HOUSE OF LORDS

# Select Committee on Communications and Digital

## Corrected oral evidence: The future of journalism

Tuesday 2 June 2020

3 pm

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. 10 Virtual Proceeding Questions 84 - 92

### Witnesses

I: Professor Charlie Beckett, Director of Polis, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science; Andrew Dickinson, Senior Lecturer in Multimedia Journalism, Manchester Metropolitan University.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

# Examination of witnesses

Professor Charlie Beckett and Andrew Dickinson

Q84 **The Chair:** Welcome to Professor Charlie Beckett and Andrew Dickinson, who are giving evidence to our inquiry into the future of journalism. Professor Beckett is the founder of Polis. Andy is a senior lecturer in journalism at Manchester Metropolitan University. First, I thank the witnesses very much for giving us their time. I am sure you have been following the inquiry. We very much look forward to hearing your views. Could I ask each of the witnesses in turn to introduce themselves briefly and then give us a brief overview of how technology, particularly digital technology, has changed the production and practice of journalism? When you have answered that question by way of introduction, we will open it up to Members of the Committee. Please keep your answers reasonably brief so that the Committee can pick up on things you say and explore them further when they are interesting.

***Professor Beckett:*** Thanks very much for the invitation to talk to you all. I have been following the process so far. I am basically from the era of the dinosaurs. I was a very traditional journalist. I started on a local newspaper, the *South London Press*, where I am from, and ended up working on London Weekend Television, which does not even exist any more, the BBC, and then ITN's "Channel 4 News". I came to the LSE nearly 15 years ago to set up Polis, the international journalism think tank there. My work has been with news media. I am a professor in the department of media and communications, but I spend pretty much all my time engaged with all kinds of journalists all around the world, mainly looking at the subject of your inquiry, which is the future of news and how journalism changes, but always with the "and". I am always interested in journalism and something, such as "and politics" or "and society".

In particular, I have looked at journalism and political communications, but I have also done big reports on reporting terrorism, religion and the media, and, most recently, I led the LSE's Truth, Trust & Technology Commission, which looked at the information crisis. At the moment, I am leading the LSE's journalism and AI project. We did a report last year, but that is continuing this year.

I will try to keep it very brief. Journalism has been through an extraordinary, multifaceted series of changes recently, and they are not all about technology. A lot of it is about how the whole information ecosystem has changed and how society has changed. Briefly, in terms of technology, there have been these three big shifts. First, there was the move online, which started when I was in a newsroom. People got websites. Secondly, there was then the huge shift into social media, which was much more complicated in the ramifications and in terms of the kind of journalism that was produced and the impact it had. Thirdly, we are in a phase where journalism is going to become much more distributed, much more diverse in terms of the organisations, but much more devolved in terms of how people get their information. I am biased,

but that is why I am doing the research on AI and ML. That technology is going to be at the heart of this most recent phase. I cannot think of many industries that have been so—to use the phrase—disrupted as journalism, in terms of the business model, the production practice, how people use it and pay for it, and what they think about it as well.

**The Chair:** We will come back to you on some of those issues.

***Andrew Dickinson:*** Thanks very much for having me along and apologies for not making it the first time round. I hope that the internet network will be better than the rail network as far as that goes. My name is Andrew Dickinson. I am a senior lecturer in journalism and the course leader for the master's in multimedia journalism at Manchester Metropolitan University. This will be probably my 21st year in journalism education.

Unlike Charlie, I would say that I am in journalism, rather than of journalism. I do not have a journalistic background. I have an editorial background in documentary and television production. My entry point into journalism was through the digital side of things. I was taken on by the journalism department in another university to teach on the first master's-level course in online journalism in the country in 2000. I have slowly found my way, like digital technologies over the last 20 or so years, into the centre of journalism. We were very much an outside, on-the-edges operation to start with, at the beginning of the century. Now, as Charlie has alluded to, it is absolutely fundamental to what we do.

I also do training with news organisations. Over the last five or 10 years, that has been mostly concerned with regional news organisations. I have spent a lot of time with journalists, editors and people from all levels of regional news organisations. It has been really interesting to see how that works and how things have changed there.

In terms of answering the question, Charlie has outlined the big areas. From my perspective, in terms of the skills, briefly, there are a few areas where we are seeing the biggest changes manifest. The first one is in convergence. It is the idea that we cannot just say we are a print journalist or anything else. Journalists need to be multiskilled. They need to be able to produce images, video, text and everything. As the platforms come together, we cannot make the distinctions that we used to make any more.

I would also put data as one of the pressure areas or one of the areas that is of interest. That is not just the data that is necessary for us to hold people to account—being able to work through giant spreadsheets, coronavirus numbers or whatever it might be, and being able to interrogate those with some authority and understanding—but, more fundamentally, the data that drives the business and the financial decision-making processes that are part of journalism these days. That includes understanding facts and figures and the mechanics of that, and where it reaches into the grey areas such as machine learning and artificial intelligence, as Charlie pointed out.

I would also highlight the relationship with the audience as being a big fundamental. When we talk about that, we talk about social media. That is the platform that has brought the audience to our door. We cannot ignore them any more, we cannot push them to one side and they want to be part of what we do. Skills-wise, learning how to manage those much more live, direct and visceral relationships with audiences is important. At the same time, it is also about how we engage those audiences in a more productive way. We talk a lot and increasingly in journalism about community engagement, getting communities onside and making them part of what we do. There are plenty of journalism organisations that are looking at that as a key area for investment. That is something that also impacts directly on individual journalists; they are the community-builders and the community bridges. That is an area of interest too. The data comes into that as well, understanding audience analytics and that kind of stuff.

Business is also a big issue for us. I have talked to people from regional newsrooms where they have found themselves sat next to the sales director, literally in the newsroom. Charlie will know this: the idea that sales would have anything to do with the editorial was something that was just not spoken of. They were literally in another part of the building and never the twain will meet. Now, that paper wall has gone and there is a relationship there that is massively important because one drives the other, for better or for worse.

Finally, the thing that is a bigger challenge than anything else, certainly from my perspective, is soft skills. There is a section of the industry that finds it difficult to think that young people can do face-to-face communication or talk in anything other than messages and social media. The reality is that you need to be able to talk to people face to face, be genuinely interested, pick up the telephone and that kind of stuff. On top of that, there is being creative and being a creative thinker. It is that softer side of how we interact with people but also how we approach our work that is important too. Those are the broad areas for me, drilling down a little bit on what Charlie said on some of those issues. Those are the ones that I get that are front and foremost of my thinking when I am training or talking to students.

Q85 **Lord Allen of Kensington:** I would love to understand that dynamic of sales versus journalism, as chairman of Global Media. Help me with that, in terms of whether it is good or bad. I can see very positive dynamics there and I can see possibly very negative dynamics.

**The Chair:** If you can answer that briefly, we will get back to the agenda, because we have a lot to pack in.

**Lord Allen of Kensington:** I am responding to what is a really important issue.

**The Chair:** It is an interesting point.

***Andrew Dickinson:*** As I raised it, I should respond to that. It is good and bad. Let me give you the example of if I was to sell some advertising against a particular story and then that brand decided that story was

not—this is a phrase that has emerged in the industry—brand-safe. There is this relationship with understanding that advertising is much more proximal to content these days. People could see the distinction between advertising on the page or advertising in the ad breaks. Now it is much more merged together. It is much more proximal on the screen. Your advertisers are getting much sensitive to the content and whether they want their content put next to that.

It means that journalists have to be more sensitive to the kinds of stories they produce. That is not to say they should stop doing certain stories, but we have to accept that this is a business, at the end of the day. There is a direct impact from editorial to advertising and advertising to editorial that we cannot ignore. We cannot make it somebody else's responsibility. Everybody has to be cognisant of the way the industry works, and that includes the business and finance of it.

Q86 **Baroness Grender:** Thank you, both, for coming to be witnesses. Charlie, I wonder if you can give us a bit of guidance as a Committee. We want to go in a way beyond Cairncross, which obviously gives us some of the financial challenges. In the UK or abroad, what are the particular innovations in this area? To both of you, this question about the application of AI, or machine-learning in particular, is absolutely critical. Everything drives towards a narrative that these are the bad beasts in the industry. Do you have examples of where machine-learning is being put to good use in growing great journalism? Some of the open-source data stuff that you mentioned before might be part of that. I would love to hear from both of you on that.

***Professor Beckett:*** It is really important. You mentioned Cairncross. It is important that we move this debate about supporting journalism away from the old idea of a kind of trade-off between subsidy or "Is somebody nicking our lunch and therefore they should give some of it back?" That really misunderstands where the success and innovation of journalism and the problems come from, and they are structural. If you are going to attend to that, even if I am going to give you examples of good practice, in a way I am a little loath to say, "There is this bright, shiny thing that the *New York Times* has done" or "There is this fantastic little thing that *Bristol Cable* has done".

It is much more interesting to see how people are using the technologies to redefine their business model or their relationship with audience and the way they create something of value. That then tells us how we might support that process. We published my report in the autumn. It is 20,000 words. There are lots of case studies about people using the technology, but we tried to stress the structural shifts that are happening. If you wanted to help people to do some of this innovative use, for example, of data journalism, or to use audience data to improve subscriptions, the best way you could help them would be to support technology knowledge, to improve training and the news media's understanding and collaboration with the universities or indeed with tech companies.

That kind of structural support engagement for that industry is much more important than saying, "Look at this fantastic translation tool. Everyone should do that". That is precisely what I am doing with the current project. We are coming up with best practice and trying to share it. We are trying to get newsrooms to collaborate. We do not have the money to actually make that happen. It is that kind of structural support for the innovation. The innovation is having structural effects. Andy referred to this. It is redefining how journalists work, but it also opening up extraordinary opportunities for journalists to connect good content to the right people, in the right time, in the right way.

The key thing about this technology is that it is really pervasive. If you look at data, for example, data can mean brilliant investigative journalism, like the Panama papers. It can mean incredible local data on homelessness that local media might be able to operate, or it might mean data about your audience, so that you can give them content that is more relevant to them and that they will value and therefore pay for. I am avoiding your question a little bit, because I am loath to say, "These particular things".

I could give you a massive list, from personalised newsletters through to really clever bots that newsrooms are using to improve the gender balance of the imagery they use. There are all these things. The journalists tell us that it is always augmenting what they would like to do. It is making them more effective and efficient, and so it is quite systematic. The biggest problem they face is strategising that, having the resources and the knowledge from the management right through. That is not the knowledge to understand the algorithms or the black boxes, but just to understand the capabilities and limits of some of this tech.

**Baroness Grender:** If you could wave your magic wand and demand that something happens at the Turing Institute that would be relevant to this, what would you ask for?

***Professor Beckett:*** It is partly the responsibility of the news media, which they have not been very good at, to explain to the Turing Institute why they are interesting. At the moment, we have identified a massive inequality. The news industry is tiny compared with all those other industries and sectors that might use these technologies: pharmaceutical, retail, health. To get them to pay attention to the news media, the news media has to do a much better job. It is not just about convincing the tech companies, because the tech companies are actually being quite helpful, in a charitable, guilty way. It is also about trying to engage with universities, research institutes and other areas of life. If you are a science journalist, there is so much to learn about what health is doing with technology. It is partly a question of enabling that.

Yes, of course I would love it if there was more public support for things such as universities or institutes when they are trying to provide the infrastructure for journalism to exploit those technologies. It should not be seen just as a subsidy for a particular news organisation. It should be seen as a subsidy for public information.

***Andrew Dickinson:*** I would not add too much to that, other than that the industry's response to AI has been pretty much the same as its response to most technological innovation; that is, in the first instance to ignore it, in the second instance to attack it, and then in the third instance to try to monetise it. We are in that very difficult phase where there is a failure to understand it and communicate it effectively. I would agree with that, but at the same time there is an absolute recognition that it has an economic benefit. You see that where people are making hard and fast decisions about replacing journalists or replacing the need for that particular resource because they can offload that to an AI. We know that has already happened with sports content. It is happening with local authority-level content.

In saying that, I do not want you to necessarily think that I am being negative about that. There is a positive. From the earliest days of AI being introduced, the caveat was always that there was a journalist who would oversee this content before it landed on the page. The role became less about producing the content as much as wrangling and editing it. Sadly, particularly when it comes with the subsidy—I am not afraid of using that word—of a large tech company, you have a fantastic combination of value there for a news organisation. It feels like a reward and it is a financial impetus to do something with it. We are in danger of allowing it to seep into the process and the business of journalism but not really doing our job as journalists in interrogating that, both internally and externally.

Q87 **The Lord Bishop of Worcester:** Thank you very much indeed to you both. Andy, you have said quite a lot already about the ways in which innovative technologies have changed the skills that journalists need, which is very helpful. Indeed, in your written evidence you pointed out that production and editorial skills that were once considered medium-specific or specialist are now becoming core skills. I wonder whether, Charlie, I could ask you to expand on that a bit. You have had a lot of experience. As you said, you have seen things change before your eyes, as it were, so perhaps you have a slightly autobiographical take on that.

***Professor Beckett:*** I can remember when I was in a newsroom and had to ask to borrow the internet. We do not think about a lot of these things now. Mobile telephony and search and so on have become so fundamental to the way journalists work and they have made them massively more efficient. I would go back to a point Andy made, which is that the point of this new wave of technologies is to take away a lot of the duplication and the boring repetitive labour of journalism. I worked in TV; 90% of television production is secretarial work and logistics and booking taxis.

The optimistic scenario—and the evidence is that it has happened already in the last decade or so—is that the technology can take at least some of the automated labour away and leave the journalists to do the things they are best at, which should include curiosity, passion, human interest, but also specialist knowledge, specialist areas and so on. That is the new skillset. The new skillset is not just about understanding

algorithms or data journalism. That is terribly important. There are new areas. It is also going to be adjunct areas. There are now job titles of "algorithm editor", which is someone using human judgment to oversee how well the machines are working.

There was a dreadful story this week about Microsoft allegedly replacing journalists with robots. Those journalists would not have existed anyway but for the digital technology. If your job can be replaced by a robot, you have to question what you were doing in the first place to add value as a human being. I do not know if that answers your question.

***Andrew Dickinson:*** I feel, as a human being, I have to say I would disagree slightly with Charlie's point that, if your job could be replaced by a robot, you have to think whether there was value in it anyway. That comes down to who is counting the value and what the quality of the job being done is. Charlie is absolutely right: the idea is to let the robots do the grunt work and let the human beings do the more finessed stuff. We kind of live in that world anyway, right down to autocomplete on our mobile phones. That is a given. It is about who is making the decisions about what the value proposition for a real human being in this chain is. I am not being humanist or anti-machine there. I am big fan of machine-learning. As a geek, I love it. We have to be careful about the value proposition, where that rests and who is making that judgment.

**The Lord Bishop of Worcester:** Can I ask you both, in this changing world, about whether journalists have sufficient access to training? As a corollary to that, you have seen the world change before you, as I have, and we have had to adapt to these new technologies. Do you think the newer generation will need as much training, given that they are reputed to be much more IT-savvy than those of us who are a bit older?

***Andrew Dickinson:*** Yes is the short answer. There is the idea that young people are more tech-savvy. The question is whether they are tech-savvy in the right way. It is about the balancing act between the expectation of employees and the organisations they go into, and the audience in some respect, and the appropriateness of the way they use technology. I know a lot of my students can write faster with their thumbs on their mobile phone than they can with a pen or a keyboard. That is not a criticism. It is just that is their mode of communication. The issue might be that they are moving into an industry that is still relatively conservative and works to tropes and processes. Their way of working will not necessarily fit with that. Sometimes it is just about moving them from one track to another.

It comes down to how I balance that expectation from industry with their expectation of how the world works. That is where I feel a bit of pressure. Young people are saying, "I communicate this way, my parents communicate this way and now you are asking me to do this, and this is very different from what I would expect". That is as much about the industry coming up to meet them as it is them rearranging their skills to somehow fit this sometimes very differently articulated idea of what a journalist should be. That is the easiest answer. What constitutes a modern journalist is a very difficult thing to nail down. It is not

necessarily best done by defining the skills students need to bring in. It is as much about defining the expectations of the industry they are going into.

***Professor Beckett:*** I completely agree with Andy, who does a fantastic job of giving people skills. Picking up on it, one of the biggest skills is going to be entrepreneurial—I mean that in the broadest sense—to understand the diversity of journalism. There is too much journalism in the world at the moment, and too much of it is the same. One of the things that journalists are going to have to do is work out how they add value in what they do day to day and year by year. That is partly, of course, to do with the technology. You get fantastic journalists such as Sophia Smith Galer at the BBC, who is doing terrific and really clever stuff on TikTok. I do not think TikTok is the solution to the news media's problem, but it is a good example of her using the technology, and she has done it in an entrepreneurial, editorial way.

Is there a big skills gap? Yes, definitely. The biggest conclusion in our report was that there is a huge skills gap, not just in that tech knowledge, but just understanding the new systems, what audience data might tell you about how you relate to the public and what you might do with that. This is not an advert, but we have created an online training course, which is partly about strategy and is going to move on to be about nuts and bolts. It was funded, bless it, by Google, which has created this thing. Obviously, it wants journalists to use the tech.

I am not having a go at the J-schools, because they are paying attention to this. As an industry, we just do not think in that strategic, systematic way about the resources that our journalists need.

Q88 **Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** This flows very naturally from the conversation we were just having. I want to ask both of you how journalists should be educated. To exemplify this, I was recently watching a rerun of a not very successful BBC show called "Press", which you may remember. Part of the reason it was not very successful was because it suggested a very binary way of looking at what journalism was. On the one hand, you had a guy who had come up through the ranks and learned to be rough and tough through being a journalist from an early age. You then had another young man who had come through a liberal, Oxford education, had come into journalism and found himself in a world that he could not make very much sense of and did not bring the best out of him. That said, what are the educational values that you look to promote among your students? It is not just about skills, is it? It is not just about whether they can use the technology and know how to analyse the data. Andrew Dickinson, you were talking earlier about soft skills and creative thinking. How do you imagine that within, say, an undergraduate degree course in journalism? Is that even really necessary?

***Andrew Dickinson:*** Soft skills are necessary, because I would put entrepreneurial thinking in the same boat as that. For me, the bottom line is whether it is necessary for journalism or not, and I think it is. We do not just want people who are right for newsrooms right now; we want

people who can go into newsrooms and take them on and move them on. That is as much about how you build relationships as it is about what you know or the fancy new technology you are expert in. Relationships last forever; technology lasts for two to three years.

I also have this other challenge that is put against me, which is that my job is to make students employable. I am measured by that. Employability is one of the data outcomes that I have to work to. Employability is not just about skills; it is about mindset. It may be, particularly at undergraduate level, that students are not going to go into journalism as their first job. They may go into other fields. It is about giving people the resilience and the understanding of themselves and the workplace that means they can take advantage of the transferable skills. Soft skills are important. Being able to talk to people and build relationships is absolutely core to journalism but is massively usable in other places. It is something I strive to do. It is something I am required to do.

I do that in a university that, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, is, in terms of its syllabus, perhaps driven by the old-fashioned journalist from "Press" that you talked about. They are the people in the industry who say, "This was what it was in my day. This is what I value so this is the kind of student you should produce". At the same time, I am battling against the other person you mentioned there, which is somebody who did a humanities degree at Oxford and, because they went to a public school, have found themselves in a journalism newsroom. I have to try to find a way between the person who likes the idea of journalism versus the person who likes an idea of journalism that does not exist any more, and steer my students through that gap.

***Professor Beckett:*** As always, I agree with Andy. There is nothing wrong with studying journalism or training to be a journalist at university. At the LSE, I do not teach people how to be journalists. We teach people about journalism and try to encourage them to be critical thinkers. If you look at it from an industry point of view, they will tend to hire wonderful graduates, for example, from Andy's place or from City University, because they can drop them into the newsroom and they will start working straightaway. My experience, all those many years ago, was not to have studied journalism. I learned it on the job and, frankly, 90% of the skills I acquired were acquired doing the actual journalistic labour.

From an industry point of view, the skills gap is the lack of diversity. It is partly not having people with the skill of understanding different communities, identities, class or whatever. We also need more people who understand science or the law. In this recent crisis we have seen the deficit of understanding when it comes to statistics, health science and epidemiology. In that sense, I would say, if you want to become a really successful journalist, study law, languages or science. In fact, do almost anything else. I really do not mean this as a criticism of J-schools, but that is where the gap is.

There are lots of people with very good craft skills who could adapt to digital, but do they have those other core resources they can bring? Importantly, they will have to be able to make the critical judgment about sources and expertise so they can access those resources. We have seen journalists in the UK struggling quite courageously with that problem; as Andy says, all these Oxford PPE or humanities graduates are suddenly becoming epidemiologists and struggling with that. That is the learning process and that happens over the period of a career.

Lawyers, for example, do continuous career enhancement or professional development. That is desperately needed within journalism. We are trying to do a little bit of that at Polis. That is a massive need for journalists, who often have fantastic experience and have developed great contacts and relationships, and yet they need to be retooled. That is not just for the technology but for the new circumstances they are operating in.

**Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** That was a really helpful answer and the issue about the intellectual, analytic skills that allow people to know how to interrogate information was exactly what I was trying to get at. At the moment, we are observing that that is not always there.

**The Chair:** Indeed, I thought that was a very interesting point.

Q89 **Baroness Meyer:** I wanted to ask why the drop-out rate is so high in journalism. Is it because students come in and think, "This is going to be an easy course and I will have a degree", or is it because they find it quite complicated and more difficult than they imagined, with more competition and maybe a low level of pay at the end?

***Andrew Dickinson:*** Let me clarify: when we say the drop-out rate, do we mean the drop-out rate from journalism courses?

**Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** From courses, yes. From the statistics, quite a lot of students come in on the first year and then there are quite a lot of them who drop out on the second year, and more on the third year. It seems to be a higher level of drop-out than in other courses.

***Andrew Dickinson:*** That is data that I have not seen and I genuinely would like to see that, because it is not my experience. I am anecdote and you are data; that is fine. That said, what tends to happen is people come in with an idea of what journalism is, and that is often not necessarily a particularly nuanced or correct idea of what journalism actually is.

It would be interesting to interrogate those individuals. The research I have seen on undergraduates coming into journalism courses is that they tend to be motivated by a passion to want to do something or change something. They are very motivated to change and perhaps they do not see journalism as that mechanism any more. Once they have understood it, perhaps it presents itself as slightly too restrictive or was not the opportunity to do the things they are interested in and passionate about. I say this to my prospective MA students. At the end of the day,

journalism is a job and a job sometimes means doing the things you are not interested in.

I would also argue that there are more opportunities to find yourself in journalism without necessarily doing the journalism degree, picking up on Charlie's point. You can find yourself on your YouTube channel, whether you are a qualified lawyer or whatever, and build that audience up.

In terms of drop-out rate, it is probably that expectation has not been met. Who sets up that difference in expectation is an interesting point to develop. In my written evidence I said that is something that starts at primary and secondary school with our media awareness. If that was more journalism-focused, rather than just about understanding the media as this portmanteau thing, we might see a drop in numbers. My bosses will be very angry with me now, talking myself out of a job. We might get people who come to me even more fired up that journalism is the right way.

That also means that we need to strike that right balance between employability—putting journalists in those jobs so that they can effect that change—and making these fantastically soft-skilled, idealistic young people that the industry, at its opening point, does not want. It is great: myself and people such as Charlie can sit within the industry and see those giant gaps. We can see those jigsaw holes that are shaped like a very particular human being, such as the really informed lawyer, but those gaps in the industry are not reflected in the gaps in the wall around it. Getting into the industry to fill those gaps is the big challenge. That is still gate-kept very strictly by a much more restrictive view of what the industry demands. It is basically that young people are fresh into the industry: "You are the guys who deliver what we need, day in, day out. I need people in my newsroom to help me get this done". There is a supply-and-demand issue that is the point there.

Going back to your original point, it is about people coming into journalism courses with more of an understanding of what journalism is. That is the industry's problem as well. We talk very broadly about media literacy, as if once you understand the media you will be more sensitive to it, which is nonsense. It is the industry's job to be better at explaining what it is, what it is for and what it does. That is from the high ground of journalism being a key cog in the machine of democracy, all the way down to spending your day stuck in a Crown Court wondering which chocolate bar is going to be in the vending machine that day. All of those are massively important parts of journalism, but it is that broad church that Charlie alluded to.

Q90 **Lord Storey:** I have found the conversation with both of you absolutely fascinating and really worth while, so thank you. You talked about all the various skillsets that you would need, and I found that list quite amazing but understandable. Surely you need to have an inherent ability to want to have the mind or the ability to be able to write or do the requirements of journalism, or anybody could become a journalist. What are those inherent requirements? I was a teacher. Not everybody can teach.

Somebody can learn the skills, but even when they go into a classroom, if they do not have that empathy, they cannot do it. Is the same true of journalism?

***Professor Beckett:*** I can try to answer this. I wrote a piece about the four Cs. I cannot remember what they were; they included curiosity, creativity and, I think, commitment. You have to believe in this myth that your journalism is going to have some kind of impact. I agree that there is a sort of core drive. What is interesting about journalism today is, even within news media institutions, they have always been made up of very diverse skillsets, by necessity. To reflect back on society, in its diversity, the diversity of news, you have to have lots of different approaches, attitudes and skills. That idea of the hard-boiled hack is one useful myth. I am not saying it is wrong, but especially in the modern setting, where journalism cannot just rely on being that cliché core industry, that lunch has already been stolen. It has to be more diverse.

I have written about the importance of emotions in journalism. By that I mean identity, empathy and all those other things, not as a nice thing to have but actually as a critical organising principle. If you are going to try to connect to people, you have to be able to understand their lives. Understanding might mean at a human-interest level. It might mean understanding at an expert, curational level, understanding what they do. There is so much room in this industry for lots of different kinds of skills and competencies. The problem at the moment is the reverse. You have heard this from a million witnesses, I am sure. It has become demographically more homogenous. These are fantastic people, but they are all increasingly similar at a time when other industries seem better at tapping into wider skillsets, experience sets and so on.

***Andrew Dickinson:*** I do not hold with the view that journalists are born, not made. It is the usual line that all you need is a bit of rat-like cunning and that is what makes you a journalist. That could not be further from the truth. The analogy of the teacher is a really good one. If you find a person with a passion and an understanding that journalism is the mechanism by which they can enact that passion, versus being a teacher, novelist, songwriter, High Court judge or whatever it may be, the importance is that you keep that passion alive. That is a constant balancing act for me, which goes back to the soft skills thing.

We have to also understand that the industry is built, at its lower levels, to take that passion away. It is built to service a machine. I can produce the most passionate, most committed and most skilled journalists, and then I put them in a newsroom and they are told there is no room for that, or the attitude in the newsroom is that there is no room for that. It goes back to something Charlie said about valuing that broader set of skills and diversity. Given the day-to-day pressures in most newsrooms, that is something that is seen as a luxury, not as a necessity. That can be, to borrow a perhaps inappropriate phrase, given the circumstances, a bit of a passion-killer for some people.

**Baroness Buscombe:** What I am going to ask segues very well from what you have just been talking about. This is incredibly interesting.

Charlie, you said, quite rightly, the news industry is actually tiny. Within that sphere, how do smaller news organisations survive in this? One is thinking about both start-ups and local news organisations. In a sense, is there more of an opportunity for them to be agile? Is there a possibility that their USP can be a little bit more distinct, rather than the larger organisations? As soon as you were talking earlier about the mix and the closeness, with the togetherness of the editorial and the sales, I thought of the *Telegraph* hub, which I think was introduced in about 2010. Everybody was completely shocked, including me, because I thought, "Wow, this does not feel right at all". Of course, needs must. The business model changes. There has been exponential change of the whole industry. Some have complained that the monoliths have destroyed high-quality journalism. Do you think that is right?

Andrew, in 2017 you talked about universities setting up local news organisations staffed by students. This is a different kind of innovation. Do you see more opportunities for the smaller organisations? Which would you rather be in now: small local news, where you can do something a little bit different perhaps, or a larger organisation with one of the broadsheets, dare I still call them that, or whatever?

***Andrew Dickinson:*** There is some truth in the fact that smaller organisations could be more agile, but I do not think that is necessarily true in journalism. When you look at the smaller media organisations—we could use phrases such as "hyper-local", but even those organisations that might be considered more regional—there is the amount of effort that is required just to keep the content flowing in that. We are talking about perhaps one or two people that are drawing any money, let alone what would pass as a salary; the rest is done on a volunteer basis. The ones that have managed to be successful have been the ones that innovate away from the content.

Charlie already mentioned the *Bristol Cable*, which is a good example. That is a co-operative-owned newspaper in Bristol. Also, that newspaper does media training, so it does community-based training as part of its remit. That allows it to operate as a co-op. I know other hyper-locals that operate under the community charity limited company side of things, so they operate in this pseudo-charity range. Sustainability at that level is almost impossible, just because the money is not there. You would have to hire an advertising person, for example, but who is going to advertise when they can set up a website for a year for the same money that it would cost them to advertise for a week?

We are seeing that the innovation is coming out of the larger news organisations because, to be frank, they are the ones with the money and the staff. Also, they are the ones that are hoovering up the lion's share of external monies—your Googles, Facebooks or BBCs. If, for whatever reason, a little bit of money haemorrhages from these organisations, over 75% or 80% of the revenue and the staff go to those large media organisations. I genuinely think those smaller media organisations are not just a place for innovation but a place to encourage and engage in terms of the diversity we have been talking about. Those are small publications that speak to communities where people will

recognise themselves, both in terms of who they are and what they believe in. They can pick up that bug for journalism there, but, sadly, it is a sector that is massively disrupted and really struggles to be sustainable.

***Professor Beckett:*** I agree with what Andy is saying. I might draw a parallel with the world of the arts, which obviously is taking a pasting at the moment as well. You have massive art institutions such as the National Theatre, but then you will have a lot of tiny, fragile, often quite transient local arts levels, which may even be voluntary or community. In the news industry, we are seeing that the worst thing you can do is try to preserve it. We have to have this monolithic local news and monolithic national news. We are getting a bifurcation where we are getting fewer but much bigger news media organisations, such as the *New York Times*. Look at the *Guardian*: a piddling little UK newspaper that is now getting tens of millions of users around the world.

At the other level, you are getting a greater diversity of not just the hyper-local but the hyper-specialist type media organisations. It is a very fragile ecosystem. They might come up and disappear. It is partly about the so-called passion economy: people who can make a living just on their own doing something they are particularly excited about. They may be able to do it for only a couple of years and they have to move on. You are getting that kind of bifurcation and you can help either of those sectors.

The experience I am getting from doing this AI project is a real diversity. We have a complete diversity of news organisations, big and small, around the world. The key thing is this idea of collaboration and this idea that, if you are a major media giant, even hardnosed like Axel Springer, you are trying to bring start-ups into your organisations because of their organic innovation and entrepreneurship. You can learn from them. They can benefit from the scale you can offer them and the expertise and technology. Of course, the smaller organisations themselves can be much more collaborative; for example, around advertising revenue as well as other resources.

An industry that used to have a cut-throat animosity and refusal to learn from each other or work with each other is increasingly, by necessity perhaps, or by invention, learning to make those connections. Sorry; this is another advert for my project, but that is precisely what we are working on at the moment. It is a series of experiments, trying to get newsrooms to collaborate. For example, we have *Nice-Matin*, a very small French local newspaper, working with Bloomberg. They like it because they know they can all learn from each other.

**Baroness Buscombe:** That is brilliant. Ed Iliffe, of Iliffe Media, who we are going to hear from next week, has one example of how technology and innovation can help small news. Better dissemination of primary data, such as court manuscripts, could help local news organisations. In other words, it is not just about, "Can we have a subsidy here?" or "How do we help?" I am glad you are shaking your head in that way. It is about being artful and finding different ways of changing not just what

you do as a model within the organisation but looking for ways to get others to change what they do, such as the courts—by the way, I am a lawyer; maybe I should become a journalist—as to how you can get the information so that the public get the news they deserve and need.

***Professor Beckett:*** Very quickly on that, you have probably talked to Bureau Local, which is doing precisely what you are trying to do. Its biggest obstacle is about one of the things that government or the authorities can do much better, which is to improve the accessibility of information and data for anybody doing journalistic labour to access that information, use it and help people to understand what is going on in their world.

Q91 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Andy, at the very beginning of this talk, you said that communities are part of what we do. I am interested in how technological innovation can be used to engage people in news and maybe bring in people who do not normally consume news. Is it really all about analytics and algorithmic curation, or are there other skills and innovations that journalists need to learn in order to be able to engage and indeed build communities?

***Andrew Dickinson:*** Again, yes would be the short answer to that question. There are technological solutions to this, but they always prove problematic. You can load an app on your mobile phone and it will give you information that is tailored to the kind of content you want. That tends not to be fed by people with passion. That is automated by robots that have been programmed by people with passion, and it depends on the quality of the content you put in. You can semi-automate people's discovery of news, but we need to go back to what the core product is in the first place.

A community is going to, in the first instance, engage with media that reflects them. If your regional or national newspaper does not reflect that—and they often do not, because they cannot—there is not much you can do to make the content more discoverable through technology and to get more people looking at it, because they are just not interested. You can start to put people in newsrooms who are producing content that communities will recognise, or you can release some of those institutional factors and let go a little bit of some of that ownership that means that those smaller community organisations cannot benefit from that.

There is the court stuff, and the other one that is often cited is council official notices and about how that needs to be somehow ring-fenced around journalism because there is a level of income there. There is an argument to say that that could be ringfenced around small hyper-local and community news organisations because they are more likely to be able to put that in front of their viewers.

There are clearly technological solutions to putting news in front of hard-to-reach audiences. That often requires some real thought by more traditional media organisations about how they did that. We have already talked about TikTok. I agree that TikTok might be gone in four or five

years, but a newsroom that is engaged with TikTok will understand or will have learned how to be a little bit more innovative and fleet of foot for the next time that platform comes along. Technology and finding different ways to put content in front of audiences is not the whole solution. It means that we need to think quite fundamentally about the kind of content we are putting in front of people.

***Professor Beckett:*** It is a brilliant question and it is so often not asked. All the people on this call are super-served by fantastic journalism because we really care about public affairs and so on. We know how to access it and we can afford it. The news avoiders are much more interesting, and they have always existed. It is now being made manifest. The public are not stupid. They are not more resistant to being informed than before at all. It is just that we are more conscious of the areas where traditional news media does not reach. This is partly because news media has such a narrow, elitist agenda, which of course I love, but it is also on the technology front. There is no solution to this through technology. If you talk to the people who are working so hard on personalisation and audience data, it is still a very crude set of tools, with lots of unexpected consequences. We are working with them to try to improve how they do that.

I have another couple of quick points. First, tabloid newspapers were a fantastic mechanism to take what you might call hard news, political news, to people who do not really give a shit about it. The *Sun* has 10 or 12 political stories every day, in among all the entertainment, celebrity and sport. I started my career on a tabloid newspaper in south London where the same thing happened. We need to bear that in mind. People like to sunbathe as well. They need to have some fun in this.

The other point is that it is actually happening, but outside of what we call the news media. For my sins, I am a West Ham fan, and I get almost all of my news about West Ham from a voluntary-run fan forum, which is brilliantly done and incredibly rich in terms of content. That is where I get my news from. That is not a problem. I do not think the news media has to take over that. There is a lot of stuff happening out there that we would not call journalism. It is universities, lawyers and doctors setting up their own communities, perhaps on Facebook or wherever, which are doing similar functions around specialist or hyper-local news that is outside and outwith the traditional news media.

**The Chair:** We are really very short on time, so we will take one final question from Baroness Bull. What we would love from this is a very concise answer and then, if you wish to, to follow up further in writing if there is something you wish you had the chance to elaborate on.

Q92 **Baroness Bull:** From your perspectives and the expertise you have brought to us today, what would you like the findings of this inquiry to be? What recommendations would you want us to make, in terms of public policy and public bodies, to better support journalism?

***Andrew Dickinson:*** I have already submitted some written evidence and my recommendations are in there. I will very quickly say two. My

first one would be an institute of journalism development. We need an arm's-length organisation that accrues funding and steps away from industry, academia and some of the other vested interests—we all have our chains that hold us down—and can act as an independent voice in terms of distributing funding for that kind of thing. There are some great projects, but people are scrabbling around for little bits of money and there could be a singular place to do that, on top of some other things.

I would also say I would very much like to see the media literacy curriculum at junior and secondary level be more journalistic.

***Professor Beckett:*** I think I have sent you the links. I was part of this commission that suggested something similar to what Andy has talked about, a kind of news innovation fund. I suppose it would be a tech Arts Council-type arrangement. I have also talked a lot about how I think the education system and other public bodies can be much more part of the story of supporting information more generally. Journalism can then thrive off this.

Overall, you may have the impression, which is correct, that I think journalism has to sort this out largely by itself. That is partly because it needs to have its own independence but also because I think it has actually done quite a good job. It is in a uniquely unfortunate situation with regard to advertising but is making great strides to wean itself off that particular source of revenue. Obviously, there are some easy hits around tax relief and stuff like that, but I think it is about trying to encourage skills and resources. They may well come through better access to data and better access to the kind of technology that the tech companies can create. The irony, of course, is the tech companies are, generally speaking, very happy to share that technology.

**Baroness Bull:** Can we trust the sector, if left to itself, to deal with the question of diversity?

***Professor Beckett:*** No.

***Andrew Dickinson:*** No.

**The Chair:** I am going to very briefly thank you, because we have taken up so much of your time and we are running into our next set of witnesses that we are going to hear from. We really appreciate the time you have given us, the written evidence you have given us and the issues you have talked about. We may well want to come back and talk to you. Professor Beckett and Andrew Dickinson, thank you both very much indeed for your time this afternoon.