



# Select Committee on Communications and Digital

## Uncorrected oral evidence: The future of journalism

Tuesday 12 May 2020

4 pm

Watch the meeting

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

Evidence Session No. 9

Heard in Public

Questions 76 - 83

### Witnesses

**I:** Jimmy Buckland, Director of Strategy, Wireless Group and Managing Director, Wireless Studios; Will Harding, Chief Strategy Officer, Global Media & Entertainment.

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## Examination of witnesses

Jimmy Buckland and Will Harding.

Q76 **The Chair:** We move on now to look at radio news, which has obviously played an important part in the overall coverage of Covid. We are joined by Jimmy Buckland and Will Harding. Jimmy is director of strategy for Wireless at News UK, which is developing new radio and audio output, and Will is the chief strategy officer at Global Media & Entertainment. Thank you very much for joining us. May I ask you both briefly to introduce yourselves a little more and give a bit of your own background and perspective of the organisations you come from and a very brief overview of the challenges and opportunities facing commercial radio? We will then take questions from Members of the Committee. The next question after this first introduction will come from the Lord Bishop of Worcester. Jimmy, may we start with a brief introduction from you and your overview of the challenges facing the sector?

**Jimmy Buckland:** Thank you very much to the Committee for the invitation for Wireless to give evidence this afternoon and for that introduction. Wireless is a leading commercial radio broadcaster and in my role as director of strategy I support our development in both live radio and podcasting. For the benefit of the panel, Wireless was previously part of UTV Media but was acquired by News UK in 2016. I suppose what is interesting about our organisation is that we exist in a sector which of all the areas of news media is an area which has historically seen less range and breadth of provision than we have enjoyed in recent years. Historically, speech radio and news radio particularly were areas where provision was largely the preserve of the BBC.

Wireless is unique in having in its fold what was the first national speech radio station in this country in TalkSPORT, which in its current format is focused specifically on sport, and has a strong strand of sports journalism and live sports coverage; just a few months ago it was named sports network of the year in the Sports Journalism Awards. Also within our fold we have Virgin Radio, which is the UK's most listened to digital radio station. It is testament to the development of digital radio in this country that we were able to attract Chris Evans from BBC Radio 2 last year. We also operate TalkRADIO, which provides a distinctive voice. It launched in 2016 and provides additional choice in news and current affairs on digital radio. We also have a successful podcast arm at Wireless Studios, which in partnership with the newspaper titles under News UK offers new news podcasts and podcasts from other sectors. Very recently, we launched a major new news podcast called "Stories of our Times". It was launched amidst the pandemic and has provided some very interesting and high-quality news coverage of the pandemic.

In terms of challenges to the sector, focusing specifically on news and on speech radio, there is a really positive story the commercial sector can tell about the development of news services and new digital radio output and podcasts. Clearly, in the short term the challenges are around Covid-

19 and ensuring that the financial impacts of Covid-19 do not undo some of the growth and development we have seen through new digital services. Recently, DCMS initiated a review of digital radio and audio, which identified themes around, for instance, the role of platforms, which are important areas for audio to be considered; new technology; and how indigenous British content can achieve prominence. Another area which is really important as we think about the future, the impact of Covid-19 and the development of the sector, is just how the BBC and commercial radio can develop productive and constructive partnerships where distinctiveness and the complementary roles of the different sectors can be maintained.

**Will Harding:** Thank you very much for inviting me to give evidence this afternoon. I am chief strategy officer for Global. We are a privately owned company. We are relatively young. We were formed in 2009 and I have been with the group since that time. We are home to some of the best-known commercial stations in the country: Classic FM, LBC, Heart, Capital and Smooth. In a typical week about 25 million listeners across the UK tune in to one of our stations. We are also one of the UK's leading outdoor advertising companies and have invested in that sector over the last two years. Alongside our commercial business we run Global's Make Some Noise. This is a grant-giving charity which seeks to give a voice to small charities to support children and young people who are living with disability, illness or lack of opportunity. We also sponsor the Global Academy, which I believe a number of Members of the Committee have visited. This is a state secondary school in Hayes in west London which provides vocational education for young people from a very broad range of backgrounds who are looking for a career in the media industry. That is us.

Regarding opportunities and challenges, radio as a traditional medium has been with us since the 1920s and I think is in a very strong position. It is a very robust medium. Some 90% of the UK population tune in to live radio every week, which is an extraordinary statistic in the digital age. I will come on to talk a little about the current crisis, but the primary long-term challenge the industry faces is to plot a path through the transition to digital and to ensure that our content and our brands remain relevant to listeners in a digital age, particularly younger listeners who are listening less to live radio, in the same way that they are consuming less traditional media across the piece. We operate in a much more competitive environment. We are not just competing with each other or with the BBC. We are also competing with streaming companies and podcasts from around the world in a much more multi-platform environment.

The current crisis has obviously had a huge impact on us. Our focus has been to ensure we keep our stations on air, and broadcast through the crisis, which we have done, and to maintain the invaluable service that our stations provide to listeners across the nations and regions of the UK, ensuring our own commercial survival. Like all media, we have seen a collapse in advertising revenues and we have had to seek to address

that. The long-term future of radio is very encouraging, and there are many grounds for optimism about the future of the medium, but it is all about adaption to the digital age.

**The Chair:** Thank you both very much. There were a lot of thoughts there and we will start now to unpack them and explore some of the issues you have raised. The next question will come from the Lord Bishop of Worcester and after that Lord Storey.

Q77 **The Lord Bishop of Worcester:** Thank you both for joining us and for what you have already said, which was very helpful. We have heard a great deal in this inquiry already about how digital technologies have changed journalism and the challenges and opportunities that digital technologies offer. Could you focus for a moment or two on how those technologies have changed production and consumption of commercial radio, and perhaps also give us some successful examples of innovation? Jimmy, since your organisation is keeping the word "wireless" alive, somewhat ironically, perhaps you could begin.

**Jimmy Buckland:** We are proud of the word "wireless". The heritage of audio stretches back a century, but, as Will says, our medium is in rude health, 100 years on from the days of Marconi. In terms of innovation brought on by digital technology, you asked about production as well as distribution, and certainly in terms of production, digital technology has brought more efficiency and nimble ways of creating audio. Perhaps the most significant change that digital technology has brought is in terms of distribution. What I mean specifically by that is the fact that there are more routes to market now, for both commercial broadcasters such as ourselves and independent content producers. If we think back just a decade or so, the route to market in the field of audio or live radio related to access to the FM and AM spectrum. The first development that arose was the launch of DAB, which meant that that historic position whereby the BBC possessed much of the national broadcasting spectrum in this country started to open up. In fact, although DAB and its newer variant DAB+ have been around 20 years, it is only in the last five to 10 years that we have seen an opening up of commercially viable models for new channels and stations to come to the market. That is in part to do with the work that the industry, Governments, the supply chain and so on have put into increasing penetration and access to DAB and DAB+ receivers.

To take some specific examples, I talked about the launch of TalkRADIO and Virgin Radio earlier, and this summer we will be launching Times Radio, a new, very high-quality digital radio station which will provide a further expansion of free-to-air choice in radio broadcasting and in news broadcasting in this country. That is enabled for a very large part by that expansion in DAB. It has also been facilitated in more recent years by the growth of connected forms of listening. I am talking here about smartphone apps and smart speakers, voice-activated devices and so forth, which again are opening up a new route to market. If you take the example of Virgin Radio, it has been able to launch shows of the scale and reach and impact of Chris Evans's breakfast show, which during the

pandemic has provided an incredible public service on a free-to-air basis, but without access to FM and AM distribution, and without a traditional commercial radio model either. It is an ad break-free breakfast show on what is a commercial radio station. Indeed, we will extend that model and apply it to Times Radio as well. We will look to distribute that channel without AM and FM distribution, through smart speakers, through DAB and so forth, and with an integrated commercial partnerships model to the programming output rather than the traditional ad breaks which you would perhaps associate with commercial radio.

**Will Harding:** In terms of production, there are a couple of things I would emphasise regarding how digital technology has changed that. The first is around flexibility. Obviously, all of our radio production now is digital. What that means is it gives us a lot more flexibility in how we can combine different strands of content together. We can produce shows from anywhere in the country and bring in local news and information. We can offer different splits of content to different regions or nations of the UK in a way that would never have been possible in the old world of production. That has allowed us to not only improve the mix of content that we offer to our listeners but to do that in many more flexible ways.

The second big production change is similar to what Jimmy said. There has been an absolute explosion in the amount of content that we can produce. That is not just new digital radio stations on DAB and on streaming platforms such as Amazon Echo or Google Home but other forms of content such as video and social media. When we produce LBC's Leading Britain's Conversation, the conversation starts on air but it does not finish on air, and all of our journalists are not only producing audio but involved in producing video and content for online platforms as well. It has given us an opportunity to step beyond the traditional boundaries of what radio is and that has been really important to us in terms of production.

What that means for the consumer, for the listener, of course is an absolute avalanche of choice, which is a very good thing, but it is not a completely unmixed blessing. It creates lots of challenges for us, and sometimes some challenges for the listener and viewer in terms of trust, which I am sure the Committee has been looking at. Overall, that choice is very positive for the listener. The range of media they have access to, the range of news sources and the variety of content are a massive boon for society and create lots of opportunities not just for us as an established broadcaster but for new entrants to come in. We have sought to take advantage of that.

The innovation that I would point to from us would be our flagship mobile app, Global Player, which is a mobile product but you can listen on a PC or a Mac as well. It enables listeners not only to access all of our live radio stations but to listen on catch-up if you have missed a show. We have a full range of podcasts, not only our own-produced podcasts but third-party podcasts, including the BBC's, on the platform. We offer additional music options of curated playlists. Classic FM, for example,

offers a lot of different music options to listen to for different moods or environments. You might be a student revising or have a young baby in the house and need some relaxation. All of these things are available in one place in the Global Player. It is all about vastly enhanced choice for the consumer, which is a very good thing—but, as I say, it has also brought challenges for the industry.

**The Lord Bishop of Worcester:** One thing I am very aware of here is the value of local radio and how much that offers community cohesion, and, particularly, enables connection for those who might not otherwise be able to be connected. With reference to choice, may I ask you briefly to comment on the future of local radio, perhaps you first Will, given that just over a year ago you announced quite a drastic reduction in local radio production?

**Will Harding:** A year ago, we announced that we were moving Heart and Capital, two of our flagship networks, to a national breakfast show, and we moved Smooth to a national drive-time show. We reduced the number of hours of production that were happening region by region. At the same time, we increased our investment in regional and local journalism. We would not characterise those changes as a move away from local radio. We are trying to offer the best possible mix of content to our listeners. There is no doubt that our listeners want and value regional and local news and information as part of the mix of content on all the stations that we are able to do that on, on all the regional and local networks, but they do not particularly care where the production happens. What they care about is the quality of journalism. We took a decision to focus our content investment around regional and local content, on journalism, on news and information, rather than on production resources. We believe that allows us to offer the best mix of content, based on our analysis and our research of what listeners value, which, as I say, is all about wanting up-to-date and accurate local and regional news and information, not necessarily a focus on where the presenter is physically based. To do that, we have journalists on the ground throughout the nations and regions of the UK, and that is where we put the additional investment in. We have increased the number of journalists we employ to deliver those changes.

You asked about the future of local radio, and it is a very important aspect of what the industry does, but it is changing. When I joined the radio industry just over 10 years ago, over half of all radio listening in the UK was to a regional or local station. In the last 10 or 15 years we have seen a huge growth in the number of digital stations on offer, as Jimmy said, and a rollout of digital sets and equipment, which has meant that more and more people are listening to those digital stations.

The challenge though is that the overwhelming majority of those new digital stations are national, not regional or local. As a result of that, we have seen that that 50% of listening which when I joined the industry was to regional and local stations is now 30%, and it is falling. The challenge for the industry is how to ensure that we continue to deliver the

local, regional and national content that listeners really value, in a way which ensures that those stations are viable and thrive and grow their audiences over time. That is why we have made a lot of the changes that we have; to ensure that the mix of content that we offer is as compelling as it can be. My view is that there will always be a demand, and an expectation, from radio listeners that they will hear local and regional content and content from the nations. The challenge for the industry is to get that mix right and to ensure that the stations which can provide that kind of content continue to thrive and continue to deliver audiences, because that delivers advertising revenue, without which we cannot continue.

**The Chair:** Jimmy, do you want to add anything briefly?

**Jimmy Buckland:** I would start by paying tribute to Lord Jimmy Gordon, who was obviously a much-loved member of this Committee. All of us at Wireless were very sad at his recent passing. Jimmy was a great champion of local commercial radio and recognised the role that it has played for many years and, as Will said, continues to play.

Wireless is an investor and supporter of local radio, particularly on the island of Ireland. That includes a strong presence in Northern Ireland, where we have a station with a very large audience and a strong local news team. It has a daily news and current affairs show focusing on local interest. Lord Gordon recognised that it is often in those regions and nations of the UK where local radio is most important, and perhaps outside London and the south of England, where local radio continues to be such a vibrant and important part of the media landscape.

Will mentioned investment in digital services. More recently, we have invested, in partnership with our colleagues at the *Scottish Sun* in Glasgow, in some digital radio stations on a regional basis—Scottish Sun Radio—which complemented that digital expansion. It is a mixed picture of both national and local services in commercial radio but, where the content is relevant, audiences value local radio immensely. We think it has an important role to play, and one that hopefully can emerge in strong health from the current crisis.

**The Chair:** Thank you for your warm words about Lord Gordon. He was a very wise and witty member of the Committee and we miss him. Before we move on, I am going to invite Lord Allen to speak, as he wants to declare an interest relevant to today's session.

**Lord Allen of Kensington:** I want to declare up front that I am the founder chairman of Global Media & Entertainment, and therefore it is appropriate I declare that at the beginning of this meeting. I will not be asking any questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Lord Allen. The next question will come from Lord Storey.

Q78 **Lord Storey:** I want to look at the long-term prospects of local radio and

local journalists. With the relaxation of broadcasting regulation, we have seen the syndication of programmes. Will put a very good case forward, but we have seen 60 or so local programmes cut and local studios closed down. We have seen the impact of local radio news diminished to some extent. I understand that, because we are in challenging times, with streaming, podcasts, and the dominance still of the BBC. How do we ensure that regional voices are heard, that it is not all centralised in London and that young people who want to go into local radio journalism still have that opportunity? I was interested that Will said he was going to be increasing opportunities in regional journalism. Perhaps he could tell us how he is doing that.

**Will Harding:** When we made the changes to which the Lord Bishop of Worcester referred, we increased the number of journalists we employ in the nations and regions to ensure that we continue to deliver locally relevant news and information. As a group, we have just under 150 journalists across the nations and regions of the UK. Over half of them are based outside London. We operate nine news hubs outside London. We increased the number of journalists we employ in the nations and regions of the UK to ensure that we continued to provide locally relevant news and information. Those are not planned changes. Those are changes we made last year. I fully understand, and we fully share, the desire to ensure that commercial local radio continues in rude health. I would always urge, though, that we focus our attention on the types of local content which have real public value and which local listeners want to hear through the speaker.

The resounding evidence from all our audience research and Ofcom's audience research is that the local and regional content which listeners value is news and information. Our view is that that needs to be protected. It is about quality of journalism at the end of the day, not the number of shows. It is ensuring that throughout the day listeners can hear news bulletins which are customised for their local or regional area, and which include regional and local news stories that might not be covered on national bulletins. The industry has changed and will continue to need to change and adapt over time, but I think we need to focus our attention on protecting the important local and regional content, which listeners value.

There is a risk here, because we have seen attempts to overregulate the sector, that it can be counterproductive. Not that long ago there were stations—not stations we owned and operated but that third parties operated—which were no longer economically viable and had requested to make changes to the way they did their output, but those changes were refused and they went out of business. A station in the valleys in Wales, for example, handed back its licence and there have been other instances where stations have struggled. I absolutely understand the point made, and it is very valid, but there is a balance that we need to strike here to protect the local and regional content that listeners really value and which, if we lose that local and regional journalism, will not come back, and that would be a tragedy.

**Lord Storey:** Could community radio stations fill the local journalistic gaps to any extent?

**Will Harding:** To an extent, absolutely, and there has been a huge growth in the number of community radio stations in the last few years. However, I am sure that representatives of the Community Media Association and community stations would be the first to point out the challenges that they face in maintaining their services. Funding within the community sector is a constant challenge to keep those stations on air. I do not think it is either/or. We need to see commercial radio and community radio and the BBC, which obviously runs local stations in England and stations in the nations as well. We need that diversity of voice. I do not think community radio will fill the gap, but it is absolutely part of what we need to see, and it needs help and support as well, particularly in the current environment.

**Lord Storey:** Jimmy, do you want to add to that?

**Jimmy Buckland:** I will not add at length to that. Will has spoken very well about the specific instances around the stations operated by Global. News UK is an organisation which certainly champions journalism and is a keen supporter of journalism at all levels in this country, but many of its titles, and indeed the radio stations that we operate under Wireless, are more focused on a national service. Sustaining that local and regional journalism is very important. Where we are active in Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland, we are very active in seeking to maintain and extend a commercially sustainable model for regional and local journalism in those locations. Indeed, in Northern Ireland we invested relatively recently in new state-of-the-art studios in Belfast as part of the City Quays development there, from where we broadcast.

The overriding picture is a very positive one. If we broaden out from looking at radio to looking at all forms of audio, there has been an explosion of choice at a national level in podcasting, community radio and in different forms of services. These are changes brought by digital technology. We would suggest the overall picture is a very positive one in terms of an extension in choice, but there are changes and clearly, there are types of provision which have adapted and have needed to adapt as those changes have come forward.

Q79 **Lord McInnes of Kilwinning:** One of the key aspects we are looking at is diversity of output, but it is also about diversity of audience. It is really heartening that you have managed to make such a success through providing choice to a diverse range of channels for a diverse range of audiences. How do you fit your news output with the particular audiences that you are aiming for, and, in particular, those audiences that might not be as engaged in you? If you think of the Times Radio channel, the audience is going to be very engaged, but in some of your other radio channels how do you manage to both engage the audience and customise the news output for that audience?

**Jimmy Buckland:** Clearly, commercial radio has long played an important role in uniting local communities and, more recently, has extended that role into uniting communities of interest. That is clearly seen during the current pandemic—the role we can play in providing news and information to a broad range of audiences. If I take the example of Virgin Radio, just in the last week, Chris Evans has raised in excess of £1 million for charities affiliated with the NHS and has galvanised his audience around that cause, and is also providing a news service. He is providing accurate fact-checked information about the pandemic, about the current public health advice and so forth.

If we take another service we operate, TalkSPORT, clearly, it serves very much a sports-following and largely male audience. A lot of our listeners are younger men who perhaps are not watching traditional television news or are less able to access other forms of media. What they are hearing through our output is a really valuable service of news and information, but mixed with entertainment, and mixed with moments that lighten the mood, I suppose, in these times. Looking to the launch of Times Radio, again that will serve another audience.

We are very conscious of the opportunity we have. Also, certainly within our organisation, we have sought to continue to move quickly to maintain that representation and bring in new talent. Just in the last year, TalkSPORT has launched a new breakfast show which is presented by Laura Woods, a very talented female broadcaster, who is hopefully able to bring in a new audience and a fresh listenership to the station. We have various other initiatives in working with different community groups to bring in other audiences, both off air and on air, which I am happy to go into further detail on if that would be useful.

**Will Harding:** You mentioned that commercial radio has a very diverse audience, and that is correct. As a sector, we are very proud that we reach a very broad range of the UK population, across all our stations, not just Global's. Some 64% of UK adults listen to commercial radio every week. We have a very similar reach among listeners from a BAME background, significantly higher than the BBC. We are also much more successful than the BBC at reaching listeners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. We are very proud of that. You asked how. The short answer to that is by offering choice. We have all invested in new stations and we have all sought to target those stations at new audiences. One of the first opportunities that Global took as digital radio started growing was to take our London station, Capital XTRA, which was only available on FM, on analogue radio in London, and broadcast it nationally on digital radio. That has had a huge impact on its audience. We have invested in new stations as well on digital radio, and new content, which I talked about earlier.

The other point again is obvious, and the Committee will know this already but it needs to be said: to attract a diverse audience, you need diverse talent, and that is on-air talent, in front of the microphone and behind the microphone. On that front, we have made a lot of progress as

a sector, but there is still a long way to go. As a group, Global is pretty evenly balanced in terms of gender at around 50:50. In recent years we have seen an increase in the proportion of our workforce, both the on-air talent and, equally importantly, the behind-the-scenes talent, who come from a broader range of backgrounds. We have made a lot of effort in that space. There is a lot more to be done. It is one of the reasons we opened the Global Academy and launched a new apprenticeship scheme two years ago. We have restructured the whole way we try to recruit talent to improve the diversity of our workforce. It is an ongoing project. It is not done and we have a long way to go, whichever way you look at it. But it is the only way to deliver that more diverse audience.

The last point I would make is that you have to understand and listen to your audience. That is why it is important to have people who come from a variety of backgrounds. There is no point in saying, "This particular audience is resistant to hearing news but I'm just going to try to ram it down their throats". You cannot do that in the modern world. You have to be responsive to the audience and find creative and innovative ways of delivering news. While news bulletins on different stations might be carrying the same stories, they will be delivered in a very different way. At the moment, we are running longer news bulletins than we would normally, for obvious reasons, but in ordinary times the duration and frequency of news bulletins will be different depending on the nature of the target audience. The tone of a news bulletin will be very different according to the audience you are trying to reach. That is why you need these journalistic skills and a diverse range of talent, both in production and presentation. It is fundamental to our survival. We have a huge vested interest commercially in being successful at that.

**Jimmy Buckland:** Might I build on that, drawing on a specific example from TalkSPORT? TalkSPORT is a sports-focused network and one of the interesting trends in football in the last few years has been this incredible surge of young English talent in football; in many cases, young black talent from areas of our cities such as south London. Speaking honestly, there was probably a moment a couple of years ago where we realised that we needed to ensure that our operation both on and off air was reflective of that trend. You see that on air in the diversity of expert expert professional football talent we have in our programming in the likes of Trevor Sinclair or Darren Bent, who has joined the station. You see it in hires such as Reshmin Chowdhury, who is fronting our game day programme. Off air we work with organisations such as Football Beyond Borders. There is also an organisation called the Black Collective of Media in Sports and an organisation called Milk and Honey, which supports young women. All these partnerships allow us to identify the next generation of sports broadcasting talent and sports journalists, producers and, potentially, presenters as well, to ensure that our output is representative of the full range of sports interests and demographics in this country.

**Q80 Viscount Colville of Culross:** I want to ask you about impartiality. You both have a wide range of editorial voices, some of them really quite

strong on your radio stations, and yet LBC and TalkRADIO have very high impartiality support from your audiences. How does your approach to due impartiality help to build up a community of listeners?

**Jimmy Buckland:** Thank you for the question. I spoke at the start about the expansion of choice in news and current affairs output, which I think we have benefited from in this country in recent years. TalkRADIO has been part of that, and LBC, which Will can speak to, and shortly, Times Radio as well. Clearly, all broadcasting in this country is subject to statutory legislation on due impartiality, so when we talk about differences between the styles and approaches we adopt and the output of BBC services, we are talking about nuanced differences rather than more fundamental differences. Adherence to due impartiality is of crucial importance to our services, and is, indeed, a licence condition. Where those nuances and differences apply is in relation to areas such as giving presenters the opportunity to give their opinions, within a context of balance and of alternative views being provided; perhaps providing more of a platform for listeners to have their say to express the range and diversity of views which might exist on a particular issue across the country; and ensuring that we challenge more of a London-centric mindset which might exist on the particular major issues of the day, and some of the major issues that have defined our political direction in recent years.

Those are probably the areas which have attracted audiences and appealed to audiences. Presenters have shown they are human and that they feel emotional responses to frustrations and challenges around Brexit, or frustration with the lack of progress on political decision-making on particular issues. That is natural and human and I think our audiences have responded to that. We have provided that platform for perhaps more of a diverse range of opinion and experience. Crucially also, when we talk about impartiality and news coverage, our democratic process benefits from a plurality of broadcasting output. One of the benefits of the provision which exists within commercial radio and news is that opening up of other perspectives, other sets of editorial priorities, other sets of interests and so forth, and, rather than, in the case of speech radio, relying solely on BBC services, having another outlet as well.

**Will Harding:** You mentioned LBC, and the one thing LBC is not is an echo chamber. In LBC we have had a huge focus to ensure that we have a very wide range of opinions from presenters across the schedule and within the shows they present. You have a station where James O'Brien follows Nick Ferrari or you have Maajid Nawaz on the schedule next to Nigel Farage. These are very well-known presenters who have widely divergent views on the topics of the day, and so, when you look at LBC as a whole, there is a very broad range of opinions being expressed. That is across the schedule.

Secondly, within each of these shows the whole point of LBC is that the presenters actively encourage alternative views. The thing you will hear all the time from LBC presenters on air is, "If you don't agree with what I

am saying, if you have a different view, call and let's have a discussion about it". It is the basis on which we deliver that due impartiality, which is obviously the obligation in the Ofcom code. It is also how we make the station invigorating and entertaining and a great listen. When Global was formed we took over LBC. It was the first commercial radio station to launch in the UK, but it was bumping along in London with a million or so listeners at best, and losing money. We have invested enormously in the schedule and we took it national and, as a result of that investment, it now has well over double the number of listeners it had—2.7 million in the last survey—and it is profitable. Its profile is beyond our wildest dreams. It has been very commercially successful for us, but in terms of audience appreciation it has been even more successful.

Ofcom did some research last year looking at trust in news and looking at this question of impartiality, and the scores for LBC were quite astonishing. I say this with all due modesty because it is absolutely nothing to do with me; I am not involved in the editorial side of the operation at all. Some 85% of LBC listeners said that the station offers a range of opinions and 83% said it is trustworthy. These scores are higher than any other station, ours or anybody else's, including the BBC. It can be done and it can be done in a way that is informing and entertaining, but it is about ensuring that you have alternative views both across the schedule and within shows.

As a group, we are probably as proud of the success LBC has had as we are of anything else in the last 10 years, because it has transformed itself. It has proven, as Jimmy said, that the commercial sector can do speech radio in a way that it simply did not do 10 or 15 years ago. That made the UK a very unusual market for radio. If you go to the US, the biggest stations in terms of ratings are all speech stations. That has not been true in commercial radio in the UK. It has been challenging because the BBC is so strong. This is not about making the BBC weaker. It is about finding that alternative voice, innovating and finding something else that works with listeners and will engage them and attract an audience which is not being served.

**The Chair:** We have quite a lot to pack into the last 10 minutes, so could we have reasonably succinct questions and responses? The next set of questions comes from Baroness McIntosh and Baroness Buscombe.

- Q81 **Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** Shifting the ground slightly, I want to ask you about the entry level into the profession of journalism. I noted that, Will, when you were making your opening remarks, you talked about the Global Academy and you described it as providing a vocational education for young people who want to go into the media industries, which is of course fine. However, it made me wonder if either of you had any thoughts about whether journalism is a vocation or a profession, or whether it is both those things. Particularly, what is your view about the kinds of qualifications, first, that you are looking for among young people coming towards you into the industry that you are part of and, more generally, about what is appropriate as an educational background for

people who want to make a profession or vocation out of journalism. Do they need degrees, for example? Should we even think of having degrees in journalism? Would other kinds of degree form a perfectly sensible entry point, or are they not needed at all?

**Jimmy Buckland:** Thank you for a very thoughtful question. Whether journalism is a profession or a vocation feels like a question for a whole thesis.

**Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** Not now, possibly.

**Jimmy Buckland:** Trying to boil that down, we certainly hold journalists in very high esteem in our organisation, in part because of the skills and the professional experience they bring to our organisations. The journalists within TalkSPORT and Virgin Radio are the people who provide accurate information and who ensure we check the facts. There is a discipline and a professionalism in journalism which is important, and which we certainly hold in high esteem. More broadly, in an organisation called News, journalists are held in very high esteem.

Regarding how we recruit and train journalists in our organisations, the drawbacks of a system which relies on a more formal mode of education and degrees can be seen in the issues that we talked about earlier when we were discussing representation and diversity. Apprenticeships is certainly an area we are actively focused on and which we feel we need to expand. There will be benefits to us in expanding, and so we are providing more places for apprentices. Unfortunately, the pandemic is reducing our ability to have people physically in our studios shadowing and doing traineeships, doing placements and work experience. We hope that will change. Indeed, we have some apprenticeship programmes which are currently paused during the outbreak. We have a programme involving the Press Association, for example, which focuses on the skills needed for radio journalism, which we hope to be able to bring forward as soon as the pandemic allows.

**Will Harding:** Our primary focus at entry level is to broaden the range of people we have coming into the organisation. We would always say to young people interested in working in the industry and working for us that enthusiasm, creativity and commitment are much more important than any academic qualification that young people have. An applicant who can demonstrate they have put together a successful YouTube channel is going to be far more impressive to my colleagues in the newsroom who are recruiting than someone who has simply done a degree.

I hesitate to answer your question as to whether it is a profession or a vocation. I suspect it is both. I would say that to be successful as a journalist in the digital age you need a very broad range of skills. We expect our broadcast journalists to be able to investigate stories, to write bulletins, to read bulletins, to be able to film video, and to be able to engage on social media. Those are skills, frankly, which when I was at university did not exist. Universities play a very important part and we

recruit journalists who have done degrees in journalism. We work very closely with an organisation called the Broadcast Journalism Training Council, which tries to bring universities and other colleges and the industry together to ensure the curriculum meets the needs of the industry, but it is not a requirement at all, and, as I say, our primary focus is on young people who are absolutely committed to broadcast journalism and to working with us.

**Q82 Baroness Buscombe:** Taking that point a little further, it reminds me of the arguments we had all those years ago on the Communications Act when we were talking about the importance of plurality of content, which is so critically important. For that, surely we need to have journalists who are not only from diverse backgrounds but, perhaps even more importantly, have a diversity of experience. You have both talked so well. By the way, you are talking here to a massive fan of commercial radio. It is my favourite medium. The reality is the listener is looking for somebody with experience who they can learn from and can share their points of view, which is what separates you from so much public service broadcasting. May we take this a bit further? How do you match that wish and will to ensure that you do your best to recruit bright brilliant things from a diverse group of backgrounds and appeal to the listener? For that of course, because you are commercial, you have to make ends meet.

**Jimmy Buckland:** The first step is to ensure that a broad range of audiences see talent on air with which they identify. I have talked about the emphasis we have put on bringing through presenters who are fully representative of the country. Off air it is that work we put in to not just waiting to see which applications we receive, but working with some of the groups that I mentioned, so we are actively identifying talent which would never conceive of applying to our organisations for positions. Going back some years, our industry was less actively engaged in this, but we have all identified there is a huge commercial opportunity if we get this right, because we will foster a lot more creativity, and bring those varied skills Will mentioned into our organisations. Certainly within our organisation we are actively focused and we see it as a societal challenge which we can play a big part in tackling.

**Will Harding:** Fundamentally, it is about having an organisational culture where you care passionately about the quality of the output. If it is imbued from top to bottom of the organisation that the most important thing is the quality of the content you produce, everything else you can fix and you can deal with. If you do not have that bit right, in a content-led media organisation, nothing else will ever work. To do that, though, you need to invest in people because no one is born as a brilliant broadcaster. These are skills which are learned and developed through hard work over quite a long period. You have to be able to invest in people and you need the infrastructure to do that, but you have to care, and you have to have an organisation that cares passionately about what comes out of the speaker.

**The Chair:** A final question from Baroness Grender with a one-minute reply from each of our witnesses.

**Q83 Baroness Grender:** Thank you so much for all your evidence. Obviously, as a Committee we want to ensure that we make very powerful and strong recommendations about the future of journalism per se. What would you be leading us towards as the top one or two recommendations about journalism itself, not necessarily the future of radio but of journalism?

**Will Harding:** I would like to see a long-term programme of investment into training and developing talent. The point I just made is we need a diverse range of broadcasters, but they need the time and scope to develop and train those skills. I would like to see a strategy which works not just with universities, although they are absolutely an important part of it, but with industry and with other bodies such as the training council I referred to earlier, to ensure that any young person who wants a career as a journalist has access to the training and experience necessary. We have moved away from the old model of unpaid internships because they are not helpful in broadening access. However, they used to provide an entry level and we have replaced that with paid apprenticeships. However, there are only so many apprenticeships small organisations can provide, so I would like to see a much more joined-up strategy, across government, education, the industry—and not just in radio, I mean in the whole of media—to develop these skills. Whether the person goes on to do their own blog, or comes to work for the BBC, or us or Jimmy, does not really matter. It is about having those skills. It is easy to talk about due impartiality, fairness and accuracy, but to deliver content which respects those principles is not always simple and straightforward. It is a skill and it takes time and training. I would like to see that focus on skill development at entry level across the piece.

**The Chair:** Before I ask Jimmy to come in on that, we may well be coming back to you soon and asking you whether you might invite the Committee to come along to the Academy to see the work that you are doing.

**Will Harding:** That would be fantastic. We would love to host you there as soon as we are able to.

**The Chair:** Jimmy, to wrap up.

**Jimmy Buckland:** We have spoken today about the huge expansion in free-to-air choice which listeners have enjoyed in radio, in speech radio and podcasting. I suppose one challenge that I would pose in concluding is that, in ensuring that we do not put that expansion in choice at risk—indeed, we need to support it and allow further expansion—perhaps we could dwell briefly on the role the BBC can play as a partner for the commercial radio sector. Too often there has been a tendency within the BBC to see additional free-to-air choice as a threat or as direct competition. As we think about the impacts of Covid-19 and the financial challenges posed, of course we recognise that the BBC has huge advantages of spectrum, of distribution, of cross-promotion and of financial resources which are comparatively insulated.

A plea or request or suggestion would be for the BBC to be a better partner for the industry than perhaps it has been at times in the past; the developing of a mindset where it sees that expansion of commercial radio choice as a very positive thing, where it genuinely embraces distinctiveness and does not see a need to provide directly replicative output and programming in response to emergent independent provision, and partnering around distribution and platforms. There was a discussion last year where the BBC was exploring partnerships with the commercial sector around BBC Sounds and possibly cross-promotion of complementary programming in the area of speech radio and sports output. That conversation has not progressed at this point, but it is certainly one that we would like to pick up. With future initiatives on the horizon such as Times Radio, which we are all really excited about at Wireless, and the opportunity to work with a news provider of the pedigree of the *Times* and *Sunday Times*, there are ample opportunities for such partnerships which, if the BBC is willing to embrace, we are certainly willing to on our side.

**The Chair:** Thank you for that very thoughtful evidence. There was plenty of optimism as well as an acknowledgement of the challenges facing the sector. As Baroness Greender said, our focus is on journalism and news, and you have certainly given us a lot to think about on the role of commercial radio in relation to that. Jimmy Buckland and Will Harding, thank you both very much for your time, for giving us evidence, and we look forward to seeing you at some stage in the future. Thank you also to all the Committee for participating today. That closes this session.