HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on Communications and Digital

Corrected oral evidence: The future of journalism

Tuesday 9 June 2020

4.05 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. 13 Virtual Proceeding Questions 108 - 114

Witnesses

I: Ian Murray, Executive Director, Society of Editors; Michelle Stanistreet, General Secretary, National Union of Journalists.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witnesses

Ian Murray and Michelle Stanistreet.

Q108 **The Chair:** We will move on now to our next set of witnesses, who I think have been listening to most of that session. They are Ian Murray and Michelle Stanistreet. Ian is executive director of the Society of Editors and Michelle is general secretary of the National Union of Journalists. Welcome to both of you for joining us and spending a few hours with us, given that both of you must be very busy at this crucial time. May I start by asking you both to introduce yourselves, say a little more about yourselves and your roles, and give us a brief overview of your perspective on the future of journalism at all levels?

Michelle Stanistreet: Thanks very much for the invitation to give evidence today. I should mention that I am general secretary of the National Union of Journalists. We are a trade union representing journalists across the UK and Ireland. We consider ourselves the voice of journalists and journalism. The code of conduct, which all our members sign up to, is one of the oldest in the world. Our commitment to press freedom and ethical journalism is at the heart of what we do. We are not affiliated to any political party as a trade union. We have a cross-party parliamentary group that addresses issues that matter to our members and the broader industry. That is the focus of our campaigning work as well.

When it comes to the future of journalism, the backdrop to the industry is really important. That has now been incredibly challenged for the past 15 years or more. Enormous changes have taken place in the sector through that time. There has been a move to digitalisation, increased casualisation of work and a real disruption to the traditional advertising business model. Many of the companies in which our members work have responded to a lot of those challenges and changes by cutting costs and diverting resources from front-line journalism to maintain profits.

The impact on our members and the quality of the content they are able to produce has also been significant. We have seen successive waves of redundancies and cuts to budgets, which often impact on freelance journalists in the first instance, resulting in a lot of job insecurity and stagnant wages. It is very timely that you are considering all this. The Covid crisis has significantly increased and accelerated all the challenges and problems the industry is facing.

The sector is undoubtedly imperilled. We have seen ad revenue drops in some companies of anything between 60% and 90% during the lockdown period, so it is incredibly impactful in a very damaging way. Some newspaper titles have already folded and we are braced for job losses in the coming weeks and months, as well as potential closures. In many respects, when I talk to some of our members, this recent period has felt like the eye of the storm, while the different government support packages are in place, although many individuals on furlough also feel like they are in the waiting room for redundancies. That is significant vulnerability for those individuals. As a union, we fear that, without

significant and meaningful intervention, the damage to the sector will be unprecedented in its scale and impact, but also, potentially, irreparable.

Setting all that aside, in terms of the challenges, the backdrop and the current crisis, I am an optimistic person and I think the crisis has underlined how important quality journalism and trusted news and information is. Journalism underpins democracy and our democratic structures. It plays an enormously vital part in the public good. We see it as a key part of the spectrum of public services. I think this crisis has really unveiled and brought home to people to things that they value. I think trusted content, journalism and information is one of those things. If we lost that, it would be a disadvantage and to the harm of all of us.

That is why, very early in the lockdown period, I and others in the NUJ spent a lot of time pulling together the plan that we have published and shared with you. It is about transforming the sector and creating a much more positive future. That could be transformational. That report has a number of short-term and medium-term measures that we think could change the circumstances in which many of our members work at the moment.

A key overarching plank for that is the need to compel the tech giants to pay their way. You touched on this earlier. It is very much long overdue. We have suggested that could be done through the digital services tax as a vehicle, or some kind of new digital information levy. However that is achieved, that will be a way of bringing an end to those global, very powerful businesses deploying content that they do not contribute towards the costs of. Let us face it: they have had a very good crisis, in terms of increased revenues and profits.

Following up on the comments the other speakers made on conditionality, the NUJ is clear that this would not be about propping up existing failed business models. Conditionality would be key if any intervention was made that involved public investment and money. Whether a local media entity was large or a small, hyperlocal group, there would be very clear criteria about how that money was spent, so that it was directed at front-line journalism and news gathering. We have a whole range of different measures that we think could address the flaws and problems that have existed for quite some time now, which have become very entrenched, but could also see our way through a period of undoubted crisis to a news industry that is much more fit for purpose in the 21st century.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You have touched on a number of areas there that I think we will follow up on in further questioning.

Ian Murray: Thank you, everyone, for inviting me, the Society of Editors and those we represent to speak here. I agree an awful lot with the points that Michelle was making. I have been the executive director of the Society of Editors for the last three years. That was after I left my last editor's chair. I have spent 99% of four decades in the regional and local press in the Midlands and on the south coast, starting out as a junior reporter at the age of 18 and going on to become editor of a number of papers.

The Society of Editors is a campaigning organisation. We campaign on behalf of press freedom, freedom of expression, the public's right to know and high standards of training in news gathering and news reporting. Diversity in the newsroom is one of our big themes. I am an optimist. I believe that the strength of the British media is its plurality. We go into battle to defend the principles of freedom of expression and the public's right to know. There is not one size that fits all. Nature abhors a vacuum and humanity is always hungry for news. Therefore, as some sectors wane, others rise, but the principles at the heart of them are the ones the Society of Editors campaigns for, and does so very vigorously.

It is an interesting body of work to represent. We go across the whole spectrum of the print publications, as you can imagine. We will be talking and battling on behalf of what we might call the left-wing media or the right-wing media. The Society of Editors has no political axe to grind. I was going to say we come through the centre of that, but we do not represent just the centre. We represent all points of view.

I am optimistic, but at the heart of the British media at the moment there is the traditional, mainstream media, which is doing a blooming good job and always has done. It is extremely challenged, and I am sure we will go on to some of those points later. During this pandemic and crisis, we have seen the very comforting trend that the numbers of people going to mainstream recognised media have risen tremendously. Only in the last day or so, we have seen the Telegraph Group announcing that it is giving back the funding it has taken in furlough. I am not going to be so crass as to say it is having a good crisis, but it has seen subscriptions to its website and papers rise utterly tremendously.

The idea that the printed press is dying is wrong, as you have heard from Edward Iliffe in previous evidence, but the websites are huge, so there is that interest in local news. Some say, "Interest in the mainstream media is waning. Trust in news is waning". I am sorry; the figures do not bear that out. The challenge, and we can come to some of those later, is how to make that interest pay. There are obviously concerted efforts to say to the digital giants, "We believe that you should pay your way more". How do we achieve that without stifling the very things the Society of Editors stands on, for instance freedom of expression and freedom of speech? While it is tough out there for the media industry, I am very optimistic that we will find a way through.

The Chair: The *Telegraph* and *Spectator* reported an increase in subscriptions during Covid, which has led to them handing back funds to the Government. Are you seeing that increase in subscription across the board, or is there insufficient evidence at the moment? I do not know whether either of you has any insight on that.

Ian Murray: I would not like to say that I have any particular insight on that. The anecdotal evidence I am getting back is that all traditional media outlets are getting an awful lot of take-up. It is quite understandable. That includes the BBC. There is a massive interest in the news and in quality news. We have seen the whole industry, across the

board, rise to the challenge of this, to keep the public informed and try to separate the wheat from the chaff.

The Chair: I am just wondering if there is evidence that it is leading to an increase in paid subscriptions. It may be too early to know or there may not be the evidence there yet.

Q109 **Lord McInnes of Kilwinning:** One of the big issues we have discussed in this inquiry is diversity of experience and diversity of thought of those who become journalists. I wondered what further action could be taken to ensure diversity in the journalist workforce and to ensure there is that diversity of experience and thought in the profession.

Michelle Stanistreet: Lots more needs to be done to make gains in that really important area. It has certainly been a long-running priority of the NUJ. We have worked with a range of bodies to try to address this, including Ofcom and DCMS. One of the practical challenges for those of us engaged in that work remains lack of granular data from employers. They may refer to bursary schemes for BME journalists, for example, but it is difficult to know whether those translate into meaningful jobs come the end of those schemes. You might have a newspaper that, on paper, has a more representative workforce than others when it comes to BME staff, but, when you look at the socioeconomic background, it is as non-diverse as anywhere else in that newsroom. You need the full picture to assess where that organisation is at and what could be done to improve diversity in the round.

Our black members in the NUJ would definitely want to see an end to the kind of sticking plaster diversity schemes that crop up from time to time as a response to these issues. They would want more meaningful ways of tackling recruitment issues and barriers to promotion and progression.

You are right to touch on the impact on thought. Diversity is important to any organisation, or should be, but when it comes to journalism it has a particular impact. We are supposed to be holding up a mirror to the communities that journalists serve. It means that we are missing out on a lot of diversity of thought, lived experience and, frankly, talent that is going untapped and not being nurtured at the moment.

To get past that, meaningful cultural change is needed. In our experience, a voluntarist approach simply does not cut it. To get us further at the speed required, employers need to be compelled to produce and publish their diversity stats. The exposure to sunlight in that way will spark change. It means you can ask, "Where is this organisation at? Let's come up with an action plan together to move things forward and spearhead cultural change that goes beyond the skin deep".

Look at what has happened with the gender pay regulations, as a recent example. That was introduced in a compulsory way for organisations of a particular size. That has been quite transformational in how seriously companies view gender pay gaps. Whether they are doing it because they have to or they have really bought into the spirit of why it should be important to them is a moot point. They have to do it. Where we have

recognition, it gives the opportunity for staff and unions to be part of that consultation and process to try to improve a situation.

The BBC being forced to publish the pay data of high earners was also a significant turning point. It sparked a demand for change. It raised awareness. It triggered many more conversations, particularly among our female journalists and members, about equal pay. That is a related but different issue. It got people talking about the need for greater transparency. Without the transparency and that information, you do not know. You do not know your relative worth in relation to any other colleague. You do not have the information you need to stand up for yourself or find out where your pay or salary is at. It arms people. It gives them the information to see what we need to do to tackle this.

Some of the barriers are really simple ones to dismantle. It is about having a clearer, more transparent pay structure available for everybody to see. It is about having recruitment practices that are not just the friend of an editor meeting somebody and saying, "You come and join us". We know that like recruits like and there is a lot of unconscious bias in our sector particularly. It is about how you progress. A lot of it is not just about how you get people in. How do you retain them? How do you keep them? How do you make their employment one that they want to sustain? How do you nurture and retain that talent? There are lots of different ways in which we can approach it, but fundamentally we need that granular detail to do that properly.

Ian Murray: I agree with the kind of themes behind what Michelle was saying, but it paints a picture that I simply do not recognise. It gives the impression of newspaper companies and editors in particular—remember that in most cases it is the editors or managing editors who organise recruitment—just putting a sticking plaster over it and paying lip service to it. They are not. I have been an editor for 20 years. There was the idea there that it was friends of the editor who got appointed. Maybe it was in the past, but certainly not today.

For the last 10 to 15 years, the industry has been—I would use the word "struggling"—struggling to improve the diversity in its newsrooms. There have been many reasons put forward as to why this is. There are absolutely no objections and no barriers there. That does not mean there is not more that can be done, but we have a number of initiatives. An awful lot of the industry uses blind—I was going to say "tasting" but that is not the right phrase—CVs coming in. They take a great deal of effort. There are no barriers out there in that sense.

Lots of discussions are going on. There are lots of organisations out there, such as PressPad, which we work with. I work with the NCTJ diversity council to get more people from all kinds of backgrounds, not just BAME backgrounds but underprivileged backgrounds, and not just those who have been through the university process, coming in at a much lower level. It is not as though there is a lack of will in any way whatsoever.

All newsrooms and editors, and certainly all companies, recognised some time ago that the communities they serve have changed and evolved.

Local and national newspapers need to reflect that. It would be a non-self-serving stupidity to say, "We're just going to bring our friends in because we want it all to be exactly the same". It is not true. A huge amount of effort is going on there. Whereas I agree with Michelle that we need to do more, and we continue to agree to do more, it is not because people are just paying lip service and getting on with it. They realise that it is not acceptable.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Ian, you mentioned the lack of barriers. Do you think there are invisible barriers, for example the concentration of the industry in London especially? You mentioned your own experience from the age of 18 in regional press. Do you think that same opportunity would be open to someone just now on a regional basis? Has the decline of the regional press led to a lack of diversity to some degree?

Ian Murray: On the one level, yes, because the numbers of journalists who start out their careers in the regional press has reduced, because the size of journalistic workforces has reduced, although other opportunities are cropping up. The journalists starting their careers in the regions may then look to move on to the nationals. The industry looks to tackle the problem of being too centred in London, for England at least. Outside, in the regions, the newsrooms now are far more diverse. They are definitely far more diverse than when I started in the industry 40 years ago. That reflects the communities that are out there.

I have been involved in various discussions over the years, both in the editor's chair and, since leaving that, in my role at the Society of Editors, because I have been on the board for 10 years, about what more we can do. It would be suicidal, particularly for local newspapers, but also for national newspapers, to say, "We simply want to perpetuate this one view of the community we serve", whether it is national or local. Although more can always be done, it is not through a lack of willing.

Q110 **Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** I want to pick you up, Mr Murray, on your own career and background, and how different things would be if you were starting out now. You said that you started at 18, which suggests to me that you did not go to university, at least not then. You talked about working your way through. My guess is that you probably did not have to do an unpaid internship to get yourself established in a newsroom, but perhaps you did. Maybe you will tell me that you did.

You have begun to talk about it, but I want to ask you how we can allow a much broader range of possibility for people coming into journalism. It is pretty clear that most people starting out now have come through university. They may not have degrees in journalism but they certainly mostly have degrees. Mostly, they have to be able, if not to be unpaid for a bit, certainly to kick around in the shallows and not have a proper job for quite a long time to establish some kind of credential. That is not possible for quite a lot of people, and nor is it altogether desirable for everybody. Not everybody wants to go to university. Not everybody thinks that is the best way to be a journalist, even. Obviously, I would like Michelle to answer the same question. How do you see those opportunities being stretched to make the profession more inclusive?

Ian Murray: I will start by talking about my own experience. You are quite correct: I did not go to university. I joined the profession at the age of 18, went straight into the newsroom as a junior reporter—a cub reporter or whatever it was in those days—on a weekly newspaper. I then did my training on block release with the old Richmond College in Sheffield, where one of my classmates was Jeremy Clarkson, so it was quite an interesting training experience. Yes, even then he was absolutely lovely.

The industry then changed and went through that. Within 20 years of me being in the profession, it was very difficult to get into the profession if you had not gone to university and did not have a degree. That was probably all for what was thought at the time to be very good reasons, making the profession more professional, with higher qualifications. We saw this with a number of professions. There was an awakening and a realising that we were denying the newsrooms the very thing that we needed, which was the diversity in all its forms, particularly in the local press, of the communities we represented.

Certainly in the newsrooms that I was heading up on the south coast, we began to actively seek to take people on, still from university, ensuring though that many were locally born and bred. A percentage were also coming to us at the age of 18, having completed their A-levels, because we felt they were a pretty good bet. We did that by reaching out to the local schools and colleges, and making contact in that way, as you should do as a local news organisation. It worked incredibly well.

We are seeing a large growth in the media schools at universities and colleges. Some are extremely good. There is a fantastic one here in Bournemouth. It is almost crass to say, "We're going to discount anyone who goes through an education system that involves journalism and the media". It is a balancing act.

Has the industry got it right yet? No, it has not, obviously. We would still like to see it continuing, but it is not as though it is not recognised in the industry that there needs to be this diversity in many forms. You need representation at a local level, but also now at a national level. Everyone coming from the same background is not going to be reflective of the larger or smaller communities you are trying to serve. Effectively, it is the death knell because you will lose your readers, listeners or viewers and advertisers will think, "You're not reaching the audience I want to reach".

Is there a lot to be done? Yes. Is it a recognisable issue? It absolutely is. Is it being tackled in some ways? Yes. We have things such as PressPad that help out in coming to London, where it is very difficult in that way. It is a recognised challenge, but it is not insurmountable by any means.

Michelle Stanistreet: The situation can be significantly improved. The key to that would be transforming and diversifying the routes into the industry, particularly in the face of the changes most likely to impact on higher education post this current crisis. It should not be a normalised requirement that new entrants have to fund costly degrees, postgraduate courses in most cases, and then maybe still have to rely on the bank of

mum and dad to prop them up in the early stages of their career, when they might be expected to work for free on top of all that. That does not work for many working-class people.

There should be diverse ways into securing a foothold in the industry, which include apprenticeships and school leaver routes, that offer proper training, fair rates of pay, opportunities to progress and learn and are not just cheap labour schemes. As a union, we had experience in Scotland with developing a modern apprenticeship in digital journalism a few years ago, with funding from the Scottish Government and Skills Development Scotland. That was one way of trying to give underrepresented young people a route into the industry and an opportunity to learn on the trade and in the job. We could provide a bit more information on the background of that if the Committee would like.

Greater media literacy is a really important part of how you structure any changes. It is about trying to create the opportunity from a very early stage, within schools, and make schoolchildren think of journalism as a prospective career: "That might work for me." Often, when we go in and talk to schoolchildren, they have never really thought about reporting or journalism as something anybody like them could do, particularly if they do not know anybody among their families or friends who have been connected with the industry. It is about also how you switch people on to the possibility of journalism being a great opportunity and livelihood for children at a younger age as well. There is scope to do more in that regard.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: If you have anything to say to us about the way the apprenticeship levy works in relation to journalism and the training of journalists, it would be quite helpful if you could write to us about that. It is an issue that we have considered quite a lot in the past.

Michelle Stanistreet: Yes, definitely.

The Chair: We would appreciate it. As Baroness McIntosh said, it is a recurring theme for this Committee, right across the creative industries sector.

Q111 **Baroness Bull:** I want to move on from inclusivity in the profession to inclusivity among consumers. We have heard from several witnesses about the increasing challenge of funding free-to-read news through advertising. We have also heard about the success of some niche news providers in serving audiences that are able and willing to pay. Overall, we know that only 9% of people pay for news and a further 6% would consider paying for news in the future.

What is worrying about all this is the relationship between socioeconomic status and the amount of news sources accessed. That obviously has an impact on levels to which people are informed. By that, I mean not just quantitative levels but also quality levels. There is a lot out there that looks like news but probably would not meet standards of accuracy and impartiality. My question for you both is how journalists and news providers might better engage with and more effectively serve those

people who are less likely to pay for news and therefore possibly less likely to consume high-quality news.

Michelle Stanistreet: It is an interesting question and something that definitely needs tackling. In our considerations of this as a union, one of the things we have called for in our news recovery plan is free vouchers for online or print subscriptions for all 18 and 19 year-olds, and tax credits for households that are taking out subscriptions. The spirit of that is looking at ways of boosting engagement and fighting back against disinformation. The role of the curriculum could also play a part in that, as children travel through their school years.

It is about how you introduce people who quite often rely on Facebook or other social media platforms for information that pops up on their phone. They have a close relationship with their phone and think that what is there is accurate. How do you introduce them to trusted, impartial news sources? That is one way of introducing them to and, I hope, giving them a taste for, paid-for, quality, impartial journalism at an early stage.

Clearly, news is a public good and access to news and information should not just be about an ability to pay. That is why we also support a range of investment in quality public interest news. It is also why public service broadcasting plays such a significant role. Ensuring that can flourish into the future is an important concern and issue for the NUJ.

There is also better engagement with people. There was an interesting discussion in the previous session about how you build that relationship with the public, whether you call them the audience or whatever. How do you make that engagement meaningful and develop those relationships of trust? When you produce information that is genuinely relevant, whether that is critical information in a local context, you build up that relationship of trust. That could transform a lot of those people who currently do not have subscriptions or pay for journalism into people who potentially would.

I was interested to see reporting at the weekend of a church in Kent, as a result of some surveys it had done with people in the local community during the lockdown period. People responding to that survey were saying they really value and have prized good-quality, relevant information. As a result, that church is recruiting for a professional journalist to come and be a core part of its staff. I thought, "What an interesting outcome". It underlines what I was saying earlier. This crisis has brought home to us how important that kind of quality, incisive, reliable, trusted news really is to people. It is how we build from that to secure their support for journalism in a broader way. That is what we need to now do.

Ian Murray: It is at this point that I usually find myself having to defend the broad range and spectrum of the media that this country enjoys, and a few others, but it is not common throughout the world. We are always at risk when we have these discussions of veering towards what news is worthy and how to push people to read more of it. I do not want to be derogatory about that. I have been a journalist for 40-odd years and I want that to get across. It is almost as if certain sections of the media,

perhaps some of the tabloid papers for instance, are considered not worthy, so we are moving towards more upmarket areas and what used to be called broadsheets.

When you get to a position in a free society of saying, "We are going to decide what news and what way news is presented is right for you and this is the way you should be", it is risky. Some of the best journalism out there is in the tabloid papers, albeit presented in tabloid form. It is fantastic. They condense down and make endlessly complex stories concise. I know it comes with all kinds of other challenges, but they get that across there, yet all too often it is said, "Let's look at these worthy broadsheets, these worthy documentary programmes, et cetera".

I am not decrying them. They are fantastic. I am not here to go into what I actually read and watch on television all the time, but it is about that broad church. Thankfully, in this country we are having these discussions. We are having them here. We can debate all these kinds of issues. Whereas we should always be striving for excellence, it is a case of how we can attract more people to engage with genuine, good-quality, accurate, fair, unbiased news. Newspapers have the right to be partisan, provided they can differentiate between what is comment and opinion and what is fact. We have to be careful not to go on to a higher plane and say, "We are not going to force people". If we try to make it too much like that, we are not going to force an awful lot of people to engage with that kind of journalism, because they enjoy it in a more popular form.

Baroness Bull: That is quite interesting. You went off at an angle I was not expecting you to, in talking about worthiness. That was not the intention. When I said there is a lot out there that looks like news but is not, I was not referring to any particular news provider's content. I was referring to social media content that masquerades as news but often is not. I love the idea of parish notices in the church becoming about parish notices in a broader sense.

Q112 **Baroness Quin:** The previous question somewhat overlaps with mine. Given that we are a parliamentary committee and make recommendations to government, I wondered if you would like to say how you feel public policy could better support media literacy. By media literacy, I mean ways of helping people evaluate misinformation. I note the comments just made by Ian Murray, but I am not thinking so much of worthiness or particular formats. I am thinking of ensuring accurate and not misleading information. How can people approach the news industry better prepared to evaluate misinformation and generally promote media literacy?

The Chair: Shall we start with Ian? To some extent, it is sort of the answer to the problem you described. If people are literate and understand what they are reading, where it has come from and what agenda it might have, nobody else needs to signpost the much-trusted sources.

Ian Murray: That is correct. I am not naive and the industry is not naive. It has found itself with an issue of fake news that has arisen and become a catchphrase. It seems to be in some quarters an easy way of dismissing news that is probably not fake but just not to their liking. It is not of their opinion and they wish to draw attention away from that: "That is all fake news". I would say, and the Society of Editors has said it for some time, that an awful lot could be done in the political sphere to prevent or work against that.

Because of that, and it is not a bad thing, the mainstream media in particular, but also emerging media, has had to react. We heard from Adam a bit earlier on about the initiatives in Bristol. The media that is regulated, sticks to the rules, has trust in it, trains its journalists, with ethics at the heart of it all, has had to say, "Hang on a minute. We have to prove that what we have here, this journalism, can be trusted." How can we go about doing that? It is going out further and further to say, "Hold us to account. Look at what the alternative is."

Among this blizzard of information out there on the internet, why should you come to us? We appreciate the question. We have to go further now to explain why, to live up to those ideals and to prove that, if we are not, using the crass term, the best or only show in town, we try awfully hard to achieve that. Nothing is perfect. When you have such a plurality of news, you are going to get it from all sides.

I am long in the tooth of going to school, but it starts at a very early age, having these discussions and saying, "Do not believe that. Question why. Look at different shades, different newspapers, different media outlets and where it is coming from. Learn to not accept the first headline but have a look and make your own assessment. Do your own research on news items and decide it is that, instead of going on that."

You are never going to analyse it down to the nth degree. You are never going to take away the passion and human instinct that is there, because it is there, but there is no harm in starting young. The industry itself recognises these challenges and that it has a role to play. The present health crisis has been absolutely dreadful. You would not want it to have happened this way, but it has driven people back who were perhaps becoming a bit dismissive and had fallen for that line: "It is all fake news. You can't trust anything you read in the papers or on TV." They are asking, "Where can we find trusted sources of news?"

The statistics the industry has created, which I am happy to provide to you, show that more and more people are turning to the mainstream media, the recognised media and, yes, some of the new emerging media. We need information that we can trust. We need news that we can trust. A lot of it goes to the BBC, but also to the established, recognised names, and hence what we saw beforehand about the *Telegraph.* Perhaps it will not be the only one that returns the furlough money, saying, "We are not going to be so crass as to say Covid-19 has been good for us, but we found it was not as bad as that because people have turned to us for trusted, quality, balanced news".

Michelle Stanistreet: I agree with what you were saying. It needs to start at an early age. Issues of media and digital literacy should be embedded in the national curriculum. It should be part of that conversation and learning process from the earliest possible stage. I have a 16 year-old son and a three year-old daughter. In their own ways, they are very tech savvy, more so than I am.

I also have a lot of interesting and fraught conversations with my son about the information he comes out with that has appeared on his mobile phone. It is inevitable. When something is there, in front of you, being shared by your friends, it is imbued with a sense of credibility that does not necessarily exist. How do you teach people to question and kickstart their analytical processes? "Why did that person post that? Why did they say that? How has that been edited? Where does that information come from?" It does not matter whether your trusted journalistic source is a red top, a local paper, a hyperlocal or a broadsheet. There is something very different about proper journalistic material and information produced in a credible and ethical way. They are the lessons we need to teach our kids.

We have taken part in some events and things that DCMS has done with Margot James last year. We are in the process of working with NewsWise, the *Guardian*'s media literacy project, to see how our members can play a role. Journalists, as practitioners, should also be part of that process, doing what they can to help with this educative process, whether that is with videos that schools can use or different materials. It needs to be tackled. The current situation brings that home all the more. There is a proliferation in fake news, disinformation or conspiracy theories. They can be incredibly damaging when you are talking about public health information at a time like this.

The Chair: This is a really interesting area we would probably like to explore more. Sadly, we do not have time. We would welcome any further written evidence about the work our witnesses are doing in the area of media literacy. Perhaps comment specifically on the question Baroness Quin raised: is this an area where there needs to be public policy involvement? I do not think we have time now, but we would like to hear more on that.

Q113 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** I would like to ask about what could be done in public policy terms to support freelance journalists. I declare an interest as a freelance television producer making content for Netflix and Smithsonian Channel. Michelle, I was particularly interested by a point in your submission, in which you said that many freelancers are forced to be taxed at source by the PAYE system, yet treated as self-employed for the purposes of employment law. What problems does this create for freelancers and how can that be stopped?

Michelle Stanistreet: It has been quite a long-standing shift in the way the industry has worked. The lockdown period has brought home the inequities that exist for all our freelance members. They have fallen between the two government schemes that have been established. PAYE freelancers taxed at source are treated by HMRC for tax purposes as if

they are employees, although when it comes to rights, access to holiday pay or maternity leave in their workplaces they are treated like freelancers. They are not entitled to access the freelance support scheme.

Many companies that could have furloughed individuals in that situation have refused to do so. About a third of the union's members are now working freelance. Many of those are facing enormous hardship as a consequence of those gaps in provision. We fundamentally want this to be a wake-up call. We need a reform of public policy on the self-employed to reflect the way workers have been forced to operate by many of those engaging companies. They have not chosen to set themselves up in this way. They do what employers require them to do. If that meant setting up a limited company or becoming a personal service company, they have had to do that. The system now needs to be reformed so that freelancers are taxed appropriately as self-employed individuals and can access holiday, sick pay and those basic protections they are denied at the moment.

The rollout of IR35 is in train. It is due to be rolled out to the private sector by next April. That would be disastrous, in our view, and plunge many more freelancers into that no man's land where they have none of the rights of being an employee or the tax advantages of being self-employed. There has been a Lords Economic Affairs Select Committee report. We will back the findings of that and say that the rollout is riddled with problems and needs to be curtailed. We have already experienced the difficulties it has created for our members who work in the public sector. We do not want to see an advance of that, but a fundamental reform of public policy to put in place the protections that do not currently exist for our freelance members.

Viscount Colville of Culross: Ian, what can be done in public policy terms to support freelance journalists?

Ian Murray: I am not going to waffle on, because this is not a position that the Society of Editors has taken a view on. That is for others to answer.

The Chair: There are some very interesting points there that we need to consider further. Sadly, we are running very short of time. We have time for one final question.

Q114 **Baroness Buscombe:** This has been such an interesting session, talking a lot about journalism, but in particular journalists. My question, in a sense, is: who would be a journalist? Even 10 years ago, as chairman of the Press Complaints Commission, I remember treading carefully to encourage some way of—I did not even dare use the word "regulation"—protecting journalists from harassment and protecting the freedom of the press. For example, I asked, "Is it not sensible that people who write stuff on social media should have to have their name attributed to it, just as they would in the press?" The way I was attacked was so appalling. It stays with you, so I kind of understand what appalling situations some of these journalists go through, particularly harassment by social media, in

trying to tell their story and do it the right way. What is your response to this? What more can we do?

Ian Murray: You would probably expect me to say this. We need more politicians like yourselves—not particularly you as individuals, of course—to stop denigrating the mainstream media and journalists by saying, "All this is fake news. You cannot trust the press". We have seen minor incidents of it during the Covid-19 outbreak: "We are not going to answer questions on this area because they are just campaigning." In other words, can we have less knocking of the media and putting journalists in the position where they find themselves targets for abuse?

It has been there for a long time. "Who would do it?" Yet there is no end to people who want to come into our profession, even though it is always considered to be down there at the bottom, the least liked profession. It is politicians, estate agents and journalists. We are all in good company there.

I am the last person to say that journalists are angels, they get everything right and there are not some wrong coves among them. We could do with support, even just on the principle that we respect a free media. I am not saying that does not come from an awful lot of the political class. "We expect a free media. We know it is a difficult job to do and we are not always going to agree with them, but there are good points there". I think that can be done.

Michelle Stanistreet: I completely agree with Ian that there needs to be better political leadership on this. Politicians and people in prominent positions should not add to the problem by undermining journalists and their ability to carry out their work. That should be a given. We have seen a worrying escalation in recent weeks of harassment and attacks on journalists, even during this lockdown period, at home and abroad.

In recent weeks, an NUJ member and union rep, Amy Fenton, had to move her daughter to a secret location. She endured more than 100 death threats and harassment, online and offline, all in the course of her job as the chief reporter at Newsquest in South Cumbria. It was awful, appalling abuse and harassment. We have seen our members, carrying out their jobs during the protests in recent days, harassed by protesters but also some heavy-handed policing. Just last month, the NUJ spearheaded a joint industry-wide response from politicians, other editors and publishers to stand up and condemn the threats made to newspaper journalists and staff in Northern Ireland. They were threats from dissident loyalist groups, but there have also been threats from republican groups.

It brings home the range of challenges that many of our members are facing in the course of doing their day-to-day job. The level of polarisation and toxic public discourse on social media fans that flame. Maybe a task force could be set up to look at this and come up with better solutions and strategies for dealing with it. The Government have called for a new national committee on the safety of journalists and an associated action plan. The NUJ has been calling for the Government to engage on that and include the union and others in that work.

We have also been pushing for cross-party support for the International Federation of Journalists' draft UN convention on safety and the independence of journalists and media professionals. We have spoken to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee about that. What is happening here is happening all around the world to different degrees, and some much worse degrees than here. A joined-up approach and a particular focus on this issue are definitely needed and worth while.

The Chair: Michelle and Ian, thank you very much for giving us your time this afternoon, for sitting through the previous session and for the evidence you have contributed. We may well ask you to come back and amplify some of the points you have made. The discussion we had with Baroness Quin about media literacy is something we may ask you to submit further evidence on. Thank you very much for your time this afternoon. I hope you stay well.