

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: The future of Public Service Broadcasting - PSBs in the time of Covid-19, HC 156

Tuesday 16 June 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 16 June 2020.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Julian Knight (Chair); Kevin Brennan; Steve Brine; Philip Davies; Clive Efford; Julie Elliott; Damian Green; Damian Hinds.

Questions 1 – 105

Witnesses

[I](#): Clare Sumner CBE, Director of Policy, BBC; and James Purnell, Director of Radio and Education, BBC.

[II](#): Alex Mahon, Chief Executive, Channel 4.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Clare Sumner and James Purnell.

Q1 **Chair:** This is the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee. *[Inaudible]*—and James Purnell, Director of Radio and Education at the BBC, in our first panel. Our second panel will consist of Alex Mahon, who is the Chief Executive of Channel 4. There will be a short break between those two panels while we reset our remote guests.

I am going to start off with declarations of interest. I have to declare that I am a BBC pension holder. I worked at the BBC from 2002 to 2007. I understand from members there are no other interests to declare apart from Kevin Brennan.

Kevin Brennan: I have received hospitality and tickets to events from the BBC, as declared on the register of members' interests.

Chair: Thank you. My first question is to James. What is the current shortfall in cash due to Covid-19, and what savings will you have to make?

James Purnell: Our overall shortfall is £125 million but, if you will forgive me, are you happy for Clare to answer that question? She is best placed to do that from the corporate centre at the BBC.

Clare Sumner: Would you like me to explain further, Chair?

Chair: Yes, please.

Clare Sumner: As you know, during this Covid period the BBC has been agile in serving all our audiences. That has been underpinned by the licence fee, which is great.

Of course, like many other media organisations, we face costs for a number of reasons. Those are currently estimated at £125 million, so we have said that, in this period, we need to find those additional savings on top of the already very tough Charter challenge to find £800 million in the first five years, of which we are currently at £616 million. As you know, we have worked very hard to bring our overall overheads down to 5%.

You can see that the BBC has primarily been using the licence fee in this period to support, inform, educate and entertain in a way that our audiences have appreciated, but we have some further costs that have been incurred that we are working our way through.

Q2 **Chair:** Is £125 million the cost right now, or have you projected that forward in case of, for example, a second wave and further disruption?

Clare Sumner: It is our current estimated cost, but you are right that we are going to need to keep it under review and see how that plays out.

Q3 **Chair:** With the £190 million that you have to find as part of the five-



HOUSE OF COMMONS

year plan in terms of the Charter and then the £125 million, you are facing a total shortfall over the next 12 months of £315 million. Is that right?

Clare Sumner: In the way that we have done it, you are right that the £125 million is on top of our current savings plans. In effect, we have to find that money and then we have to find an additional £125 million. It is going to be a tough period for the BBC.

In terms of how we propose to find the £125 million, we are of course looking at programme savings. We are looking at property deferral, for example, on the Northern Ireland building. We are looking at tech and also some operational things we can do.

It is also fair to say, like many organisations, we are learning from this Covid period. We have been more agile. What can we learn about efficiency and effectiveness? That may also generate more savings.

Q4 **Chair:** What will this mean for viewers and listeners? Will we see, come the autumn, repeats? Obviously not *Fawlty Towers*, but will we see endless repeats as a result?

Clare Sumner: I hope not, but you are right to say that the schedule is going to be mixed. We have shown in this period that we can do great innovation even now. For example, we have *Talking Heads* coming soon. We have done *Springwatch* really innovatively with four presenters from different places. Coming up this Sunday is *The Luminaries*. We have had some great drama. We will have some great drama coming through in the autumn as well.

You will see a mixture of shows that we can innovate easily in this period and other things that will take more time. *EastEnders* is coming back into production at the end of this month, although we will run out fairly shortly, and we are going to introduce some old classics. We are doing a mixed schedule to take into account this crisis.

For us, it will particularly get thinner next year because of the way that production falls, but at the moment we are doing everything we can to innovate and then use some of the catalogue that will come through.

Q5 **Chair:** "Old classics" is repeats, isn't it?

Clare Sumner: In that sense, for *EastEnders*, coming up shortly we will be able to revisit Angie and Den and some of the classics.

Q6 **Chair:** All right, repeats. Mr Purnell, in terms of radio and the areas you are in charge of, what is your perspective on what is going to happen downstream from the potential losses you have seen?

James Purnell: Yes, we are going to have to have some repeats. The main thing driving that is the fact that it is very hard to film right now.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

On the children's television side, for example, we have had to cancel quite a significant proportion of the dramas and comedies we were planning to film over the summer. We are working very hard with the industry and, indeed, with DCMS to get television production back up and running as soon as possible.

On radio, some of that is a bit easier. We took *The Archers* off for a while, but we have been able to bring *The Archers* back. We have Glastonbury coming up.

I noticed that, when you were talking to the Director-General in the last session with the BBC, you and he were speculating about whether we might be getting down to a news-only service given lockdown. Our teams have done an incredible job of keeping the vast majority of our services up and running, even though we have 10% to 15% of our staff in the workplace. That is all now being done from home, as you will all have heard, from people's spare bedrooms with duvets and mattresses as soundproofing. On the radio, we have essentially maintained the vast majority of our services, sometimes slimmed down, sometimes with fewer DJs, but we are going to be bringing people the best service we can, including, for example, an amazing Glastonbury, which we will go through. It will be repeats, but it will be an incredible archive.

It is the same with the Proms. We are not going to have the Proms we had before, but we will have a series of the best from the archive, some of it chosen by our listeners. Then, if we can, in the last couple of weeks of the summer, we will have some performances in the Royal Albert Hall. It may not be the Proms that we have been used to, but it is the Proms that we need right now and the Proms that we can do right now.

Q7 Chair: There has been some talk about the future of BBC Four. Do you have any insight? Is it for the chop, yes or no?

James Purnell: No, and it is not speculation. It is in the annual plan that we put out a few weeks ago. We said there that we have a very strong commitment to serving all our audiences fairly.

We are the biggest provider of media for young people in this country. We reach eight out of 10 young people every week for about seven hours on average, but that has been going down and we want to invest more for young audiences. That means increasing investment in BBC Three. We have said that we want to try to double that to build on its fantastic creative record.

That does mean making savings elsewhere because our money is down by a quarter since 2010, but we are confident that we can keep BBC Four as a channel that will have some content from the archive. We will also be commissioning across BBC Four to BBC One and the iPlayer.

Q8 Chair: The revised deadline for the scrapping of the over-75s licence fee is fast approaching. Are you going to further delay that initiative until



October?

Clare Sumner: The board is keeping this decision under review, and we will be announcing our decision in July. Meanwhile, everybody is licensed until the end of July, so nobody needs to do anything at this point, but we are keeping that decision under review.

Q9 **Chair:** Will this decision be made at the start of July? Obviously, there will be a lot of uncertainty out there, so people need to have as much notice as possible.

Clare Sumner: There are two things. The board will take a decision on that in July. I cannot give you a specific date at the moment. We are saying that we will give everybody time to transition to a new system when we announce when we are implementing it, but I stress again that the board is keeping that under review.

Q10 **Chair:** Are there discussions going on, though, in terms of extending it to October?

Clare Sumner: At the moment, we are looking at how we could, for example, operate, as we have been doing for the under-75s, systems that take into account Covid in the long term. The board is, of course, considering this regularly and will take a final decision next month.

Q11 **Chair:** All right. In terms of news reporting—and I know Steve Brine will probably want to talk about some of these items as well—in the past the BBC would probably have been expected by some to be more about straight reporting during a sustained national crisis, but this time instances such as Emily Maitlis’s soliloquy on *Newsnight* regarding Dominic Cummings suggest a more opinionated style of journalism. Why do you think that is? Do you think it is something we need to accept as a consequence of more fevered times politically and a 24-hour news culture, and relating to social media? Is this the new norm, so to speak?

James Purnell: No. I would reject the premise in that there has been a huge amount of information-first news broadcasting in this period. We had 44 million people come to us, for example, in the week of 23 March, and 20 million came to hear the Prime Minister’s statement on 10 March.

If you listen across all our sequences, we have extended our programmes to make sure that we cover the public information because people are desperate to hear it. Last week, for example, after the bubble announcement, if you had been listening to *5 Live Breakfast*, you would have had Fergus Walsh and Nicky Campbell going through all the different questions from listeners about what it meant for them, their families, boyfriends, girlfriends, every single permutation. I would not accept your premise that there has been a shift overall in our journalism.

Clearly, the BBC has always had information and news, and then journalism and current affairs. *Newsnight* is a very important programme



HOUSE OF COMMONS

as part of that, and it has done some brilliant reporting in this period on, for example, care homes and comparisons with Sweden.

On the particular example you mention, the news leadership team felt that the introduction, which was supposed to be asking questions to set up the journalism later on in the programme—that is what we always do—came across as a set of statements from the BBC rather than a set of questions. These are very complex judgments we make the whole time. We do want our journalists to make judgments. You will want to hear from Faisal Islam and his views about the economic context, for example, and what the figures this morning mean. But in that particular example, I think we got the balance wrong and, therefore, we corrected it very quickly the next day. It was just about the intro at the top of the programme, which should have been questions but came across as statements.

Q12 Steve Brine: Picking up on that, for the record—because, with the greatest respect to *Newsnight*, it is not one of the most watched programmes in the land—this is what was said at the top of the programme, “Good evening. Dominic Cummings broke the rules. The country can see that. It’s shocked the Government cannot. The longer Ministers and the Prime Minister tell us he worked within them, the more angry the response to this scandal is likely to be. He made those who struggled to keep to the rules feel like fools and has allowed many more to assume they can now flout them. The Prime Minister knows this, but despite the resignation of one Minister, growing unease of his Back Benchers, a dramatic early warning from the polls and deep national disquiet, Boris Johnson has ignored it. Tonight, we consider what this blind loyalty tells us about the inner workings of No. 10. We do not expect to be joined by a Government Minister, but that won’t stop us asking the questions.”

James, what did you think when you heard that?

James Purnell: I did not hear it at the time. I saw the next day the reaction from the BBC News team, and we clarified very quickly that we did not think it was an appropriate introduction to the programme. That was done very quickly, as in fact the Chair of your Committee acknowledged at the time.

It is worth saying that we do thousands of hours of content, the vast majority of which do not result in clarifications of that kind. What is different about the BBC from, for example, social media or other sources of news out there is that we have a very clear set of processes so that people can raise concerns. When we get it wrong, we will correct that quickly because we are fully committed to impartiality and to accuracy. Whenever we make a mistake, we want to do our best to correct it as quickly as possible.

When Ofcom ask the public who they trust for information in this crisis, about 50% say the BBC; we come first. The next closest is official



HOUSE OF COMMONS

sources like the WHO or public health professionals at 16%. Some 70% of people have been using BBC News, and 60% think we are doing a good job, with the next highest being 30% for ITV. If you judge our broadcasting overall in terms of news, it is trusted and comprehensive. *Newsnight* is a programme doing fantastic journalism. On this particular instance, we clarified it.

I would also slightly push back on the idea that the audience is not significant. It is a significant audience, bigger than most national newspapers in this country. It is an important part of the BBC's news journalism.

Q13 **Steve Brine:** Look, having an audience bigger than most national newspapers is not a huge thing. Basically, you agree with Fran Unsworth that it felt like more of an op-ed page than an intro to an impartial broadcast programme, which is what she said.

Continuing on the point you made about trust, there is a report in *The Guardian* today. I do not know whether you have had a chance to see it yet, but it says, "Trust in the news has fallen over 20 percentage points since 2015", so in the last five years. This is from the Reuters Institute's annual digital news report. It says, "Even the most trusted brands like the BBC are seen by many as pushing or suppressing agendas, especially over polarising issues like Brexit."

Given what is going on on the other side of the Atlantic and given what this report says is going on here, do you think there is a problem if the public has trust issues with our news media, be it online, be it broadcast or be it in print?

James Purnell: We absolutely want to be trusted by the public, and we are the most trusted news organisation. It is an excellent report. It is very comprehensive. It goes across many countries around the world. I have had only a quick chance to look at it this morning and it is quite extensive, but its argument for why those figures have changed is about the polarisation of politics in many societies around the world and the fact that people who are more partisan have, in some cases, declining views of trust in public service broadcasters and news organisations.

I have a couple of little corrections that are worth putting in there. The biggest decline for the BBC was around people who identify as left, but the sample there was just 90 people, so we should not read too much into that. The overall figure was about 64% who trust BBC News compared with 15%.

But your overall point is right. In a political world that is much more polarised and very fast changing, it is a harder job than it would have been 20 or 30 years ago to cover news impartially and to have everybody hear their views appropriately heard and appropriately challenged. We are working on that, and we feel very committed to doing that. It is vital to have an impartial news space in the public sphere, not just us but Channel 4 and the other public service broadcasters.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

To pick up on the start of your question, yes, we would say that compared with America, having that impartial regulated public service broadcasting does mean that the public debate in the UK, although it can be fierce and not everything is right in the UK, is probably better than it is in the United States. That is to some extent down to public service broadcasting.

Q14 Steve Brine: Clare, as James rightly says, it is a tougher job than it has ever been, but it is a very well-remunerated job at the top end. We were talking about Emily Maitlis. She is paid some £260,000 from our constituents' pockets. But it is a tough job. Is it the BBC's intention still to cut 450 jobs within BBC News?

Clare Sumner: At the moment, following Covid, we have announced that we are putting those plans on pause because of the current situation we all face. Given what I said at the top, we are going to have to continue with those efficiency plans when the time is right, and we are going to continue to have to take some tough decisions. The budget pressure we are under now is increasing. As you know, we took over 24% in real terms since 2010, so the overall budgets for the BBC have been coming down for some period. This does mean we are going to have to take some tough decisions, but we have paused that, as you can understand, for the time being. Our news teams are doing an amazing job in very difficult circumstances.

Q15 Steve Brine: Is it an opportunity to promote from within? You have some talented people, whom people do not often see on air or hear on the radio and who, I am sure, cost a lot less than the top earners. Is it an opportunity for you to promote new people?

James Purnell: Yes, absolutely. We have let some of our key talent go over the last couple of years. Commercial radio has been a great success and has, therefore, had more significant budgets to approach some of our staff.

We always try to balance the fact that we want to have good talent on the BBC. If we are not a popular organisation, we cannot do all the things we have done during lockdown, for example, in terms of reaching the whole country. It is what our audiences expect. They want well-presented programmes.

But we also do not want to pay market rates, so when people get pay offers that we cannot match, then we say goodbye to them. That is something that has happened at the BBC the whole time, and people are developed from within the ranks. In fact, Emily Maitlis would be a good example of that, as indeed would be the whole of the *Today* line-up at the moment. Indeed, the vast majority of our news presenters do come from within the BBC. Occasionally, we are happy to bring people in from the outside, like Faisal Islam, who is an excellent addition to our editors as well.



Your basic point is right, which is that when the salary offer becomes too high, we do not match the commercial sector, but there are a lot of people who like coming to the BBC to work for less than they would get outside. They can do some of their best work at the BBC because of the range and quality of news we can offer.

- Q16 **Steve Brine:** James, you are a former politician and now somebody at the very top of the BBC. Talking of high-earning individuals, *Newsnight*—my obsession continuing—has had three footballers on in the space of a matter of days. What do you think about the way that footballers have inserted themselves into the national debate in recent days?

James Purnell: For us, it is a question to cover rather than to have a view on. Grant Shapps was on the *Today* programme this morning and welcomed Marcus Rashford's contribution. Clearly, he has done a fantastic fundraising effort, but I am not going to get drawn into the rights and wrongs of the campaign he is running. It is for us to challenge all views on that and to cover the debate rather than to be part of it.

- Q17 **Damian Hinds:** James, you mentioned earlier the need to further develop the market with younger viewers and listeners. In the supplementary evidence we received from the BBC after the last time we spoke to your colleagues, you included some figures of viewing habits that show a dramatic increase in Netflix and other streaming services, particularly for the 18 to 34 age group.

For some reason, there was no line on that graph for YouTube and I wondered if there was a reason for that omission. Had there been a line for YouTube, what would it have shown us?

James Purnell: I have not seen that graph, but I would guess it is because YouTube is not part of BARB, which is the measurement panel for audience ratings for broadcasting.

I can give you some figures on that if you want. YouTube is the biggest platform for 6 to 16-year-olds. It is pretty similar for 16 to 34-year-olds.

There is a bit of apples and pears when you are comparing YouTube, a platform that has content from millions and millions of people, with something like Netflix or the iPlayer, which are essentially making content and then putting it out on their own streaming service.

In terms of the overall picture, the BBC provides about 24% of the share of media consumption in this country. Netflix is 3%. I cannot remember the figure for YouTube, but I am happy to share that with the Committee.

- Q18 **Damian Hinds:** Is it true that for that 18 to 34 age group—I do not know if you have the numbers for 18 to 24s, but it would be even more so—the go-to place for many younger people is none of the terrestrial channels or their various iPlayer-like services but YouTube? I wonder for an organisation like the BBC where that comes on the scale between very serious and existential. How important is consumption of content and the



branding of it versus usage of a platform and the branding of it?

James Purnell: That is an excellent question. To restate, we are about a quarter of consumption in this country, and we are the biggest provider of content for young people—

Q19 **Damian Hinds:** I am talking about younger people specifically. We understand that for older folks traditional terrestrial television is front and centre, but that is not the case for these younger people, is it?

James Purnell: No, it is the case. For young people, we are still the biggest provider in the UK. But it does emphasise your point, which is that the BBC has been reforming and needs to keep on reforming to be able to serve content to audiences in the way they want it.

That is why we have had such a clear focus on iPlayer and having longer boxsets on there. We have now agreed that with Pact and are delighted about that. You will see this year that that means, broadly, the growth in iPlayer is making up for the loss of linear viewing that has been seen across the market. In my area, we have launched Sounds to offer content on demand on people's phones in the way that people expect. It is not just young people but is across all the age ranges.

In a way, the crisis and the lockdown have shown both sides of that argument. On the one hand, we have had a huge upsurge in people coming to the BBC, including a huge range of things for young people. We have 70% to 80% approval ratings for the content we are providing. We had the biggest-ever day on iPlayer with extraordinary viewing levels for content like *Normal People*, for example.

On the other hand, the crisis is also going to accelerate the changes that were happening in the market anyway. The changes in terms of viewing streaming services or listening to streaming services that might have happened over five years are now going to happen over one or two. The age range of people who use those services is also going to broaden dramatically. It is not just going to be an issue for young people. It is going to be across the whole of the age range.

That is why we have to be able to modernise our services, move our money around and switch spending, even though our money is falling, to serve young audiences better so that we are serving all our audiences fairly. We are also making sure that the content is experienced in a place like iPlayer or Sounds where, first, people know that the content comes from the BBC and from their licence fee and, secondly, we can make recommendations to them about British tastes and British content and give them the content they need, not just the content they might want.

Q20 **Damian Hinds:** That is really what I am trying to nail down, the extent to which you are platform agnostic. It sounds from what you are saying like you do care whether people are watching branded BBC content on YouTube or whether they are watching that same content on iPlayer. Would you say you are winning that battle at the moment?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

James Purnell: Yes, we do care. We use YouTube, for example, as a way of particularly marketing our content. Also, we have some CBeebies and CBBC content available on YouTube, but it is primarily there to reach audiences and to encourage them to come and get the best experience on iPlayer.

Obviously, iPlayer is something that we make very widely available in the market. Sounds is also available on Sky and Virgin. We have hundreds of versions of those services—Freeview, Freesat—so that we can provide that best experience to people on whatever device they are consuming.

It is also something we care about very much from a regulatory point of view, and it may be that you would like to hear from Clare on that topic.

Damian Hinds: I think we would.

Clare Sumner: I know the Committee is going to be coming on to look at public service broadcasting and, in effect, the changes that we need. One of the things that has to be reviewed is regulation for a linear era into more of a digital compact. You are absolutely right that when we look at the way services and VOD services are working, having that direct relationship with our audiences, making sure we get the data back so we can keep improving what we are doing and issues like attribution will be important as we go into the next 10 years. In terms of issues we have discussed before with the Committee, like prominence, it goes beyond video on demand to recognising that we are in a new ecosystem. How does the regulation change around that, in effect, to get PSBs surviving and thriving in this period?

In this particular crisis, we have seen that millions of people—26 million was the peak for TV and regional news, for example—still come to linear services, but we are also acutely aware that we need to modernise that framework and modernise that compact. That will go to the heart of some of the questions you are rightly asking.

Q21 **Damian Hinds:** On education, and Bitesize in particular, during this crisis, what can you tell us about the take-up of Bitesize content compared with normal times by age group? How much of that content is on the telly versus online? Is there, therefore, more you could do to bridge the digital divide, given that there is a tonne of educational material on the internet but only a limited number of people can put things on television? I am sorry to put three questions together.

James Purnell: That is a good set of questions. To finish the thought on the importance of where content is discovered, there has been a great example in this crisis around coronavirus. Both Amazon and Google wanted to scrape our news to offer information about coronavirus to people who have smart speakers. We were worried that if we did not have the ability to get questions from the public and then did not have the ability to choose ourselves what information to offer up, it could undermine our news values and our reputation for impartiality and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

accuracy. We tried to work with them to have a way within their systems of us having that editorial oversight. We were not able to do that for whatever reason, so we have piloted something called Corona Bot, which is doing exactly that on Facebook and Facebook Messenger.

That shows an important point for your review. We now have smart speakers in many homes and they are going to be in far more homes. There is a question about whether we are happy with the biggest organisations in the world, big tech companies with their execs essentially in the States, buying a monopoly in people's kitchens and living rooms. It is worth thinking about whether there should be some regulation of those smart speakers so that there is a choice of assistance for people. If they want to say, "Hey, Beeb, can you", and then ask us a question about coronavirus, for example, they can do that easily on their device whoever has made it. We do not want to make devices but we do want to have that mixture of editorial curation and content making.

In terms of your questions, the service we have done is a huge credit to the team. In just four weeks after lockdown, they came up with a whole new education service, despite the fact that the vast majority of them were in lockdown as well. It has been offering a mixture of TV and online. My fundamental answer to your question is that the sweet spot for us is always when we have the stations and the online working together. Here we have 150 lessons online every week. That has happened over 14 weeks. There are a huge number of lessons, one new one on English and maths for each year group every day, but then also one on other subjects like geography or art or whatever. That is a large amount of content, so the shop window for that is the Bitesize daily lessons we have been doing, another 10 hours of content filmed since lockdown, using social distancing. Those then act as a way of bringing people into the content and then directing them to the right lessons for them. Different children will be at different stages of their learning.

In terms of the figures, we have been getting about 4 million people a week coming to the offer overall. Normally, the people we would have at this time of year would be for GCSE revision. That has gone, but it is two or three times bigger than it would have been at this time last year. We have had 1 million to 2 million views of that content on the iPlayer. The majority of the consumption is online, but the two of them work together.

Your point about children who do not have access to the internet is absolutely right. We have tried to address that by putting the lessons on the Red Button, but the audience levels are so low that they are not even recording any audience on the system. I am not sure that for young people putting it on the telly is going to be the right answer. Probably a more fertile area is to work with DfE, with schools and with Parliament to work out how we can get online access as high as possible for children who do not have it. One way of doing that may be to go to schools. Even when some classes cannot return, potentially it is possible for children to come back to a computer lab and do socially distanced learning that way.



Q22 **Damian Hinds:** On a related subject, what analysis have you made on the Turn on the Subtitles campaign? What proportion of your content does not have subtitles available?

James Purnell: We have been talking to the campaign about that. About 30% of our viewing happens with subtitles turned on.

It is an interesting one. We are open-minded about it. It is a slightly tricky one for us because we are not experts on the data. The campaign members themselves are strongly convinced that the data shows there is a benefit from turning on subtitles. Having looked at that evidence, we do see that, but a lot of it is correlation rather than a fully-fledged test where you could see causation between the two. I know there are some concerns from phonics experts about whether subtitles, first, might distract people from the way children start to learn to read by putting sounds together and then blending and, secondly, might make people think that this is an alternative to all the help with reading and phonics.

In an ideal world, we would be keen to do a pilot, but whether we can do that and whether we have the space to do it in terms of the work that all our technology teams need to do is something we still need to bottom out. The headline is that we will not be taking up the campaign wholesale, but we would love to find some way of doing some kind of robust experiment to establish whether there is causation and a benefit between the two.

Q23 **Damian Hinds:** I know you have some under-5s content on the edges of Bitesize, but I believe that, pre-Covid, you were also working on a much more ambitious plan for early language and literacy analogous to the DfE's Hungry Little Minds campaign. Can you give us an update on that and when we can expect to see it come to fruition?

James Purnell: Yes, we met when you were in your previous role and discussed that. There was very much a shared set of goals around the two campaigns.

Clearly, there is lots of evidence now from experts that we can do a huge amount for kids' literacy when they are in the womb and before they start speaking. As you will know, one in four children is reaching school without basic levels of literacy. That means being able to form sentences and answer and understand questions. In some areas it is one in three.

We have put together probably our most ambitious campaign ever, working with a large range of public and voluntary organisations, to launch what we are calling the Tiny Happy People campaign, which is going to try to halve that gap over the next 10 years. It is a mixture of content for parents to use—we have put up 450 bits of content—and then some local hubs. We will work in deprived areas where there are the biggest problems and work with midwives, health visitors, teachers, parents, grandparents and voluntary organisations to get the message out that you should start talking to your kids. There are various games



HOUSE OF COMMONS

you can play and a whole bunch of things you can do to get your kids literate by the time they get to school.

We have launched it. Unfortunately, it was literally the week before the lockdown so we had to cancel the launch itself, but we will be coming back to it. It is a long-term campaign, so we are strongly committed to it.

Q24 Kevin Brennan: James, returning for a moment to the controversy about the *Newsnight* introduction on 26 May, did anyone from the UK Government contact the BBC about that?

James Purnell: No, I do not think they did. There is a letter on its way to you to confirm that.

Q25 Kevin Brennan: I did receive a letter—you are right—from Tony Hall. This was a matter that was raised with me by constituents who are concerned about Government pressure on the BBC. In the context of the current pressure that is on the BBC from the UK Government on a variety of issues, there are people out there who are concerned about it.

When I wrote to Tony Hall and asked him that, he said in his answer, "I am very happy to be clear. The decision to make a statement was made by the Director of News, who received no communication from any Government representative."

That was not the question I asked. The question I asked was whether the BBC had had any representations from anybody within the UK Government, not whether Fran Unsworth directly and personally had been contacted by anybody, as she is the one who made the decision. I totally accept she made the decision without that, but are you absolutely sure that nobody from the UK Government contacted the BBC to complain about the *Newsnight* introduction?

James Purnell: I know what happened. We have a 9 o'clock meeting every day where we look through the agenda for the day and what happened the previous day. I know that the news teams there discussed it and came to quite a quick view. As I say, *Newsnight* has done some brilliant journalism—

Q26 Kevin Brennan: I know that, James, but I am not asking that. I am asking you if you are absolutely sure that nobody from the UK Government contacted the BBC to complain about that introduction. I accept that is what your answer was in a—

James Purnell: It is an impossible question to answer, with respect, and—

Q27 Kevin Brennan: So, to the best of your knowledge, you are not aware that anybody from the UK Government—

James Purnell: To the best of my knowledge, yes. To the best of my knowledge, that is right. To reassure you, the reason I was explaining the process is that we ask ourselves that the whole time and we get comments from political parties the whole time and—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q28 **Kevin Brennan:** I know, and I am quite interested in that. I accept that that is part of what happens in the BBC, and we have all from time to time made contact with the BBC about various things. We probably should do it a lot less than we do.

I am interested in transparency about it when the Government are, quite frankly, exerting a lot of pressure on the BBC on the over-75 licences, on the decriminalisation of non-payment of the licence fee. Certainly at the beginning of this Parliament, there seemed to be an agenda within the Government to cut the BBC down to size and put it in its place, if not to end the licence fee and possibly privatise element, et cetera. In the context of that agenda, it is important to know with transparency whether or not the UK Government are putting pressure on the BBC about editorial things.

My question is not whether, from time to time, politicians do that or should do it. It is whether you are completely transparent when that happens.

James Purnell: We are very experienced about that, and I think that is true of UK politicians as well. We have a very good settlement on that. As you say, politicians have their views about our coverage, and we treat those in one particular box, one part of our brain; and then we have debates about the future of the BBC and the licence fee, and we do that in a different part of our brain. You are right, it is important.

That is why we have the Charter review process in this country where the Charter is set for 10 years and the licence fee every five years. We get that balance between the fact that there must be public accountability of the BBC for what we do and public involvement in shaping whether the Charter gets renewed, but that is a separate process from coverage of politics and day-to-day rows about whether we have the coverage right.

Q29 **Kevin Brennan:** Just to seal this off, if the UK Government contact the BBC to complain about a particular piece of editorial content, will you be open with us and with the public that the Government have contacted you and there will not be any back-channelling and not answering the question when somebody asks if the Government contacted you?

James Purnell: I honestly do not know what that would mean. Do you think we would have to have a question—

Q30 **Kevin Brennan:** If you got a phone call from No. 10 saying, “Emily Maitlis was out of order last night,” will you tell us if we ask you? My question was quite a simple one. Did anybody from the UK Government contact the BBC regarding the *Newsnight* episode in question, and what representations did they make? The answer was that Fran Unsworth had not been contacted. That is my point.

You would have done the same when you were a politician as I would do, which is to say I can see an answer that does not fully answer my question when I read one. My question was simply whether anyone



HOUSE OF COMMONS

contacted the BBC, not whether anyone contacted Fran Unsworth in particular.

James Purnell: As far as I am aware they did not, and the answer is given in good faith. Whenever we are asked questions like that, we do answer them honestly and fully.

Q31 **Kevin Brennan:** That is helpful to know. I am glad to know that. If there is any further clarification, please let us know after the Committee.

On the issue of the licence fee and the over-75s, Clare, if a decision were taken to extend the concession beyond the current deadline, how much every month would it cost the BBC to do that?

Clare Sumner: The total we estimated is about £745 million for a year. It costs in the region of £35 million per month of deferral.

Q32 **Kevin Brennan:** With all the financial issues that the Chair raised at the outset of the Committee, if a decision were taken by the Government at the end of this review to proceed with the policy of decriminalising the licence fee, what is your estimate of the budgetary cost that would be added to the issues you already have as a result of that?

Clare Sumner: We spoke about this at the Committee last time. We estimate that, over a five-year period, it would be an additional £1 billion of costs. We think those figures are at least £200 million a year in the time that we had to work through the decriminalisation consultation. As I have said to this Committee before, the effects of decriminalisation would be very serious on the licence fee model. It would erode the model. It would put us under even more financial pressure and, rather ironically, not necessarily protect the system for the majority of people who do pay. As you know, we have very low evasion rates in this country. The current system linked to the model works effectively, so we could spend a lot of time and effort putting the BBC and our audiences in a worse position.

Q33 **Kevin Brennan:** Could I also ask about something we talked about last time, which is the Six Nations rugby coverage and keeping it on free-to-air television? I sense from the evidence we had recently from the chair of the Rugby Football Union of England that, having tacked back towards keeping it on free-to-air, they may be looking for money again rather than necessarily prominence on free-to-air. Can you give us an update on any progress or what is happening with those discussions?

Clare Sumner: Yes, of course. The only update I can give you is a slightly frustrating one. Again, that is something that has been affected by Covid and is on pause at the moment. As you know, the universality of Six Nations on free-to-air brings together all the nations in healthy competition. At the moment, on the Premier League and on the FA Cup, we are beginning to show the importance of free-to-air sport. We want to be in a position where we can show these great games because this is an important part, but the current discussions are on pause and obviously we can update the Committee when they continue.



Q34 **Chair:** To follow up on Kevin's question concerning decriminalisation, you were very forthright in front of the Committee last time in terms of your thoughts about the idea of an enhanced civil fines regime instead of decriminalisation. Given you have the figure of over £200 million if decriminalisation takes place, have you done any modelling whatsoever in the organisation in terms of the financial hit if we were to move to a system of enhanced civil fines rather than criminal sanction?

Clare Sumner: Yes, that is part of the modelling I was describing. When we look particularly at the civil penalty model and increasing the fine, it is around £200 million per year in terms of how much it would cost because of increased evasion and lack of certainty within the system. There are some other additional things we would have to factor in.

Q35 **Chair:** I am a bit confused. You are saying essentially that an enhanced civil penalty would make absolutely no difference and, therefore, it would not mean it would be less. My thinking would be that if you have a figure of, say, £200 million plus, part of that would be offset if you went to a system of enhanced civil penalties.

Clare Sumner: The reason it does not, as we set out in our response, is because we think that civil penalties would increase the evasion rate. From memory, every 1% increase in evasion costs the BBC around £40 million. There are huge operational costs of moving from one system to another. It would mean a fundamental change to the way we operate. Also, when you have enhanced civil penalties, they are fixed. As we talked about at the Committee last time, potentially it is going to be less fair, particularly to vulnerable groups, than the current system. That is why it does not lead to potential reductions.

We had to model those figures based on the information we had from the Government, which was very thin. They were just consulting on a high level of principle.

Q36 **Chair:** Given there is a distinct possibility that that may be what they move to or ask you to move to, should you not have done that modelling? Should you not have seen exactly how much of that £200 million would not be lost if you moved to enhanced civil penalties? I am sure that would be sensible, wouldn't it?

Clare Sumner: To clarify, I note your word "enhanced", but we think that a civil penalty system would cost us in the region of £200 million a year. That is what it would cost because of the reasons I have just explained. Because we would have an increased evasion rate and an increase in operational costs, those would be the costs to the BBC. There would also be additional costs to the Government.

We have done that modelling in our response, and I am happy to send you the element that explains it. We went into it in quite a lot of detail. We worked with an independent organisation called Harris Interactive, which did some behavioural analysis for us. We did some modelling based



HOUSE OF COMMONS

on the work we had done for the Perry Review, which showed similar outcomes.

Q37 **Chair:** The modelling you have, though, is after the Perry Review, isn't it? The Perry Review is now six years old.

Clare Sumner: We updated it from the Perry Review.

Chair: Fine. I would be really interested to see that.

Q38 **Steve Brine:** Gary Lineker is a very well-known figure and a great hero for many, but he seems to have opinions on lots of things these days. I was wondering what sort of dismay you had when he suggested back in January that the licence fee should become a voluntary charge. He said it was the broadcaster's "fundamental problem." He said, "You're forced to pay it if you want a TV, and therefore it's a tax." What on earth was he thinking?

Clare Sumner: He subsequently went on to clarify his remarks a little, but with Gary that is perhaps his view. You will not be surprised to know that the BBC's view and my view is very different. That is because having a universal licence fee model is what has supported the BBC, and during Covid and other periods we have shown why that makes so much difference. It is why we have been able to do all we have done in this period, and also will do going forward, to support particularly the creative industries in coming back. If anything, the current crisis has emphasised the importance of our funding model. If it was a voluntary charge, it would be a very different type of BBC and we would be having a very different type of communication.

Q39 **Steve Brine:** I remember being a Minister. When I used to say something that was not particularly on message, I would often be encouraged to clarify something by No. 10. Did the BBC encourage Gary Lineker to clarify his position?

Clare Sumner: Not as far as I know. It is perfectly fair, and no doubt we will debate with the Committee and others the future of the licence fee funding model at the right time. It stays until 2027. I recognise what you said but, as far as I know, we did not.

Q40 **Philip Davies:** James Purnell, you were trying to convey the impression that the BBC is a beacon of impartiality and all the rest of it. What is the role of Richard Sambrook in this organisation, which already has the highest standards of impartiality?

James Purnell: He was a senior figure in news, but he left some time ago and is now at the Cardiff School of Journalism. I think you are referring to a review he is doing into social media, but I am sure you are going to go on to talk about some tweets that he put out while he was not working for the BBC.

Q41 **Philip Davies:** Yes, he is your adviser on impartiality and all the rest of it, yet when you go through his tweets: "I'm strongly remain", two years



HOUSE OF COMMONS

after the referendum; Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are “post-truth politicians”; “More Boris lies—now a man of zero integrity”; “Britain is being led to an epic act of national self-harm over Brexit”; and that Brexit is not the “will of the British people”.

Is this really the man that the BBC wants to turn towards to try to deal with the issue that many people, particularly in many northern areas, think the BBC has a metropolitan, London-centric, pro-Remain view of the world? Is he really the answer to that particular problem?

James Purnell: He is not advising us on impartiality. As far as I know, he is doing a review into social media and the very point that in some ways you are alluding to. Clearly, people who work at the BBC have a whole range of views. You want people to come into the organisation who are engaged and have views. When you come into the organisation and you work here, you leave those views at the door. We have a strong culture and strong working practices to make sure that we leave those views at the door and, when we are working for the BBC, we do so very much within the editorial guidelines.

People then leave to go and work in all sorts of ways and then you do find out their views. There is a range of members of this Committee who have worked for the BBC. We have had Conservative campaigns led by someone who worked for the BBC, Paul Lambert, who is sadly recently deceased. He worked for UKIP. People have gone to work for the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats. You do not just want to have people at the BBC who do not have any views at all. You want to have a strong culture so that we are impartial in our journalism. That is true of Richard as of many other people.

Q42 **Philip Davies:** That is just the problem, isn't it? The problem is that the BBC does not have people with a range of views. They all seem to have a typically north London, metropolitan, pro-Remain view of the world. That is largely the cultural problem within the BBC. It is therefore a million miles away from people's views in Yorkshire, Norfolk, Lincolnshire and wherever. That is the problem. Do you accept that the BBC has a problem with that, even if it is only a perception? Do you not accept there is a perception problem, if nothing else?

James Purnell: I cannot control people's perceptions, but what we are doing is making sure that we have a BBC that is not metropolitan in that way. When I worked here in the 1990s, we were overwhelmingly based in London. We now have more than half of our team outside of London. We make programmes across the whole of the UK. We have recently launched a Scotland channel. We have a fantastic, world-beating drama department and now industry in Wales. We have local radio serving the whole country. In this crisis, for example, all our local radio stations have been working on their Make a Difference campaigns to make sure that we work with people in all those places. We have had over 600,000 contacts and we are helping people through local radio. Regional news, which is



our most popular programme on BBC One, reaches 8 million and sometimes 9 million people a week.

I do not recognise your characterisation. A Martian looking at the BBC would see that this is an organisation for the whole UK. It is probably the most UK-wide organisation of any that we have in this country, and we take that very seriously. We have a strong diversity of views within the BBC, as is illustrated by the members of this Committee and indeed by the list of alumni I mentioned, two of whom either ran or were involved in campaigns that were very much not what you just described.

Q43 Philip Davies: Over the last two weeks, we have seen some appalling scenes in London in particular, but in other cities as well, of violent disorder. Can you explain why the weekend just gone was described by the BBC as, "Violent London protests, which led to six police officers being injured," yet the previous week's activities were described as, "Largely peaceful protests, which led to 62 police officers being injured"?

James Purnell: Yes, I can. The quote about being "largely peaceful" was from the police. With all these protests and demonstrations, there is an editorial challenge. Of course, the disruption and the violence is newsworthy and we have to reflect that, but it is also true that, whether here or in America, the vast majority of people going on that demonstration did not get involved in violence. In a headline, we try to capture both of those things. When you then go and listen to the programme, or if you watched the brilliant *Panorama* that Clive Myrie did last night, you get more detail and context, and you get to explore the tension between those two aspects of the story.

It is also worth saying that the demonstrations this weekend involved far fewer people, whereas the ones before had thousands or maybe tens of thousands of people demonstrating. The numbers are a bit misleading. It is really about the proportion.

We are always trying to get that right. If we focus only on the minority of violent incidents, we distort the facts. If we focus only on the peaceful demonstrations, we also distort the facts. We try to tell the whole story.

Q44 Philip Davies: Why was there a discrepancy in this case? On that basis, virtually every protest would be largely peaceful. Maybe even during World War Two relationships between the UK and Germany were largely peaceful on that basis. If that is going to be the criteria for largely peaceful, presumably every demonstration would be described as largely peaceful. Why did you pick out only that one?

James Purnell: There was a far smaller number of people involved in the demonstration at the weekend. It was our editorial judgment, after looking at it, that that was the right way of characterising it. It is a judgment that we make in each case. It is nothing to do with politics. It is just to do with the different nature of the events on successive weekends.

Q45 Philip Davies: Steve Brine mentioned Emily Maitlis. What worries me



HOUSE OF COMMONS

about Emily Maitlis's oration is that it was not just on the wrong side of impartiality. It was an absolutely blatant statement of what she believed and the BBC believed. There was not the remotest amount of impartiality in it.

How does a culture develop at the BBC that allows people to think it is perfectly acceptable to do that in the first place? Surely, if the BBC was such a beacon of impartiality, no one would have even thought about doing something like that in the first place. Doesn't it go to show that there is a problem at the heart of the culture of the BBC that allows that to happen in the first place?

James Purnell: Not at all. We have gone through that territory with Mr Brine, and we can go through it again if you want. Because we thought those things should have been done as questions, which is the typical way they would be done in the set-up to a programme, we corrected it very quickly.

We make thousands of hours of news. We have brilliant journalists like Emily Maitlis and Laura Kuenssberg making judgments like that the whole time. There is a very small number of times that we get it wrong. We correct it quickly and we put that out. We also have a regulatory system to do that.

In the end, it is not for us to judge; it is for the public to judge. When you look, for example, at this lockdown crisis, 50% of the public have trusted the BBC for their news on Covid. The next highest is 16%, which is organisations like the WHO and the NHS. When you ask people whether they trust BBC News, it is normally between 60% and 70%.

We do not believe in a particular set of political views as an organisation, which I think is what you were trying to say. We do not. It is our role here to reflect that debate and challenge people, whatever their point of view may be, and to do so impartially and with due accuracy.

Q46 **Philip Davies:** Let me ask it this way, then. Do you think that Emily Maitlis's soliloquy on *Newsnight* was just on the wrong side of impartiality or a long way away from being impartial? What is your view? Was it absolutely blatant, as I seem to think it was, or did it just fall on the wrong side?

James Purnell: I am not going to give a running commentary on that particular topic, and we have gone over it quite a lot in this Committee. We corrected it very quickly, and we did so because we thought something had not been right with what had been put at the top of the programme. If you think of those things as questions rather than statements, which is how I think they were intended, that would be quite different. The way to judge that programme, I think, is as a whole and looking at the journalism. Emily and the team on *Newsnight* have done some brilliant journalism over the course of this crisis.

Q47 **Philip Davies:** It would be helpful for BBC journalists to know, wouldn't



it, if they are thinking about what to do? They want senior people to give them a steer so they know whether that was just a bit wrong or very wrong. I am sure they would like to have a steer from senior BBC people for future reference.

James Purnell: I am sure there have been many conversations about this item, as there are about all items on the BBC. As I explained to Mr Brennan, every morning BBC News has a very self-searching review of what they did the day before and what they are going to do that day. As many of your colleagues on this Committee can testify, that culture is extremely candid and extremely straightforward. I do not think there is any lack of discussion of editorial judgments at BBC News. That is a very strong part of the culture.

Q48 **Philip Davies:** Steve Anderson, who is a former executive producer of *Question Time* and a former editor of *BBC Six o'Clock News*, *Newsnight* and *Panorama*, said on the *Blue Collar Conversations* podcast that the media has not been well equipped to deal with coronavirus, that the public resents the media covering the story as if it is another political story and that they do not want to hear an announcement being attacked just because it is a Government announcement, as seems to be the case. What would you say to those criticisms that Steve Anderson has made?

James Purnell: We listen to all criticism. That is a big part of our culture. It is not what the research that Ofcom carried out, for example, is saying. It is finding that the BBC is the most trusted organisation on this topic but also that public service broadcasting overall has been one of the main places that people go to for information.

I do not think it is true that we attack every single announcement. That is not our job. Our job is to question and to challenge. We have been playing a very important role in terms of providing wider information. People turn to us in this period, 44 million coming to BBC News in that first week of 23 March. Our audiences for *BBC Six o'Clock News* and the *BBC News at Ten* have doubled compared with normal. We are getting 8 million or 9 million people coming to our regional programme at 6.30. We have had 640,000 contacts from our local news. When you ask people what they think about the news, it is rated 70%, 75%, 80% by the public when we ask them across a wide range of class and age.

We listen to all views, but that is not the information that we are getting back from research from Ofcom and from other sources. In fact, I would say that what this crisis has shown is the ability of public service broadcasting to turn on a sixpence, despite the fact that only 10% of our team is in our workplaces, and offer a service that is not the kind of nightwatchman service that was being talked about the last time this Committee met, but is basically a service which has pretty much replicated everything we had before the shutdown and, on top of that, provided a range of extra programmes—*Fallout* on BBC Radio 4; the daily call on Radio 5 Live; the coverage of all the nations' individual briefings from their First Ministers, as well as widespread coverage of the briefings



HOUSE OF COMMONS

from No. 10 every day—that are reaching the vast majority of people in this country. It is because in a public service organisation like ours, in which we combine that commitment to serving the public with a dedication to reform, that we have been able to do that so effectively.

If we had not reformed the BBC to modernise iPlayer, to launch Sounds, to have a news online service that exploits the best of modern technology, we would not have been able to reach the public in that way and the UK would not have had the ability to get that information out to people.

Equally, it is important to challenge those questions. That is how you get to better answers. It is important to have journalism that is without fear or favour and which goes out and works out when things are not as they have been promised, when things are not as they have said, when there is a different story, when there are scandals, because that is how society improves. It is key part of the value of journalism in this country. We have been able to do that precisely because we are a public service, precisely because we are publicly funded, and precisely because all that we care about is serving the public and serving everyone in this country regardless of their background, circumstances, or where they live.

Q49 Julie Elliott: Good morning, Clare and James. I want to move on to regional coverage, about which I have asked questions of the BBC on many occasions in this Committee. It is quite interesting, Clare, that in your opening remarks you talked about being agile in serving all our audiences. I have to say I slightly disagree with you. When this crisis happened earlier in the year, news and current affairs stopped in the regions of England. It carried on in the nations, but it stopped in the regions. I think what has happened is a homogenisation of English political coverage.

In the north-east, where I am, some 300 miles from London, live recording stopped straightaway. *Inside Out*, the award-winning current affairs programme, stopped—in fact, it was banned from filming—and there have been no regional *Sunday Politics* programmes.

If we look at *Inside Out*, it costs half of what a network half hour costs. It costs a lot less for a half hour. It has won all sorts of awards. It often feeds into national news stories. Why is it still not able to film?

James Purnell: It is a very important point. If you look at all the services I run, or if you look at other TV or news services, the same is true. We have had to streamline our services. With 10% of our teams in work, we have not been able to maintain the same level of content. We have worked incredibly hard to maintain as much as we can, but there are some shows we just have not been able to maintain. In some cases, that is because we do not have as many studios as we had before. Sometimes we have had only one studio working, so doing more than one—

Q50 Julie Elliott: Can I stop you there, James? I am very much talking about



HOUSE OF COMMONS

my experience in the north-east. This impacts on all English regions, but in the north-east the studios are half empty in Newcastle. There is not a capacity issue in Newcastle, where the BBC is based in the north-east, so that is not an argument for the north-east.

James Purnell: I don't know about the example in the north-east in terms of studios. I do know that, across the whole of the BBC, there is a difference between having a studio empty and it being staffed to be used. The issue that we have is that we have to be very thoughtful about how many studio managers we ask to go into work and, therefore, we have only been able to run a smaller number of services and studios. With respect, the fact that we have been able to maintain so many of our services is a remarkable thing. If you look, for example, at regional news, it is the biggest programme on BBC One—

Julie Elliott: It absolutely is, but I want to concentrate—

James Purnell: —and the journalism which you are talking about, it is not that we have stopped that journalism; it is that we have made sure that it is appearing in our biggest programmes while we are not able to have exactly the same range of regional—

Julie Elliott: So if I can just—

James Purnell: Just to finish the point, it is not true that that has only been done for regional programmes. If you look at the news bulletins, we have—

Q51 **Julie Elliott:** Yes, but I want to focus on current affairs and politics, which is simply not being covered on a regional basis in the north-east at the minute.

Since the restrictions have started to be lifted a little bit, and more filming is happening, there are more things happening across the piece, but current affairs have still not been allowed—referring to *Inside Out*—to film or follow stories or anything like that. Is that going to change?

James Purnell: We are going to have to make all these decisions after the lockdown.

Q52 **Julie Elliott:** During the lockdown there is no intention of changing any coverage of current affairs?

James Purnell: No, we are providing coverage of current affairs.

Julie Elliott: No, in terms of regional coverage.

James Purnell: We are doing regional coverage through the 6.30 news. We are doing it through all our local radio stations. Your question is premised on the idea that this is singling out regional current affairs. That is simply not true. In terms of our radio services, we have had to strip out a huge amount of our coverage. We have gotten rid of 5 Live's news coverage overnight. We have simplified all our bulletins. We used to have separate bulletins for Radios 2, 3, 4 and 5.



Q53 **Julie Elliott:** If we go back to what I want you to answer questions on, I want you to answer questions on regional current affairs and political coverage. Since the stopping of the Sunday regional programme and *Inside Out*, there has not been a single debate on BBC local news between north-east politicians. Do you think that is good coverage?

James Purnell: I think you are being slightly unfair to our teams.

Julie Elliott: There has not been a single debate.

James Purnell: If I can maybe answer the question, we have gone from a situation in which we had everybody able to go into work to one where now 10% of our staff are going into work, often having to take real precautions with their health, and I would say doing so extremely bravely. The fact that we have been able to maintain a very successful, wide-ranging, regional news coverage in terms of the 6.30 news, the biggest one that we have on BBC One, the fact that we have been able to maintain our local news coverage through local radio, the fact that those regional news reporters have been appearing on *Today* and through all of our journalism, I think it is remarkable that the BBC has been able to maintain the services that it can. You are talking as if there has been no challenge to the delivery of our services over this period. We are in the middle of a pandemic. We have 10% of our staffing—

Julie Elliott: We absolutely are.

James Purnell: —compared with where we would normally be, and I think what would be a fairer assessment of it is that it is a remarkable thing that we have been able to maintain what we have.

Q54 **Julie Elliott:** Well, except there has not been a single debate between north-east politicians on local news during this pandemic, which I think is unacceptable. If you talk to politicians from the region, or from any region in the country where that would be the case, I do not think anybody would view that as acceptable.

One of my former colleagues—and many other letters have gone into the BBC on this, as well as from me—has had a response in terms of *Sunday Politics* from Helen Thomas. She had a response when she raised all the issues. Helen talks about England having a single edition and people feeding into it. She also talks about the studios having to employ social distancing and about the capacity in many of our buildings. This is a former north-east politician writing particularly about the north-east, where the building in Newcastle is half empty. The *Sunday Politics* programme could be filmed after the news, quite easily, with the same people. You would need one producer. It says, "Problems with test and trace adds further complexity and risk." With the size of the building in Newcastle, for test and trace to be an issue, you would have to have somebody within two metres of somebody for 15 minutes. That simply would never happen. Do you think that is an acceptable response, where factually everything in this letter that I have just quoted is simply not true in relation to the north-east?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

James Purnell: I think you are being quite unfair, I'm afraid.

Julie Elliott: It is absolutely true, what I am saying.

James Purnell: If you could let me answer, we have to take responsibility for the health and safety of our teams and it has nothing to do with the size of the buildings. It is to do with what is safe in terms of people walking around the building and in terms of social contact. The fact that we have been having so many of our studio managers, reporters and producers being prepared to go into work and to keep our programmes running in the way they have is, frankly, a remarkable achievement that should be being welcomed.

Of course we want to do more, and I am sure that the teams in the north-east will look at the points you are raising about having debates, but we are not going to say that we are going to make our teams go in or have them work in a way that is unsafe.

Julie Elliott: They are already in there.

James Purnell: It is not to do with whether we have a studio or whether we have a big building; it is to do with the two-metre rule and the advice we are getting in terms of health and safety, which we look at extremely carefully. Even with the changes that we have had recently, that only allows us to go up to roughly 15% of our teams going into work.

As you can see, that is a huge restriction on our ability to do programmes. The fact that we have been able to have 600,000 contacts from people in terms of local news, our Make a Difference campaign, the biggest programme on BBC One being regional news, regional journalism happening through all our main programmes, and some extremely successful investigations being done through those programmes is something that I would hope you would welcome rather than criticise.

Q55 **Julie Elliott:** I am not diminishing the standard of BBC regional news. I am a big fan of BBC regional news. The issue here is the political coverage, which has absolutely been lacking during this crisis, in the north-east and in the English regions. I would very much like a response from your organisation about the issues I have raised in terms of space and capacity. We know there have been health and safety assessments within the Newcastle building. The people who would do the programmes are going into work, so they are in the building, so they could do them. I would like a response on that.

However, moving on, Helen also says, "We are learning lessons about how we can work differently following the coronavirus pandemic." My worry with that is that we are all learning lessons about how work is going to be completely different for everybody as we move out of the pandemic. However, I would hate that to mean that there was no regional political programming, because that would not be, going back to what Clare said, agile in serving all of our audiences at all and it certainly would not be serving the regions of the country.



One of the things that concerns me is how you will serve local audiences, moving out. *The Andrew Marr Show* is being moved from 10 am to 11 am. It is already on the *Radio Times* programming, where you can see that. It is publicly available. There is no mention of Sunday regional programmes, or of Sunderland programmes, for that matter. Is that a coincidence or an omission? Has the decision already been taken to stop Sunday regional political programmes?

James Purnell: There is quite a lot in that question, so I will try to answer it overall. Yes, we are strongly committed to local and regional journalism.

Julie Elliott: Political programmes.

James Purnell: Could I just try to answer the question? I have not been able to answer it.

Q56 **Julie Elliott:** Could you answer the question in relation to regional political programmes? I am not asking about the news. I am not asking about anything else. I am asking about regional political programmes.

James Purnell: Yes, and I am trying to answer your question but, so far, I have not been able to get a full answer out. It is a bit like being on the *Today* programme. It is nice to have the chat switched around.

We said in our annual plan that we want to do more outside of London and the south-east in terms of our local and regional services, and that includes our journalism and political programmes. We specifically said we want to do more in the midlands and the north-east. We inherit a structure in terms of our programmes that does not allow us to do that and also does not allow us to serve communities as they recognise themselves. We have not set out yet what we are going to be doing on that and, if you will forgive me, we will do that to our staff before we do it to a Select Committee. But yes, absolutely, the intention is to reflect local politics more effectively than we did before. That is exactly what we said in our annual plan.

I am not across the specific example that you raised. I am very happy to ask the team to write to you and answer that question.

Q57 **Julie Elliott:** Thank you. Finally, as I said in the beginning, nations have been served quite well during the pandemic, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The north-east, and that is not including the Cumbria element of the BBC region, has a population of around 4 million people. Northern Ireland has a population of around 1.9 million people, and it has its own news and its own political programmes, complete coverage. We have not had any political coverage. I just want to leave the thought that I do not think that is fair, and it certainly is not agile in serving all our audiences.

James Purnell: I am very happy to get the team to write to you about that. I don't think it is a fair reflection of what we have been doing. We



HOUSE OF COMMONS

have the biggest regional news programme in the country, which has been getting millions and millions of people, including in the north-east. We have by far—

Chair: I think you have quite a bit of letter writing to do.

Q58 **Damian Green:** I want to pick up something you just said, James, about how the BBC attracts people with strong views, which they leave at the door before they start doing BBC journalism. It is interesting if you still perceive that is the case, because a lot of respectable news organisations do not have that anymore. Take LBC, for instance. We know, and they make public, that broadly speaking Iain Dale is on the right and Shelagh Fogarty is on the left. They are both good journalists. They both treat people completely fairly, but it is allowed to get out into the ether what their general worldview is. Even apart from the now notorious soliloquy, it is pretty clear that Emily Maitlis is, broadly speaking, more on the left than on the right. Are you comfortable with that as a breach of the traditional BBC rule?

James Purnell: I would agree with the first part of your premise, but not the second. The rules around public service broadcasting or, indeed, about commercial radio, which is also regulated by Ofcom, have changed over time. LBC provides a fantastic service. As you say, it is different from what we do. We do not want our core news journalists' views, or their political agendas if they have one, to be part of what influences their journalism or to be perceived to do so. We try very hard to make sure that that impartiality is something that is true and which our audiences value.

Q59 **Damian Green:** You do not accept that Philip Davies's perception that everyone at the BBC is, broadly speaking, on the left is true. You have made that clear, but do you not feel that occasionally some of your presenters let their slips show?

James Purnell: By and large, no, I don't. Of course, we make mistakes and we will correct them when we do so. You have worked at the BBC. You know what it is like. Broadly, you do not know what people's views are inside the organisation. You may know what they have done in the past, but we have a very strong culture that allows us to leave that at the door when the conversation is happening inside our news programmes, our factual programmes, across what we do. We do so without those personal agendas showing through.

There is room for opinion pieces. There is room for current affairs investigation. It is not that every single item has to be impartial in the way that a news item would be, but across the whole of our coverage we need to have that due impartiality.

Q60 **Damian Green:** In which case, let me move on to Richard Sambrook's review, which is, as I understand it, a review into the behaviour of BBC staff on social media. Why have you commissioned that review? What are you worried about?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

James Purnell: The concern is particularly with people who work in news but across the organisation—it also applies to the factual teams in my area—as to whether what people say on social media could end up affecting exactly the perception that you are talking about.

It is not easy. Particularly for younger people, living on social media is a huge part of their identity, so asking them to stop tweeting particular things is quite a big sacrifice, in the same way that for people of previous generations not going on marches anymore when you join the BBC, if you did before, is something that we ask people to do. It is not maybe as straightforward as going on marches, but there is a similar set of issues.

We felt that we needed a bit of context, going through the kind of classic Second Reading debate stage of a policy issue, to work through what would be the principles that we should now apply. On the one hand, people making a statement about being anti-racist, I think we would think that was fine on social media. Obviously, endorsing a political party, not fine. There are some complex nuances in the middle that this review is going to help us deal with.

Q61 **Damian Green:** Will this review apply not just to your news correspondents, editors and factual people, but across the board? Somebody has already mentioned Gary Lineker. I follow Gary Lineker on Twitter. He is really interesting. I get the strong impression that I know more about his politics these days than I do about whether he thinks Timo Werner is going to make Chelsea title contenders next year. He clearly wants to move into that space. He is quite comfortable in that space. Does it apply to him? He does not yet present *Newsnight* as it were, but he is presenting shows that millions of people watch and, therefore, he is to some extent a voice of the BBC. Are the same rules going to apply to people like that as they will do to your news presenters and your editors?

James Purnell: No. It is a great question. No, if you work in sport or entertainment, different rules apply to you. I am sure Richard will look at a wide range of topics. He is particularly looking at people who work in news and factual content because, obviously, if they take a view on, for example, transgender issues and they are then asked to make a programme on it, people can point back and say, "You've got an agenda." So, it is particularly for that group.

It would be hard to apply that to people who present our sports and entertainment programmes. It would mean that if Phil Neville came on and did one programme with us, for the rest of the year he would no longer be able to have any views about political topics. It does not feel like we could apply that to people who work outside our news, current affairs and factual programmes, but it is clearly something that Richard can look at. There is a very good *Match of the Day* podcast I can refer you to if you do want more information about Gary Lineker's views on any particular topic.



Q62 **Damian Green:** I watch it religiously. One last thing, just to clarify something you said to Julie Elliott. Is it the intention that, post this crisis and when everyone can get back to work, you will revert to something like your normal regional political coverage?

James Purnell: We have not decided, and that is true of my radio services as much as Charlotte Moore's TV services. This has thrown a huge amount of change across the whole of what we do. We have to learn the lessons of how it has changed the market, how it has changed what we can do.

It may be that we can do more. One of the things that is interesting about how the crisis has changed how we work is it creates this space for people to work outside of cities. One question that has been put to us for a long time is, yes, maybe you have moved outside of London but maybe you are still metropolitan. Clearly, the Zoom culture could allow people to work from a far wider range of places. Is that something that could allow us to have coverage from across far more of the country?

We need to look at all those things and then we will come back to it. We have not made any decisions across the whole range of what the BBC does in terms of the very large number of programmes that we have taken down during lockdown because we only have 10% of our staff in our offices. That has clearly affected how much we can do.

Q63 **Damian Green:** Can we assume that the overall decision of what you devote to regional political coverage and so on will be one for the new Director-General when he takes up the reins in September?

James Purnell: I am sure he will have a strong view on that, but he has also made it clear that Tony Hall is the Director-General until 31 August. Across the piece, the BBC has been having to make savings and clearly MPs have very strong views about this. The bigger picture is that we have had to take out 24% of our income in a market where there are exponentially rising costs in lots of our areas and, therefore, we have had to make some tough decisions.

In my area, in Charlotte Moore's area, we have taken out about 5% a year in terms of our costs. We are not asking our news in nations and regions colleagues to make the same level of savings, but they are having to make savings. These are complex plans to get right, so we are taking our time to do so. We will make any announcements to our staff before we do so to the wider public.

Q64 **Clive Efford:** James, do you ever get complaints from other political parties about political bias, and about Emily Maitlis in particular?

James Purnell: We get political complaints from a huge number of people, from all political parties, indeed from all sides of the referendum. There were some very strong views from the remain side about our coverage as well. The key point is we listen to it and, when we get it wrong, we say so quickly and correct it quickly.



Q65 **Clive Efford:** Okay. I thought we needed a little bit of balance there.

If you were coming back in about a year's time, two years' time, in the light of Covid and how it has exposed some quite extreme differences in terms of its impact on different sections of our communities, and also the Black Lives Matter campaign, what will have changed at the BBC, do you think?

James Purnell: In terms of the Black Lives Matter campaign in particular?

Clive Efford: They are calling for quite significant social change. Covid has exposed some differences. Are you looking at that in the BBC? Do you think things will change in the future?

James Purnell: Yes, we are, and I think we are at a tipping point in terms of the debate around race across the world. It is something that we talk about very seriously at the BBC.

We would break it down into two different categories. One is in terms of our workforce, where we have, I think, some industry-leading commitments to have representative proportions of black and gay people, women, people with disabilities. We have met the vast majority of those targets. We have further to go in terms of people of colour in leadership. We are developing an action plan to do that.

In terms of our coverage, we are absolutely determined that we reflect the whole of the country, and we have been acting on that for a very long time. It is not surprising, for example, that over the last week on iPlayer there were a series of programmes that had been commissioned before, like Michaela Coel's fantastic drama, which is on at the moment; the Windrush drama that we have had on this week; the content that we have been doing in my area on *1Xtra Talks*. We had a whole Tuesday dedicated to this content. We had a black empowerment playlist throughout the whole of the day. All our radio stations covered this issue. It is of fundamental importance to us to reflect debate. The key thing that I would say is that we do so with due impartiality. We do so in a way that allows all sides to be heard and all sides to be challenged.

Q66 **Clive Efford:** I listened to Patrick Robinson, who played Anthony Bryan in *Sitting in Limbo*. He describes himself as an actor, not a black actor. In terms of casting, do you think things may change in the future in the light of Black Lives Matter and black actors claiming that they want to be allowed to play a wider range of roles?

James Purnell: Yes. I think you could see from our coverage of drama that we do that as a matter of course. Across all our content, we are absolutely determined not to cast people based on their race. We do so based on their talents and skills, while also having a commitment to representation. The same commitments are true of our presenters in the BBC. We led the way on this project called the 50:50 project, which has been about trying to get equality in terms of guests between men and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

women. We are doing a pilot now to see if we can extend that to people of colour, people with disabilities, and so on.

If you look at the BBC in terms of portrayal, in terms of casting people in a wide range of roles, we lead the market. Similarly, in terms of my area in radio, we signed up to something called the Equality in Audio pact, which is doing exactly what you are saying. One of its commitments is to say that you hire people of colour not just to work on things that are relevant to their background but to work on any range of topics.

Q67 Clive Efford: I have had a look at the board of trustees and their backgrounds, and what I see is overwhelmingly middle class, white and Oxbridge. Would it be a reasonable criticism of the BBC to say that that is a pretty shallow gene pool? Are they the right people to be leading our most significant public sector broadcasting organisation in addressing those sorts of changes?

James Purnell: Do you mean the board of the BBC?

Clive Efford: Yes.

James Purnell: Yes, the board of the BBC is partly appointed by us and partly by the Government, so that is a point that can be made to both of us.

I don't want to pick out individuals but it is not all white. Obviously, there is Tanni Grey-Thompson, who is one of our most successful Paralympic sportspeople. I am sure that is something that people would take into account in future as they make further appointments.

In terms of the things that we control, for our boards across the BBC, we are having two people from diverse backgrounds joining every single one of those boards to make sure of exactly the point you are making. Either you do so through the hiring of people on to those boards, or you also have on top of that people who come in, a bit like non-executive directors, who can make sure that we have diverse views brought in, precisely to make sure that our programmes are as good as they possibly can be.

Clare Sumner: To add to that, basically three-quarters of our senior leaders are from state school backgrounds. We were the first media organisation to publish socioeconomic diversity. We are very committed to changing inclusion across a range of factors, and that is what we are focused on at the moment.

Like all organisations, the board is acutely conscious that it wants a BBC that reflects the UK in all its dimensions, and we are leading the way and are recognised for doing some really important things. Potentially, our apprentice schemes really help us here, and some of our successful people, from very different backgrounds, have gone on and appeared on the *Today* programme and other things very quickly. We do have more to do, and we are very conscious of that.



Chair: I want to thank Clare Sumner and James Purnell for giving evidence today. We very much appreciate it. Thank you.

We are now going to take a break for two minutes as we set up our second panel, which will be Alex Mahon, the Chief Executive of Channel 4.

Examination of witness

Witness: Alex Mahon.

Q68 **Chair:** This is the second panel of today's inquiry into public service broadcasting in Covid-19 as part of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee. We are joined by Alex Mahon, the Chief Executive of Channel 4. Thank you very much for joining us today, Alex.

Alex Mahon: Thank you for having me.

Chair: I am also sorry for the delay. You are going to see your content budget reduced by £150 million, you have had to draw down much of your reserves and you have furloughed one in 10 staff. What is that going to mean for viewers, for producers and for the future of Channel 4?

Alex Mahon: Obviously, the crisis came upon us very quickly and in an unexpected way, as you know from your discussions with other broadcasters. For us, as a commercially independent broadcaster funded in the majority by advertising, that meant we had some very difficult months. April and May revenues in the advertising market were down about 50%. Luckily, we reached the bottom a couple of months ago and are coming up. That is important to say.

As you say, we drew down on the commercial debt facility that we had in place for just such a shock and we cut our costs. I have to say I am proud of the fact that we reacted so quickly. We are an intentionally marginal business, and we put all our money back into the creative economy, so we do not have profits to turn to at this time.

What it means for audiences is kind of twofold because, on the one hand, we have had to cut money from the budget for the year, so we have fewer programmes than we expected to have this year, but on the other hand we have commissioned a series of very short, reactive response programmes, a lot of them very cheap programmes. We have had on air Jamie Oliver cooking from home, locked in with his children, looking dreadful. Richard and Judy have come out of retirement to show the nation what to read. Kirstie has been crafting. Steph McGovern has been presenting from her home. In a counterintuitive move, you might say, we cut a lot but we also asked the production community to help us by making a lot of things that were cheaper and faster.

What we have seen in that is a great reaction from the public. What we have seen in the last 10 weeks is that we are winning, up on share every week, compared with where we would have been normally. That, I think,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is because the public are reacting to things that reflect where we are as a nation right now.

Ultimately, as you mentioned in the last session, there will be for all broadcasters slightly more repeats this year, and that is because it is difficult to produce things. It is not just because of cost cutting. Of course, a repeat is only a repeat if you have seen it before, and some people have not seen those shows. What we are finding, even with repeats, is they are attracting huge audiences. People are coming to the familiar and the known as a source of comfort at this time.

Q69 **Chair:** You can always repeat *Derry Girls*. That is always a superb series.

You mentioned some of the new initiatives that you have done during the Covid-19 outbreak. Jamie Oliver you mentioned. I think he filmed that on an iPhone. Is this the shape of things to come? Are we going to see more of this sort of cheaper broadcast as we come out of this pandemic as a result of budget constraints, and also perhaps the fact that audiences have shown they can tolerate those sorts of production standards?

Alex Mahon: It is a good question, isn't it, what will remain with us from this? I think we have seen two things. We have seen audiences flocking to news and factual programmes, so we have extended our news. We have done, I think, about 13 or 14 coronavirus-specific documentaries—how to protect yourself, how to clean your house, how to go on holiday—and we have seen with the news audiences this huge impact of viewers coming to trusted brands. You talked about that a little with the BBC. We have seen in Ofcom's most recent survey that Channel 4 is more trusted than BBC or ITV. We have had news audiences up, not just up 40% by volume and share, but for young people, up 75%, and for black, Asian and minority ethnic audiences, up by almost 30%.

We are seeing viewers turn to what you might call traditional brands for trust at this time. I think some of that will remain with us because we are seeing digital natives, who realise the dangers of disinformation and misinformation on other platforms, come to trusted, related, impartial, accurate sources for news.

Then we have seen the second thing that I talked about with those shows, of people wanting to see what is happening in Britain reflected. We all want to see something that talks about where we are as a nation right now and reflects some of the hardships we are going through, and we want that in an entertaining way. We want the facts, but we want entertainment.

Some of those production methods, I am sure, will remain with us: how to do things quicker, respond faster. I am not sure that the audience will continue accepting two-handers of people locked down on a Zoom-like background. I think we are all getting bored with that. But there will be things like that that remain with us.



There are also some great things that I think will stay with us about what we have called, in a rather hideous phrase, the geo-leveller of Zoom, which is whether you are meeting someone from Sunderland, Leeds or London, they are getting the same access. The days of the only way you could get access was by sidling up to a commissioner at a drinks reception in London, I think this helps us leave those things behind.

Q70 Julie Elliott: Good morning, Alex. Obviously, the Covid crisis has been very challenging for any broadcaster but particularly for the way Channel 4 is funded. Could you talk us through some of the particular challenges you have faced as a public service broadcaster, albeit with a very different funding model from the other PSBs?

Alex Mahon: Channel 4 intentionally does not make a profit. It is run effectively, as its remit was set by Parliament, as a kind of social enterprise to contribute all its money into the creative economy. We have contributed £12.3 billion, I think, since we started. That means that when our revenue is cut we do not have profits, dividends or somewhere else to go, and obviously, because we are funded commercially, unlike some other broadcasters we do not have guaranteed revenue.

That meant our revenue dropped away very fast. I am very proud of the way our organisation has responded, and I think it shows the inherent value in the flexibility of our model. We cut our internal costs, stopped projects and paused things, which has saved about £95 million in costs. We also took about £150 million out of our programme budget. We drew down on a commercial debt facility, not Government debt, that we had in place for just such a shock. We put it in place a couple of years ago.

Then we also all started working from home. We had 800 to 900 people immediately working from home, and we closed all our buildings to do that. The most senior paid people in the organisation and the board have taken a pay cut to ensure that we are contributing to this, and we have only furloughed about one in 10 people. In response to the desire to keep the economy going, we have made sure to top up their salaries to 100% because I think it is important that we keep as many people as possible, and their economic livelihoods, in a positive position. I think it shows how we can do things very, very quickly.

Obviously, the vast majority of our costs are in programming. We do have flexibility there between fixed costs and variable costs, but I would say it is not easy for the production sector. We are the biggest funder of independent production companies—it is our role to do that—but these are often small companies. They do not have massive cash reserves. Many of them have had revenue drop away immediately to zero, and they do not have a lot of money in the bank. What we have done is make sure that in the programming we kept doing—about £10 million of programming that we put back in and about £3 million of development—we made sure that we kept doing that and that we kept 50% of it or so ring-fenced for companies in the nations and regions, small companies, companies led by black or Asian staff, because those are the fledgling



companies that need support. One of my worries about this is that all their schemes and other things that help support them will be pulled away as a result of this crisis.

Q71 Julie Elliott: On what you said in answer to the Chair, you talked about news consumption among 16 to 24-year-olds being up 75%—I think that is what you said—which is incredible. Coming out of the crisis, what opportunities do you think are there for Channel 4, and what lessons can be learned, particularly for this 16 to 24-year-old age range?

Alex Mahon: It was 16 to 34s. Volume is up 75% but share is up 69%, and that is on what I would call the traditional news. We also, as you will know, put huge effort into distributing that news in a kind of platform-agnostic way. We distribute on YouTube, on Facebook, on Twitter, on our own platform. We are doing things with Snap. We have had over 200 million views of that news content online, on social platforms, and we have had about a billion minutes watched of *Channel 4 News* online this year, whatever a billion minutes means.

We have made a really conscious decision and invested in a team that is about going to young people where they are with trusted, fact-checked news. That is different to others, and that is a very important part of how we distribute our news. It is what has allowed us to have reach online and on social media as well as on traditional, if you like, with our news content.

I think those behaviours will remain for young people because, to some degree, those young people are now questioning, in a time of crisis, what they are seeing on purely social media platforms and they want to come to trusted brands to see news.

Q72 Kevin Brennan: Following up on that, how are you doing with young men in particular in terms of viewing figures?

Alex Mahon: I am trying to work out if I know the young men statistics off the top of my head. I don't think I do. I can tell you that we put out a very specific campaign focused on young men because we knew that they were one of the groups that was ignoring public health messaging the most. We did a very specific campaign about staying at home that was focused on young men aged 16 to 24, because they tend to think they are a bit invincible and ignore the public health messaging. I know that that has reached over 78% of the target group. I cannot tell you what the demographic breakdown is of male to female on the news watching, but I am very happy to follow up with that.

Q73 Kevin Brennan: Yes, thanks, that would be very helpful. Thinking about Channel 4, where it fits into the public service broadcasting universe and so on, in recent years there was quite a lot of pressure and discussion in the last Parliament about privatisation, which was finally seen off. What are your views? You have been in the job for a period of time now, although still a relatively short period. Coming into Channel 4, coming



HOUSE OF COMMONS

into the public service broadcasting world, what is your view about Channel 4's place in it and the future of public service broadcasting as a whole?

Alex Mahon: It is over two years. Sometimes it feels longer than that, sometimes much less.

I think what is very clear, and it is never clearer than now really—I know the Committee is looking at this, and the current crisis is showing us this—is there is a fundamental role for public service broadcasting, for public service content. We have seen through this crisis how important it is to us as a nation and how important it is to our viewers. We have seen that by the flocking of viewers to traditional news and by how much television viewing time is up.

Channel 4's role in that is twofold. It is to help the UK creative economy, absolutely, and it is to help build UK society and help drive positive social cohesion within that. The fact that we do that so well for young audiences and for minority audiences is never more important than in the past few weeks we have gone through with Black Lives Matter. We have a very specific role to do that, and to do that in a way that is commercially funded and with no financial burden on the public, so I think we have a strong future in that.

It is important for us to make sure that we adapt, to make sure that we adapt to digital ways of distribution and to make sure that we adapt to keep attracting those audiences. I think there is a very clear and defined role that no one else is doing and no one else will do. Netflix, the other SVODs and digital platforms are not thinking about the isolating nature of this crisis. They are not thinking about how to convene the audiences, and they are not thinking about how to get to those hard-to-reach groups.

Q74 **Kevin Brennan:** There is a very good stat you have on being trusted for your news. If your news programme is so trusted, why won't Government Ministers come on your programmes? Is there a relationship between those two things, do you think?

Alex Mahon: Well, as I said, in the latest Ofcom data Channel 4 is the most trusted for news. I am very proud of the fact that we have such a strong record on our news. We have a robust news, which is rightly focused on impartial and accurate reporting, and it has a strong record of impartiality. There are always ups and downs with all political parties, but we have had Ministers on recently. We had the Chancellor on last month. We have had the Secretary of State for Health on. We are always, as are all news programmes, vying to get Ministers on.

Q75 **Kevin Brennan:** Last month is quite a long time ago, though, isn't it? Has anyone been on recently?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alex Mahon: I don't think any Ministers have been on this month, but the same question could go to many other news programmes. They are a lot in demand.

Q76 **Kevin Brennan:** Perhaps it is a question for the Government rather than for you.

Finally, it does sometimes seem a bit strange that public service broadcasters compete on various things. Is it good use of the money available overall for you to pay so much money for a programme like *Bake Off* and poach it off the BBC, rather than public service broadcasters being a bit more collaborative in their approach to these sorts of things?

Alex Mahon: We are collaborative. We and the BBC and ITV, as PSBs, are working together on lots of things, submissions to Committees, talking to Ofcom about pieces. We work very closely together, and we have a lot of the same aims in common. I would say at this time, and with the competition we face from bigger tech businesses, we are working together more and more. BritBox is an example of that, where we are all working together, and we continue to discuss whether there is more to do.

There will always be competitive tensions in a market when producers put programmes out to bid, and we will all always compete for them. Ultimately, if you do not, they might end up on a service that is not British at all. There will always be those competitive dynamics in the market, but I would say we work together more and more.

Q77 **Philip Davies:** Alex, I must commend you for keeping a straight face when you were talking about the impartiality of *Channel 4 News*. Surely you must accept that there is a problem with, even from your perspective, just the perception of bias for the news on Channel 4. I cannot understand why any Conservative would ever want to go on *Channel 4 News*, to be perfectly honest, because it does not even try to be impartial anymore. Is it really appropriate to have a leading news presenter who said what he said at Glastonbury? For the sake of decency, I will not say what he said. I am sure you know. Is it really appropriate for a news programme, a public service broadcaster news programme, to still employ as their lead news presenter somebody who said what he said at the Glastonbury festival?

Alex Mahon: I think it is fair to say, as I have already said, that there is huge public trust in the news and that we have a very strong record on impartiality. That is what the independent, impartial regulator is there to check, and we have a consistently strong record on that.

I do not think there is any proof of what the presenter did or did not say, which you will not repeat, at Glastonbury, but clearly it is our job to make sure that we have an impartial team and that they fairly and accurately report. I do think, particularly in periods of an election, that there can be friction around things, but I am glad to say that things have calmed down since then, for us and for all the news providers.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I also think that it can be difficult when you are doing interrogative and investigative news, and I understand why that is difficult for both sides, but I do think it is an important principle of the news that we have in this country and it is one of the underlining pieces of our democracy.

Q78 Philip Davies: Are you saying that you challenged Jon Snow as to what he said at Glastonbury and he denied it? Is that what you are saying? Did you not even bother challenging him about it, or did you not really care?

Alex Mahon: To my knowledge, there is no proof either way of what was supposedly said.

Q79 Philip Davies: If he did say it, would that be unacceptable? Would it be enough to take him off your news programme if it was shown beyond any doubt that he did say that? Are you saying that that is unacceptable and you would not allow him to present the news if it were proved beyond any doubt whatsoever that he did actually say that?

Alex Mahon: I think it is extremely important that our presenters are seen to be impartial.

Q80 Philip Davies: Do you think they are seen to be impartial?

Alex Mahon: I do, and I think we have a regulator that is there to ensure that we stick by those rules.

Q81 Philip Davies: I have to say, and I say it to lots of London-based media, you need to get out more if you really think *Channel 4 News* is seen by—maybe the people who watch it think it is great because they are the only ones left watching it, but the people who don't watch it, don't watch it because they know it is biased. I would urge you to get out there and find out what real people think.

Time is limited, so can I ask you quickly something that I have pressed you on privately? Channel 4 moving to Yorkshire, mainly based in Leeds: as an MP for the Bradford district, we do not want Channel 4 to become very Leeds-centric. We want Bradford to get a fair slice of the action. Can you tell us what benefit Bradford will get from Channel 4's move up north?

Alex Mahon: As you know well, I do try to get out there. I am often on a train to other places, and I can think of nothing I would like more right now than to get out there, anywhere else away from staying at home with my children.

There is a key thing that we are doing, and you highlight it there, in terms of moving our people out of London, and that is, to your point, absolutely fundamental to make sure that we represent the UK properly. The key thing behind that strategy was to ensure that we do not end up as an entirely London-based organisation with London opinions and that kind of monoculture. That is why there has been such a huge drive. We are almost at 200 people outside of London now, and we will be continuing to do that as fast as we possibly can. The reason to do that is



to get different opinions. That is why it is also critical to have people who live in other places, and not just people from London moving there.

Leeds and Bradford: it is critical to me that we also have a diverse group of people, and Bradford can really help me in that. We have been doing a huge amount of outreach to people specifically based in Bradford to try to recruit them into our Leeds office. We are working with the mayor and the representatives of Bradford to do that. We have had some problems with, for example, local transport. It is difficult sometimes for people from Bradford to get to Leeds in an acceptable commute, as we have talked about, but I hope that our outreach efforts into the community there, and help from other representatives such as yourself, will ensure that we can recruit good people, because this is all about us representing across the UK and spending money across the UK. The target that makes a real difference is spending 50% of our money outwith London so that we make an economic impact in other cities.

Q82 Philip Davies: Finally, very quickly, Steve Anderson said on the *Blue Collar Conversations* podcast that he could envisage Channel 4 just becoming publishers of other people's content. Is that a future that you envisage for Channel 4, that it would be nothing more than a publisher of other people's content?

Alex Mahon: I have not listened to that podcast, or the ones about football I must admit, but there is time. We are effectively a publisher—we are a publisher/broadcaster—so we do not make for ourselves, but I think our key strength lies in that editorial curation and thinking about what audiences want to watch.

Q83 Damian Green: I feel I should declare an interest. I last appeared on *Channel 4 News* all of two days ago and am always happy to argue my case, even in a hostile environment.

You have made the point that you have had an increased number of young people watching the news, but does that apply to wider programmes as well? Are you getting a bigger number of young people, or is it a bigger audience share, or both?

Alex Mahon: Both. Channel 4 is up 24% overall, and 16 to 34s are up 33%. If you compare that, 16 to 34s on all television are up about 9%, so we are getting more young people. You could argue whether that is a volume effect of people being in lockdown, but we are getting a disproportionate share of young people on Channel 4 as well as on the news.

What is that about? It is about trust, it is about the type of programmes and it is about how we market, but it is about the fact that we fundamentally focus editorially on what we think will be interesting to them.

Q84 Damian Green: Do you think this is a temporary phenomenon, or do you have plans to make sure you can continue doing that after everyone



is let out again?

Alex Mahon: It depends on how stressed I feel at the particular time of day, but there are elements of this which are clearly a temporary phenomenon. You heard from the BBC team that the huge surge we saw in news viewing and the daily press conference in the early days has faded away. But post that, we have still seen, for example, news audiences up 20% to 25% by volume, so there are clearly some elements of the behaviour that are remaining.

There will clearly be a set of people who have not spent that much time with television before, who will discover things on it—hence my comment about a repeat only being a repeat if you saw it the first time—so I imagine elements of that will be retained. There is also an increasing consumer awareness, and one might say backlash, against disinformation and misinformation, so there is an increasing understanding that television is a trusted and accurate source. I suspect some elements of that will remain as well.

Q85 **Damian Green:** I may have misunderstood this, but I got the impression that you were much more platform-neutral than the BBC were in the previous session in the sense that you do not care where people are viewing your content as long as they are viewing it. Is that right?

Alex Mahon: It is not for me to comment on BBC strategy, but our strategy, by virtue of being smaller and probably by virtue of being set up to be innovative, is slightly different. We are focused on that kind of platform-agnostic distribution.

That said, we have to make sure that we get brand attribution, that we get prominence and that we get commercial money, so it is not completely agnostic. It is all those things being balanced. The key for us there, and the key legislative thing to assist with, is really about prominence. There has been quite a lot of consensus on the importance of prominence, which is making public service content very easily findable across all platforms and devices, but we would always urge the Committee to help press the Government to get this into legislation quickly because there is broad consensus that that would really help public service content.

Q86 **Damian Green:** There are some platforms you can do that on, but how do you achieve prominence on YouTube?

Alex Mahon: All digital platforms, of course, are sorting. The surfacing of content is defined by algorithms, and algorithms are merely a kind of finite sequence of commands that are programmed into a computer, which prioritises things. Although I do not have complete insight into the YouTube algorithm because it is not publicly released, you could obviously prioritise public service content.

Q87 **Damian Green:** You think it is possible. Clearly, platforms will continue to evolve as well, but looking ahead to a post-Covid future of PSB—you



say you hope that Channel 4 will survive and flourish in this new era—do you think that prominence will remain a big issue for Channel 4 for as far ahead as we can all peer into the murk of what people will be getting their content on in five or 10 years' time?

Alex Mahon: Yes, absolutely, for Channel 4, for the BBC, for ITV and for all public service broadcasters. For Channel 4, because we are the youngest skewing, we come to this issue earlier than others, but what is amazing is the success we have had in continuing to attract young people, given all the choices we have. But it is incredibly important that people can find the content.

Q88 Chair: Following up on that, would you like to see the likes of YouTube skew their algorithms in order to benefit public service broadcasters, and do you think that plays in within the disinformation space and countering this information?

Alex Mahon: I would like us to have an updated prominence regime in place because, as you all know, I think it was last updated in the Communications Act 2003, which is slightly out of date now. I would like us to update that construct so that public service content has a prioritised, prominent position across all these platforms. That requires legislation to do, but I think it is incredibly important for us to make sure that content can be easily found by the British public. At the moment, in such a difficult environment, and as you on the Committee have looked at, it is most unfortunate that misinformation and disinformation are remaining on the tech platforms and, in some cases, being prioritised by them. That is not what we get when we factcheck coronavirus myths and cures in order to help the public, and I think we see the dangers of that at this time.

Q89 Damian Hinds: I want to come back to where Julian left off. Before we do, the very impressive growth figures that you mentioned among young people in their viewership, presumably those are year-on-year increases. If we compared it with five years ago, it would not be nearly the same as comparing with last year. In other words, these are dramatic year-on-year increases but in a world where there has been a downward trend.

Alex Mahon: You are absolutely right that we are in a world where there has been a downward trend. I think 75% up compared with last year—off the top of my head, without the chart in front of me—would still be a rise on five years ago. If you look at an average video viewing day now, someone who is 16 to 34 probably has about five hours of social video viewing—do not ask me where an average person finds five hours—and about 50:50 of it is between television and other things, Netflix, YouTube, Facebook, on-demand, iPlayer, and All 4. That is the split of the video day for an average person not in a pandemic year.

Q90 Damian Hinds: YouTube does seem to be where all the growth and the action is, notwithstanding your viewing figures. In the main, it is where the growth and action is for younger people. How sustainable do you



HOUSE OF COMMONS

think ad revenues are for a broadcaster like you from YouTube, and do they cover the cost of your content?

Alex Mahon: There are always, at any point, a set of platforms that have grown for young people. TikTok is obviously one right now, and Snap has had huge growth for young people. The question for us is to make sure that we are adapting our content to be in those places where young people are. Last week we announced a big partnership with Snap to do 300 pieces of content a year, and *Hollyoaks* will be the first soap to go on Snap. There is the question of how our video content could appear on TikTok. I think there will always be a continual rise of things.

We also have to look at what people use the platforms for. People use YouTube for very different things and very different purposes than they use, for example, our on-demand platform for. The key for us is to find young people there, to adapt our content to attract them there, to make sure they know it is from Channel 4 so that they recognise our brand, and then to optimise our commercial arrangements with those platforms. Sometimes that is easier and sometimes that is more difficult. As you will know, many of the platforms have fixed terms, so it is very hard to negotiate. If it were possible, I would put lots more content there, but right now that is not commercially advantageous to us.

Q91 **Damian Hinds:** To be clear, the ad revenue does not cover the cost of the programming? Obviously, I realise the programming is shared between different platforms, but on any reasonable cost allocation basis the ad revenue provided by YouTube AdSense, and whatever additional arrangements there are, does not cover the cost of production?

Alex Mahon: That is correct. If we were to put the programme out only on YouTube, we would not make enough revenue, all things being equal, to cover the cost of creating it.

Q92 **Damian Hinds:** In a more platform-agnostic strategy, do you not worry that the more control, the more power, there is for the intermediary in any commercial negotiation puts more of the ballast with them? Over time, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the ad revenue formula gets more advantageous for you, but it is possible to imagine one in which it becomes less so. Don't you just become subject to all manner of race-to-the-bottom competitive forces?

Alex Mahon: I do think it is important that, as the Committee and Government look at what to do with the platforms, you think about how to make them sign up to a code of conduct, how to make that more enforceable, how to ensure that where they are acting as publishers that is recognised, and how to have negotiation flexibility on the commercial terms.

From an advertising perspective, we are not on a level playing field. We have to check all our adverts beforehand, we have to make sure that they are legally publishable, and we are responsible and liable with our licence if we do not do that correctly. Clearly, the digital platforms are not



subject to any of those rules. Part of the problem for us is we are competing for advertising money on an unlevel playing field. That is difficult, so we would like regulation in place to make sure not just that the playing field is level, but equally, when we think about distributing, we have to recognise that we have to go where young people are spending their time. You cannot say, "Young people are on YouTube all the time" and not think about how to reach them there, even if that is purely as a marketing activity.

Q93 Damian Hinds: Finally from me, on a different tack, Channel 4 was an innovator in the UK as a third-party factchecking service, and to date it is probably still the only factchecking service in the UK with any significant amount of brand equity. What is the role for factchecking in public service broadcasting in general, and specifically what are your plans and hopes for Channel 4 FactCheck.

Alex Mahon: We do have FactCheck, and I think the latest is that it has about 3 million views. What is interesting, but perhaps not what is good, is the people who tend to look up and check facts tend to be the people who are very assiduous in ensuring they have facts. That may sound facetious, but it is not. That is indicative of the problem that we are dealing with.

It is important that the public know that we have that, but perhaps more important is that the public is aware that everything we do is factchecked and accurate. These huge rises that we are seeing in young audience viewing and in black and Asian audience viewing of news is something to do with that. At a time of difficulty, perhaps people are respecting and appreciating what Ofcom does, and are thinking, "We want accuracy, we want FactCheck, we want to ensure that these are from the correct sources." That is proving the value of public service broadcasting.

Q94 Clive Efford: Do you get complaints from other political parties about bias in your news coverage?

Alex Mahon: I can confirm that, across the board, many people complain, yes, from multiple parties.

Q95 Clive Efford: It is not that you are populated by a subversive bunch of lefties that Government Ministers will not come on your news channel?

Alex Mahon: We get a wide range of complaints. That is part of the cut and thrust of having news that asks difficult questions. I would say that that is probably a privilege of being in the UK, although it may not always feel like that to politicians.

Q96 Clive Efford: We are in the middle of the Covid crisis. We have had over 41,000 deaths. If you look at the deaths in excess, it is over 60,000. Given the prominence and the popularity, the trust that people put in your news coverage, do you have any view on why Ministers would not want to be interviewed on *Channel 4 News*?



Alex Mahon: I would say that Ministers are being interviewed, politicians are appearing.

Q97 **Clive Efford:** Cathy Newman, one of your newscasters, said on 5 June that no Government Minister had been on for three weeks. We are now at 16 June. That is quite a considerable period of time for no Government Minister to appear on *Channel 4 News*. Do you think that is surprising, given where we are at the moment in this Covid crisis?

Alex Mahon: We are getting junior Ministers on on a regular basis. As you have heard, another member of the Committee was on two days ago. We have politicians appearing regularly. It is the same for all news programmes. We are all fighting to get people on, as we should be and as is our role in society.

Q98 **Clive Efford:** The Covid crisis has exposed some stark differences in the impact it is having on different sections of our communities; deprived and BAME communities are particularly affected, and we also have the Black Lives Matter campaign, which is calling for significant changes. Has that altered Channel 4's thinking in any way? How is Channel 4 responding to all that?

Alex Mahon: As you know, we as a broadcaster have diversity as part of our remit. Of course, we do not just have discussions about diversity for that; it is quite fundamentally important to who we are. I am very proud of our record on it, but I would equally say we have a lot more to do. Particularly focusing on Black Lives Matter, I was very pleased last year that our black, Asian and minority ethnic audiences were up 3%, and were up 9% in peak, so they have got to the highest rate we have had them. We have had real success in terms of bringing on to screen new talent, bringing in new writers, directors and production companies, and with our own staff, but I would say there is plenty more to do.

I put out a statement last week about who Channel 4 are as an organisation and talking about our commitment to being an anti-racist organisation. It was across a number of areas, about who we are and how we investigate should there be accusations of racism, about what we put on screen, about the representation of faces on screen, and about the representation within our own staff. We have a target of 20% BAME staff, and 20% particularly in the 100 most highly paid, because I believe it is by changing the leaders that you change everything.

We also talked about two new things. One was giving £1 million of free airtime to brands that are fighting against BAME misrepresentation and prejudice in advertising, and the other was, for the first time, starting to measure our supply chain, so measuring where we spend money and committing to an increase in the money spent with production companies run and owned by black, Asian and minority ethnic people.

Q99 **Clive Efford:** I asked the BBC this. The *Sitting in Limbo* docudrama had an enormous impact, and Patrick Robinson, who played the main



HOUSE OF COMMONS

character Anthony Bryan, was interviewed. I heard him say that he considered himself to be an actor, not a black actor. That really calls for parts that perhaps in the past have not been given to black actors to be opened up. Do you have any comment on that to add to what you have said?

Alex Mahon: What you are seeing now is the clear discussion about where people have experienced not just individual racism but structural racism and prejudice against them. That is a huge amount of the discussion we are seeing over the past weeks, which is welcome. It does behove us as leaders to make sure we are doing enough in our organisation.

For us, I am very proud of the new talent we have put on screen and the groups we have put on screen, but there is much more to do. Last year, for example, we did our first set of research, which was about understanding viewing habits of different communities in the UK and understanding black African versus black Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani. What are different groups watching and why? What do they think of as authentic portrayal in shows and why? What is important for us is to keep evolving what we are doing there and to make sure that we are also listening and acknowledging where we need to change more or where we may have got it wrong.

Q100 **Clive Efford:** You have increased the number of viewers among the BAME community and young people. What is your plan to retain those in the future?

Alex Mahon: All audiences are retained by feeling that what they are watching is a representation of the world they live in, so that is seeing themselves on screen. I think the reason the news does so well is it has an extremely diverse presenting team and it tackles a lot of these issues. They were the first to report on Windrush. You will have seen in the past few days they had the exclusive interview with Patrick Hutchinson. That is what we need to do and, by the way, the same goes for out of London. If we keep representing the UK, we should do well with viewers across it. We have to make sure that we are representative, and we have to make sure that as an organisation we get to a position where people have equitable power.

Q101 **Steve Brine:** Hello, Alex. Thank you for your time this morning. We have been having an interesting discussion this morning. Well, I thought it was interesting, but I guess our viewers will be the judge of that. Damian Green started it off by saying how he knows more about Gary Lineker's politics than he does about who he thinks will retain the Premier League, a point for debate. The thing is that these days there are a lot of presenters—this is not just exclusive to Channel 4, of course—who are as much media personalities in their own right as they are presenters on the programme for which they work, because social media gives them that channel. I wonder whether you have a view on that and if you think that has a price as well as a value.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alex Mahon: I must admit that I am not familiar with Gary Lineker's views on politics or, indeed, on football.

Steve Brine: You are very lucky.

Alex Mahon: There is still time. I think there is a balance to be struck here. We have recently been doing our own social media review of what is appropriate if you are a presenter, if you are an editorial member of our team, to express as your personal views, and what is appropriate if you are more of an entertainment presenter. Clearly, there is a scale there.

The other point is that social media has evolved very fast, so we are all a little bit behind in making sure that we keep up with how it is used. We have to keep evolving to make sure we have the right rules in place and we act when things are inappropriate or break those rules.

Q102 **Steve Brine:** Okay. Can I ask you about politics? Obviously, in this country we have newspapers that are perceived historically, and in current events, to be of one side or another. *The Guardian* is very much seen, rightly or wrongly, as a newspaper of the left; *The Telegraph* of the other side. In the US, of course, you have broadcasters, TV networks, that are very much seen as taking the Republican side or the Democrat side. In this country that has traditionally not been the case, but that said, you as Chief Executive know a lot about your audience. You know about their demographic; you know about their watching habits. What do you know about their politics, and how do you think the more you know about their politics shapes the editorial decisions that you take? It would only be natural for a programme to talk to its audience.

Alex Mahon: I am just reflecting on whether we know with any accuracy what the politics of our viewers are. I think in the most recent thing I have seen it is quite widespread. It is definitely true to say that one focuses on issues that we know will be of interest to the audience, as I have just talked about with young audiences, or with young-at-heart audiences, or with BAME audiences. Our job is to be challenging and questioning of all parties, whether in Government or in Opposition, and to make sure that we are doing that in a balanced and accurate way, and to make sure we are doing that in a way that is bringing facts to the public. If anything, what we have seen in this crisis is people want that questioning, because all political parties want to create a relationship of trust with the voter.

Q103 **Steve Brine:** Finally, because I know you have to go and we have to close, but given the debate around diversity of leadership within broadcasting these days, rightly so, are you the next but one Director-General of the BBC?

Alex Mahon: I think we just got a new Director-General of the BBC.

Q104 **Steve Brine:** That is why I said, "but one." Would you like to be?



Alex Mahon: I am very busy at Channel 4. However, your question is right. How are we getting diversity across our leadership? That is not just male or female, is it? It is ethnicity as well, and it is social class. At the moment we do not have a media industry—we have many other industries that are not—but we do not have appropriate levels of balance in that. I think there is a lot for us to do to make sure that we continue to fight that and that we continue to fill our pipelines with a wide range of people. It is not my experience that there are not qualified candidates out there. That is why I have set for Channel 4 a target of 50% of women in the 100 most highly paid, and 20% of BAME. That will be a hard target to get to, but I feel it is the right thing to unlock change.

Steve Brine: Okay. As Jon Snow may say to a Cabinet Minister if he or she came on, “I will take that as not a denial.”

Q105 **Chair:** Just one final question from me, Alex. As you know, we are embarking on an inquiry into public service broadcasting. What do you think the past few months have taught us about the nature of what people want, expect and need from public service broadcasting?

Alex Mahon: I think it has taught us three things. One is that people want trust when they go for facts. At no time has that been more true than in this dreadful pandemic. People want to go to trusted sources, they want to hear the facts and they want to hear the answers to their questions. That is the rise of news, the rise of documentaries, and the trust scores for us and others. I know you mentioned the report with the BBC this morning, but the fact is that television news broadcasters are still way more trusted than social platforms.

The second thing is that people want to be entertained in a way that is cognisant of what they are going through, so content that is reflecting UK society and what we are seeing, like all the shows that I have mentioned, also on other broadcasters. You do not see that on Netflix. When you go and watch *Too Hot to Handle* or *Tiger King*, marvellous things as they are, they are hardly reflecting the experience of a UK consumer in this pandemic, and they never will. They are not going to focus on the convening power that we have as public service broadcasters.

The third thing is that the sector has been damaged by this, so we need to get it back to work. The creative industries are a couple of million jobs in the UK. They are above the growth of other sectors. We need help to get the sector back to work. We need help with production insurance to make sure that shows can keep being made and can start being made at the moment. The biggest blocker is not now the social distancing; the biggest blocker is that people cannot get production insurance, and we need help from the Government to make sure we get that in place. I know that the Treasury and DCMS are looking at that, but that would make a difference. I think those are the three things.

Chair: Great, thank you. Thank you for your evidence today, Alex Mahon, Chief Executive of Channel 4. That concludes this session.