colleagues on the panel today have spoken to that.

Also, the larger the organisation, Government or non-profit organisation, the slower it moves, because of our different filters of bureaucracy, process and protocol that one must follow. However, if you are an individual, specifically an influencer, you are not necessarily beholden to those same types of processes and safeguards. Influencers help us to get a more accurate pulse on what is needed, desired and expected in the products and services we offer. As individuals and companies that offer software packages and games that are continually updated and changed, we have the ability to be agile in the features we offer, provide and distribute.

Q51 **Chair:** Influencers are a focus group as well?

Sarah Brin: A very valuable focus group, absolutely.

Q52 **Chair:** Quite an expensive one, I imagine.

Sarah Brin: Yes.

Q53 **Chair:** Do you try out products with them beforehand? Do you discuss

the generation of products? Do you get ideas from them as well? Is it a more all-encompassing approach, rather than the traditional way I talked about earlier, the idea of just a response rate and advertising? This is much wider and broader.

Sarah Brin: It is an ecosystem for innovation.

Q54 **Chair:** Yes. Any particular example that the Committee could tack on to? Is there anything you can think of?

Sarah Brin: Working at a digital fabrication laboratory in San Francisco for the software company Autodesk, I worked with their artists in residence programme, which brought in designers, architects, engineers and all kinds of folks to work with Autodesk's suite of digital fabrication tools. Those are tools that you design 3D-printed objects or CNC-milled objects with—basically using machines to make physical objects.

We brought those creatives into the space to stretch the boundaries of what our design hardware could do. When they found limits, when they came up to something they could not do, I would go over to our software engineers and say, "Can we build in an experimental feature so this person can make the CNC drill go at this angle, as opposed to this angle?", and when we found that was a successful, easy-to-implement affordance, we would implement it into our commercially available software package.

Q55 **Chair:** Does the influencer effectively get behind that, because they have had input?

Sarah Brin: Absolutely. That is very often a pipeline for hiring as well.

Q56 **Chair:** Very interesting. Keith, on the labelling of influencers' brands on platforms, I am now returning to my ancient history of advertising. There was a very clear demarcation: the word "advertorial" would almost be a death knell for advertising, but you would see the word "advertorial" in a newspaper, and it would be very clearly marked as such. What is the marking like in the influencer world? Is it up to scratch? If not, what needs to improve?

Keith Weed: As I said earlier, this is an evolving industry, and it still has a long way to go. The ASA is very much connected with the developments that are ongoing right now. What you heard earlier from Em is this notion that you have to put "Ad" or signal it as an ad, and increasingly people are. We have an advertising-literate base out there on the internet, but even still, it should be clear when an ad is an ad—in other words, when the endorsement is being paid for. There are guidelines across all the different platforms.

By the way, I heard Em mentioning help. There is quite a lot of help out there. We collectively need to understand where it is. I point to Media Smart, which is an advertising-industry funded body to help teach people about advertising on the internet, right through to influencers. Earlier this

year it published something around influencers on Instagram, and in a couple of months one on TikTok. This is available for schools, and millions of people have already been connected to this sort of education. The more education, the better. Part of that is exactly as you point out.

We are understandably very much focusing on the branding side of influencers in the conversation right now, but just to say, of course, the influencer market itself is much bigger than product endorsement. There are a lot of people out there doing fantastic jobs as influencers, but not with paid endorsement. Greta Thunberg and what she has been doing for the environment is a perfect example; even if you look at the work that Joe Wicks did around engaging people in exercise during lockdown. These are examples of people who are influencers. If you look at them in the overall market, it is estimated that half of the influencer market go on and monetise in some shape or form, but less than one fifth have it as their mainstream job.

I will put that in context. I say there are unintended consequences in the way this young market is developing and will continue to develop. As and when you think about what you need to put in place to help shape the growth of this market, we want to make sure that we are not just focusing on one particular part. One needs to stand back and look at the breadth. A lot of people are getting a lot of really positive help around mental health, fitness and other things from influencers, without it necessarily going as far as brands and advertising. Nor do I want to underestimate the role of the brand and advertising, because there are a lot of small businesses who are doing incredibly well on the internet, bringing a lot of innovation and growth that we would never have seen 20 years ago.

I am sure you have noticed the fragmentation of specialist brands. If you want to find a brand for a specific job, you can drill down on the internet and find that. If it comes with an endorsement, an authentic endorsement from somebody who uses the product and understands the product, that is very powerful. If it is no more than we have seen before in advertising, some sort of shallow endorsement, that does not have the same authenticity. So far, the influencer market has done quite a good job, and the brands go out of their way to pick the right influencers. In the early days of influencer marketing—and maybe a lot of our judgments right now are based on that, because it is quite a new market—people were just chasing numbers.

You would have the most bizarre situation where influencers who had lots of followers were endorsing things that had no relevance to who they were; hence the authentic nature of an influencer was not there at all. That has evolved rapidly, because brands realised they were not getting good returns by just getting someone to push a product, because the audience who are behind the influencer would see the brands for what they were doing, just getting an endorsement. The market is evolving

again, and understanding that ever-shifting market is going to be important for you.

Q57 **Chair:** I get your point that authenticity counts, and if you are not authentic you are not going to be effective. You will not have that personal connection that you need in order to influence. The point I want to make is that it is also about jurisdiction. If you are in another jurisdiction, in the United States or in the far east, for example, and you have an influencer with connections in the UK, with followers in the UK, and you wish to push a product to people in the UK, where does that stand? If it is an overseas influencer with an overseas company, where do we see the regulatory rigour that we see to a certain degree with domestic influencers?

Keith Weed: This is the great power and great challenge of the internet. You are recognising geographic boundaries, and the internet does not. You were talking earlier about influencers in Asia or North America. In the UK you engage with people all around the world. If I just look at the people I follow on social media, they are not just UK people; they are people in Europe, people in the US and people in Asia. What we in the UK are focusing on and talking about right now is the impact on the UK market. There is currently nothing we can do about what an influencer says in another market, and then you engage in that market accordingly.

Q58 **Chair:** I imagine that has quite an impact in terms of the reputation of influencers if there is—I am not putting words in your mouth here—more of a wild west approach in other parts of the world, and then they effectively impact the UK. Again, people may not realise as outside observers that they are based overseas with a different jurisdiction. It is ever the same thing with the internet, and almost a version of safe harbour, to a certain extent.

Sarah, I know you live in the UK but obviously you have lectured globally on these particular areas. In my conversation with Keith we talked about a UK perspective. What can we expect to see happen, if we look around the world, over the next five to 10 years in this space? What sort of developments are happening elsewhere that you think are likely to happen here?

Sarah Brin: It depends on where the nation's priorities are. As a very new immigrant, that is something I am learning. However, I can say that paying attention to emerging platforms, like TikTok and other forms of social media, and seeing which audiences that is pervasive and effective for reaching, we might start to see Governments use that as a tool. We have seen it as an effective tool for reaching audiences and distributing information. We will also continue to see, as technology develops, as fads emerge and disappear, new platforms emerge and disappear as well. Unfortunately, we will need to stay vigilant about the accuracy, fidelity and intention of information that we circulate. We will also continue to see new and brilliant forms of creativity that are enabled by these distributed platforms.

What is really exciting for me about seeing younger audiences, different audiences, audiences online and audiences using creative tools, is they are now able to share their creative work, whether that is games, animations or films, in ways they have never been able to do before. Subsequently, what we are seeing is a way to, not necessarily sidestep, but supplement traditional pathways into industry and the academy.

Historically we have seen very specific social, economic and racial filters that people need to pass, whether it is completing a certain form of education with a particular cost attached to it, or a particular professional track record. We see people coming into the games industry specifically now—because tools are more diversified than they have ever been—not necessarily have to tick those same boxes as they might previously. They do not necessarily have to have a master's degree in game design but they can develop an incredible portfolio with tools like Dreams, and so on, to demonstrate to potential employers that, "Hey, I am brilliant with these tools," which is fascinating.

I urge the Government to pay attention to those new pathways that are emerging and to invest there because it will grow your creative industries and your technological industries in ways that will only pay off, and teaching innovation as a skill. The ability to improvise, to recontextualise, to think contextually is something that we see social media platforms do brilliantly and quickly in a way that we see evolving constantly. That is not a skill I often see taught in professional or academic contexts. That is the secret to innovation.

Q59 **Chair:** Very briefly, how does a Government invest in new platforms? This will be my last question. You just said that, in order to grow our creative industries—and we have always been fantastic in that regard but obviously the pandemic has had a major impact on those creative industries—one way of building back better is to invest in these new platforms, new avenues and new routes through to connection.

Sarah Brin: I cannot help but notice that often we see people rolling their eyes or belittling the role of influencers or especially the role of videogame creators and videogame players as immature, childish, young boys, where actually that is not the case. If as Governments, as industries, as leaders of our own sectors we can start to take those creators more seriously, this is essential to building back better.

Keith Weed: Your question was about the things we can learn from around the world in this area. In my previous life—I retired two years ago from being the chief marketing officer of Unilever, the second largest advertiser in the world and advertising in over 180 markets around the world—I did a lot of work advertising with influencers. You see this market very much following the development, penetration and sophistication of the internet.

If you look at North America, the UK and China, you see the three most developed. The UK is in a leading position in how this market is shaping

up. We can probably look across to the US and China, but it is developing in real time and the UK has a big part in creating this. You are completely right, the UK is well known as a source of creativity in advertising and a big leader in the advertising world. Of course, it should be the same in influencer marketing as well.

Q60 **Clive Efford:** Keith, the Advertising Association has promoted Media Smart to us, and it is a resource for schools to educate young people about the dangers of online advertising. Is it the role of the advertising agency to fund education in our schools, or should we be doing more? Do you work with other agencies to improve education in this field in our schools?

Keith Weed: I agree that there is a need for education for the advertising industry. Surprisingly, the advertising industry does a very bad job at promoting the strong benefits that advertising has in not only creating economic growth, innovation and connecting customers to brands and brands to customers, but also in funding the free press and much more.

What is important as these things evolve is that people understand better how the world works and how the very fast and rapidly evolving advertising online world works. That is why the Advertising Association, which represents advertisers, advertising agencies, media owners, digital platforms, it genuinely is across the whole industry—quite unique for the UK, there is not a similar body in many markets around the world—is keen to promote that understanding because with better understanding you get better use and better application.

We heard earlier from Em talking about the ASA and some of her frustrations with changing rules. What the ASA are doing—I do not talk for the ASA, but I am a big supporter of the ASA—with that changing of rules is evolving as the influencer marketing changes and influencers innovate.

With legislation you have to keep moving forward, because the world changes. Yes, there is a role for education. Yes, the advertising industry is happy to help fund that, but more education about this is a good thing, as is education on many other topics.

Q61 **Clive Efford:** My point is whether there is enough being done, in your opinion, to educate young people. This is going to be with us for ever, in the sense of online influence. You have spoken about the need to rebuild trust among influencers. Is there more, going beyond what is possible through the Advertising Association, that needs to be done in our education system on this phenomenon that is going to be with us going forwards?

Keith Weed: Potentially the idea that we should help people understand advertising, online advertising and influencers, as part of understanding the world, yes, Media Smart goes a long way. The first stage would be

making sure that Media Smart is well understood by schools as an opportunity. We have already had a lot of people downloading a lot of material but it is there, it is free to use. I would encourage the greater leveraging of what exists with Media Smart. Of course it can be better and more broadly built upon. Let us first get Media Smart understood and very accessible to teachers for students.

Q62 **Clive Efford:** Does the fact the association feels it needs to step into this area and provide Media Smart suggest that it recognises self-regulation does not work?

Keith Weed: Not at all. What it recognises is that the world is changing and information is a good thing. A more educated person on any particular issue makes better choices, whether that be choosing your diet or choosing your exercise regime. The role of Media Smart is in recognising the world is changing very fast. Even in the debate we are having right now, and hearing the earlier contributions as well, there are people who are talking about things that have already moved on.

The idea of influencer marketing being the wild west was certainly true 10 years ago, and even more so 20 years ago. It is not the wild west anymore. There are still things that are evolving and changing, but influencer marketing is estimated to be $15 billion worldwide. It is a big, established business and it is hardly surprising we heard that people have aspirations to become an influencer as a career. Of course, with all the other things that come with it. Education and sharing insight with people is a good thing and a responsible thing to do.

Q63 **Clive Efford:** What are the common forms of advertising fraud currently? What responsibility should platforms and influencers have in that area?

Keith Weed: In influencer marketing one of the big ones, as I mentioned earlier, is fake followers. If you went on tomorrow or even this afternoon and chose to increase your following, you can buy followers right now. I know Instagram and YouTube have done a lot to try to reduce that, but it is still possible to do.

In buying followers, you can lead to misleading both ways. Misleading brands that you have a greater following and should be paid more for your endorsement, but it is also misleading the people who are following. Let's say you are following a mum who is posting about prams, the interest in different pram brands and children's toys, and so on, and because she has lots of followers you see her as an authentic person that you should take advice from and you go and buy that pram. If you then found out that the person did not have 10,000, 20,000, 30,000 followers, you would feel very frustrated. Or if you were someone in a political situation who seems to have lots of followers, but then you found out those followers were bought and were fake, it would be undermining to both the people following you and, of course, to anyone else who was engaging with you.

One of the prime ones has been fake followers and bots. Of course over half the internet traffic is robots, not humans. Half of those robots are bad bots rather than good bots. We have good bots that are optimising what happens on the internet, but then there are bad bots that are doing all sorts of different things. We heard earlier about AI and computer-generated influencers. There are influencers who, in their own right, are fake people. Lil Miquela has 3 million followers. You can look her up. She does not exist. She is completely fabricated by a computer. You can see about her life and what she is doing. The reason I raise this is to give you the thought that this market is still evolving.

While I am talking about what the challenges are right now, what we have around the corner is potentially live-looking people, like Lil, sharing her life with 3 million people. I do not know how many of those 3 million people know that she is not at all human and does not exist. These are evolving things that we need to think about as well.

Q64 **Clive Efford:** We could have an interesting discussion on where we draw the line between a good bot and a bad bot. Just to ask you again on that issue, where in there are the responsibilities of influencers and platforms? What more should they be doing?

Keith Weed: Everyone has a responsibility here. The influencers have a responsibility to be genuine in what they represent, and the relatively recent application that you have to say that you are affiliated to a brand or advertising has been a positive addition. All influencers understanding that they need to do that, again, is still not there. As you heard from Em, some people are better at doing it than others. For influencer guidelines and approaches, it is important that the message gets out about what you have to do legally to fit in line with what you are doing.

Then there is the responsibility of the brand advertisers because, at the end of the day, they are doing advertising and have had lots of experiences of advertising on television and in magazines and newspapers, and the advertisers similarly need to own a part of the responsibility. Then there are the additional platforms and how they ensure this is both well governed and policed.

Again, this is fast moving and developing. There is a shared responsibility across all the players to ensure this market continues to grow and prosper. It does have real benefits for people. People spend real time engaging with influencers and what they are advising, from recipes through to fashion tips. What we need to do is make sure that people have the rules to build this into a good and positive industry, rather than the concerns that we have heard.

Q65 **Clive Efford:** Can you talk about the compliance across jurisdictions? How is it possible, when working with influencers, to ensure compliance across different jurisdictions?

Keith Weed: You are right in what you are implying. Of course what I am talking about, as president of the Advertising Association in the UK, is what we can do in the UK. There are people in the UK who are looking at American sports stars or whatever, and we have no jurisdiction over that.

Q66 **Clive Efford:** Sarah, similar question. Gaming, in particular, is an internationally focused area. How can you ensure there is compliance across jurisdictions when working with influencers?

Sarah Brin: We are, more often than not, beholden to the legal jurisdictions in which influencers reside. Very frequently when I hire influencers or content creators, they will need to incorporate as a company in their home country and be beholden to the practices, rules and regulations of running a business in those particular regions. Sometimes, depending on the project, depending on who the partner is for a particular project that I am working on, it is not feasible to collaborate with entities outside of the UK because of particular legal limitations.

As someone who is interested in innovation and collaboration, I am often frustrated by the rules that are in place about who we can and cannot hire when and where, because I often don't necessarily get to hire the right person for every particular job. However, I can say my company does loads of due diligence because we are part of Sony, and Sony of course is an international entity. We have a comprehensive legal department that has presences across the globe, so it can advise us on best practices in each particular region. But of course different influencers will have different impacts and be subject to different regulations, depending on where they are sited geographically.

When you have a digital environment, you have a digital world that frequently exists outside of a physical place. Usually it is not particularly helpful to have those individual Governments standing in the way of how we develop and build those digital worlds, although I understand and appreciate that there are many factors at play there.

Q67 **Clive Efford:** On that last comment, do you fear that over-regulation in this area could be an impediment?

Sarah Brin: Let's be clear, I love regulating businesses. I want to work in context and in collaboration with Governments that empower individual creators to be paid fairly for their work, and swiftly. I would love to have support and legislation that makes that easier to do without necessarily building up the power and influence of the companies that may be hiring those individuals, if that makes any sense.

I come from California and we see all kinds of exploitation of contract workers who constantly have to defend and re-evaluate whether or not they count as workers if they are, say, Uber drivers. Of course they are doing work and fulfilling a function. It would be quite unfortunate for influencers, who provide valuable cultural and economic content to me as

a representative of a business. I want to create sustainable ecosystems for my collaborators, and I do not want them to be exploited financially. I want them to live just, empowered lifestyles.

Keith Weed: This is complex, and there are many stakeholders. When we think about how this market is going to develop effectively for the UK, and how the UK can be a leader and an innovator in this exciting development, we need to understand not only the stakeholders, the brands, the advertisers, the influencers and the platforms but the whole ecosystem. One can, in trying to fix one problem, create another. Understanding, as you are doing right now, the different inputs from the different stakeholders is critical.

Sarah Brin: Right, and there is so much benefit in empowering workers.

Q68 **Damian Hinds:** Two quick questions to Keith. First, to follow up on what you were saying about fake followers a moment ago. You will be familiar with the movement for demetrication, the idea that everything we do in our lives now has a score put on it. People live for their likes, shout outs for likes and so on, with the pressure that puts on young people, in particular. It is not directly to do with influencing, but where the two things come together is that it is suggested that if you did not have likes and the equivalents on posts, it would effectively kill the influencer sector. Do you think that is right, or do you think you could have one without the other?

Keith Weed: You would have to speak to someone who is a lot closer to the behavioural science on this particular one. As humans, we are very social creatures and we respond to feedback. If you removed the likes and that feedback loop to the influencer, they would not feel engaged with and vice versa. How would you know if one influencer was more engaging than another?

Q69 **Damian Hinds:** As an advertising industry, you have managed that for a century or so with newspapers, telly, all sorts of ambient marketing and with influencers. You ran street teams and tried to put products in the hands of influential consumers for many years before the internet.

Keith Weed: Yes, but what we are discussing here is the dynamic of influencer marketing and how it works. I could not agree with you more. Advertising has done lots of things in its previous guises, but the way the influencer marketing area has been developed, and is developing, is this notion of the feedback to the influencer.

Why did Em start getting involved as an influencer? She did not, from what she said, get involved because she wanted to monetise. She started getting involved because she was engaging with people. The monetisation came later. As she said, she worked for a couple of years before she got any pay for it. What was she doing? Was she just broadcasting into an empty cave? No, she was not. She was engaging at scale with people. Part of that engagement is the idea of knowing that

people are liking and endorsing. Without that feedback loop you would see the markets withering.

Q70 **Damian Hinds:** The other quick question I had is about incomes. We talked a little bit about this in the last session. People tend to focus on those in this sector who are very successful at what they do and make a lot of money. But you have to imagine there is also a very long tail of people making little or no money, and possibly working quite hard at it. In terms of trends, do you have a sense of how the amount of money from brands, from advertisers, is increasing in this area? More importantly, what is the relative measure of the number of people going into this line of work? Is the average income per influencer going to go up or down in the next few years?

Keith Weed: What we are seeing is, again, the early stages of a new market. People talk a lot about this person getting paid tens of thousands of pounds for a post. You are completely right, the vast majority of people are paid a small amount and they only make any reasonable money by doing a lot of activity.

We will see more people coming into the market because people realise it can be a very positive market to engage in. Again, we have to slightly step back from what we see as the negative reputation of reality TV stars and very shallow influencer projections and think about people who are talking about cooking or DIY skills. You can find someone on YouTube who can mend the bike you have, who happens to be in Minnesota or something.

This notion of the market continuing to shift will happen. More people will come in but, at the same time, the money coming into it from advertisers will go up. What will be rewarded is the people who can get the best engagement and the most engagement. We will see more money coming into the influencer marketing from advertisers—

Q71 **Damian Hinds:** Sorry to interrupt, but is it your sense that the money coming in is increasing at a greater speed, an equivalent speed or a lesser speed than the amount of young people—children, in particular—who are looking to this as a potential career?

Keith Weed: I do not know. I would be hazarding at a guess. Of course, the two go slightly in tandem because advertisers can only spend more money if there are good influencers for them to engage with, and if they can do it at a reasonable scale. The two go in tandem. Which comes first, the chicken or the egg, I will have to leave on the table.

Q72 **Chair:** What are the safeguards in place for younger people who have a degree of influence, who may have lots of followers or very unique followers and are perhaps beginning to strike out into this world of influencing?

Keith Weed: I am not an expert in this particular area, but what I would say is that the vast majority of influencers out there are not being paid.

These are people who are posting online, who have followings. I have several hundred thousand followers who are interested in the areas of marketing, tech and digital. I have never done a paid post but I am still, in some people's eyes, an influencer because they follow me and they engage with what I am doing. You are right, there will be people of all different ages engaging online and sharing insight and knowledge with their followers.

As far as being a paid influencer, I do not think any advertiser would go anywhere near paying a child because that goes against all the laws of the land about children and paying for children working.

Chair: It goes against the laws of our land, but it would not stop other jurisdictions, for instance. I do understand there is a reputational risk.

Sarah Brin: To echo Keith, I am not a particularly informed expert on this specific subject. However, I would say that within the video games industry we have something called PEGI ratings, which imply what content is appropriate for age audiences. I would also echo the idea that teaching media literacy continues to be more important than ever. The ability to identify a questionable news source, and so on, or to identify what is and is not an ad.

I would say there are very influential companies that are employing and paying youth, and I would look towards the States. Roblox is a popular online game that pays children above a certain age to produce content for their platform. I am not sure which other brands currently do that, but I know they exist.

Q73 **Chair:** What age, do you know?

Sarah Brin: I cannot specify, but certainly encompassing teenagers.

Q74 **Giles Watling:** Thank you, Keith and Sarah, for being here today, it has been a fascinating conversation. First, Keith, I looked up Miquela while we were talking just now and that is quite extraordinary. There is this fake real influencer who, the story goes, was taken down by somebody called Bermuda, who is a Trump troll or something, who then said, "This is not real, this person is not real, do not follow this person," and then it turns out, ironically, that Bermuda also was not real. We have this extraordinary situation where you have influencers out there that are totally created. Advertisers surely do not need to pay influencers, they just create their own. Is that not a possibility?

Keith Weed: The only reason I shared that particular one with you is to show you how the market is evolving and how, when we think about this area, we have to start thinking about the next steps, not just where we currently are.

Of course advertisers have used animation in ads for many years. I could argue that she is nothing more than a cartoon character who happens to look quite realistic. I agree that it is an area of concern, because the area

of artificial intelligence and computer-generated images are something that we need to be close to, because we do not want this to become broad scale and very misleading. It is much easier to engage with the truth of a human than it is of a created item.

Q75 **Giles Watling:** But it is terribly persuasive. She goes outside, she comments on the temperature, she wears Chanel clothes, she wears high street brands, she does this, that and the other, has different hairstyles and it is—just from my brief look at it now—totally convincing. I would have thought, if you did not have a slightly suspicious and jaundiced mind, like I do, you could easily be taken down that river and follow it. I would imagine it is an immensely powerful tool for advertisers and, more than that, the advertisers do not have to worry about the influencer going rogue and suddenly doing things they would not particularly want them to. Would that not be the case?

Keith Weed: This area is, most interesting for advertisers, about authenticity. You are right to be concerned. I smile, because it is currently an amusing development that we need to keep our eye on. I do not think it is a serious thing that an advertiser will want to get behind, although she has been used by a couple of brands so it is not the case that no one would engage with this.

What people are interested in about influencers is not just the lifestyle, it is about their authentic engagement with society, communities, a particular topic—camping or whatever. That is the interesting part for an advertiser. She looks a little frivolous to me. I am not even sure I should be calling her a "she". It, I suppose, given it is a computer.

Q76 **Giles Watling:** I get that, but there is a slightly more serious note to this. Professor Jonathan Hardy, when he submitted evidence, said,. "There are risks that the contracts designed to serve brands and brand safety can exercise a chilling effect on the freedom of expression of influencers and shape what messages they might circulate." Do you think that is true?

Keith Weed: Advertising has been around for centuries, and the role that advertising plays in building brands and building businesses is well known. Every £1 invested in advertising in the UK generates £6 of GDP. That is the reason why people advertise. What we need to do is work out ways to prosper, as a new industry like influencer marketing. Uniquely, what influencer marketing and digital advertising has enabled is many more small businesses to advertise than ever advertised before. They could not afford the TV advertising or print advertising.

We should look at this as a potential positive area, if well guided. You are right to put a spotlight on the concerns, but that is why we are having this conversation.

Q77 **Giles Watling:** Should we not have a jaundiced eye when we look at influencers if we know that they are under financial pressure from the

advertisers behind them, so they no longer have the freedom of expression. That very word "authenticity," that we have been bandying about a lot today, might not be there because of the financial influence behind them. It is understandable, you are paid by advertisers and yet you are supposed to be producing an authentic view of yourself to the world.

Keith Weed: Most influencers and what they are putting on the internet has nothing to do with advertising. You are going on and looking at Em's work. The vast majority of what she puts up there is not advertising. That is where they build their authenticity and who they are.

Remember, it is not the influencers who go and pick the brands, although some obviously do approach brands. It is the other way around. It is the brand advertisers looking at who is out there, who might be interesting to connect with and develop a relationship with—a paid relationship—is the way it goes.

If you are just an influencer who will jump around and advertise anything, the big brands ultimately will see you for what you are and it will lower your value in the market.

Giles Watling: The brands would obviously look for influencers who complement the message they wish to put out there.

Keith Weed: An advert is an advert. You are absolutely right, when an influencer is doing a piece of advertising and being paid for it, the influencer will be talking about the benefits. That is what an ad is. I do not think you would have a successful ad if you were saying bad things about the product.

Q78 **Giles Watling:** I get that. Turning to you, Sarah, Em said it was a self-created thing that she went into and this is how influencers come about. They fall into it one way or another. Em's case was just that she wanted to chat and then ended up finding an occupation. But you say in your bio that you are scouting, hiring, training talent and influencers. Are you actively looking for influencers? Are you a super-agent?

Sarah Brin: Absolutely, and I would say the type of influencers that I work with most frequently are not necessarily influencers like Em, but have a more specialised experience working in the gaming sector. With Dreams, I am looking for people who can use our tools well and who make wonderful experiences, games and so on with Dreams. I am looking for those people internationally, because we will sometimes partner with our community members and hire them to build content for our platform.

Q79 **Giles Watling:** You say you train talent and influencers, does that not eat into their authenticity? I use that word again.

Sarah Brin: I mean professional training like upskilling. If you are working with someone who makes good video games, they are not necessarily going to know how to work in an office.

Giles Watling: I take your point.

Sarah Brin: Just professional comms, thinking about how to work with teams and stuff like that; basic job skills.

Q80 **Giles Watling:** You are not creating the individual, as agents of old and managers of old did?

Sarah Brin: Gosh, I would not know how.

Giles Watling: That is good to hear. Thank you.

Keith Weed: But there are agencies out there that are working with influencers and connecting influencers to brands and vice versa. This has been a good thing, because it has enabled these agencies to do a better job of policing what good looks like.

Initially, in the influencer marketing, it was the brands connecting directly with the influencers. But now there are agencies working in this area—it might be something you want to look into a little further—that are the go-between between brands and the influencers. They ensure that those working on their roster are authentic, good and real, and that is why the brands use them. Because obviously the brands have to pay the agencies for that help.

Giles Watling: It is an old model, and we might as well use it.

Chair: That concludes our evidence today. Sarah Brin and Keith Weed, thank you very much. It has been most illuminating.