HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on Communications and Digital

Corrected oral evidence: The future of journalism

Tuesday 16 June 2020

3 pm

Watch the meeting

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

Evidence Session No. 14 Virtual Proceeding Questions 115 – 122

Witnesses

I: Fraser Nelson, Editor, *Spectator*; and Jason Cowley, Editor, *New Statesman*.

Examination of witnesses

Fraser Nelson and Jason Cowley.

Q115 **The Chair:** I welcome to the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications and Digital and its inquiry into the future of journalism our witnesses for the first session of evidence today, Fraser Nelson and Jason Cowley.

Before I ask you to say a little more about yourselves, I should point out that today's session will be recorded and broadcast live on parliamentlive.tv and a transcript will be produced.

Thank you very much for joining us and giving us your time. I know this is Jason's press day when he will be putting his magazine to bed. I am not sure whether it is the same for Fraser, but we are particularly grateful to you for giving up your time.

Our inquiry is into the future of journalism, particularly skills, access to the industry and the impact of technology on the conduct of journalism. In a moment, I will invite members of the Committee to ask you some questions. We very much welcome your input.

Before we do that, I ask you briefly to introduce yourselves. Tell us a little about the magazines you edit, the *New Statesman* and the *Spectator*, and give us a brief overview of your perspective of the current state of journalism in the UK. I should say that we started this inquiry before Covid hit, and it is inevitable that to some extent that will impact your view of what journalism is currently doing and its future. Shall we start with you, Fraser Nelson?

Fraser Nelson: I have been editor of the *Spectator* for just over 10 years. In that decade, my job and the industry has transformed. I think we are going through something of an industrial revolution. The way people receive their news and understand the world has changed utterly in the past 10 or 15 years, and with it journalism has changed, with lots of challenges and opportunities.

The magazine market overall has shrunk by about 63% over the past decade, and newspapers are down by 57%. You will not find a decade with those kinds of falls, so that is quite striking.

Our sector, current affairs magazines, has been different. We did a survey recently, looking at 36 current affairs magazines all over Europe. Only eight increased their sales over the past 10 years, and of those eight six were British. The two that increased sales the most were the *Spectator* and, under Jason Cowley's editorship, the *New Statesman*.

You will hear that our experiences will be very different from newspapers. You also have to remember our scale. The *Spectator* sells about 87,000 copies; the *New Statesman* sells shy of 30,000. I have about 20 journalists working here. That is a very different kettle of fish from newspapers, which have hundreds of journalists.

The advent of digital media has given us huge opportunities. We have been quite lucky, in that previously the only way we could reach an audience was to have our magazine on sale at WHSmith, or we might take out an advert on a bus or billboard, but now the online world gives us about 2.5 million people coming to our website every month. Therefore, our ability to set out our wares before a new audience is far greater than it was before.

We have been subject to the same pressures on advertising as everybody else, but the increase in readers has helped us quite a lot. I think that the *Spectator* is up by about 53% over the past year and about 10% for this year so far. That is why we are in the unusual position of giving back the furlough money we received from the Government a few weeks ago.

I found that the crisis accelerated trends that were under way, for good and for ill, but also accelerated the number of people willing to pay for journalism if it is good enough. I think we have to thank Amazon and Netflix for that. They have created in people's minds the idea that you pay for a subscription. Ten or 15 years ago it was pretty rare that you found somebody who would buy a film or music; you would find it free online. The idea that you paid for content was quite a new and disagreeable idea.

Now, people are far more accustomed to the idea that you subscribe or pay for something monthly. The only question is what you subscribe to. That conversation has been changed mainly by Amazon and Netflix, because people subscribe to them every month. By creating this consumer habit, it has allowed publications with a strong subscription offering to say, "You can subscribe to us as well". We have seen a new consumer habit that has helped us a lot. Ironically, it is the digital giants that have helped to pave the way.

Right now, where you get your news from has never been more important. There is so much free stuff. Paradoxically, the proliferation of free things and junk online has made people more likely to pay for news and analysis they can trust, and that has made things easier for publications such as mine and the *New Statesman*.

Q116 **The Chair:** That was a fascinating and largely optimistic introduction, and we will unbundle some of it in the questions to come. Jason Cowley edits the *New Statesman*.

Jason Cowley: As some of you will know, the *New Statesman* was founded as a weekly review of politics and literature by Beatrice and Sidney Webb in 1913, and in many ways it remains true today to its founding mission, but it has diversified to become a significant online title. We maintain a weekly print magazine, but we have an ever-growing website and have diversified into newsletters, podcasts, events, micro-websites and many other things, as many media groups have to do.

I think it is a mixed picture for the media in general. I have a background in magazines and newspapers. When one looks at what has happened to newspapers, one looks with particular concern. Fraser is

right: the crisis has accelerated pre-existing trends. In particular, those trends are the collapse of advertising revenues and how those are being drawn away by the tech giants, in particular Facebook and Google.

In addition, we are seeing the decline of print, particularly print circulation newspapers.

Another trend that alarms me greatly is the decline of local and regional media. There is the issue of public accountability—tracking what MPs are up to in their constituencies, what councils are up to in planning committees and the decisions they are taking. I worry about the lack of scrutiny. I am deeply concerned about the diversity of the media landscape, particularly in relation to local and regional newspapers and magazines.

News and current affairs titles, particularly in the United Kingdom but also the United States, have had a particularly good decade, driven partly by events: the financial crisis and the Great Recession and its consequences. In the UK we had the Scottish independence referendum in 2014; we had the coalition Government in 2010; we had David Cameron's surprise victory and the defeat of Ed Miliband in 2015, which led to the Brexit referendum in 2016, followed by the Brexit wars that rumble on today. We then had the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader and the wars within the Labour Party. It has been an extraordinary period to be editor of a current affairs magazine.

I used to think about what it would have been like to edit the *New Statesman* during the Second World War, when the great Kingsley Martin was editor. The *New Statesman* went into the Second World War with a circulation of about 24,000 and came out of it, despite paper rationing and the truncation of pagination of the magazine, with a circulation of about 70,000, which it held until roughly the late 1960s. But what a period to edit the magazine! In some ways I was quite envious of the opportunities that Martin and his team had.

But the opportunities my team has had over recent years have been truly remarkable. I have been editor for just over a decade. Fraser is right: the magazine I inherited at the end of 2008, compared with what we are today, is unrecognisable. The challenges and demands, too, are unrecognisable. We have evolved from being in many ways a struggling and moribund print title to a vibrant print-digital hybrid.

Fraser is right about our circulation. Our paid-for circulation has gone above 30,000 for the first time since the late 1970s. In addition, we have between 3 million and 4 million unique visitors to the website every month, which is very significant.

For a long time we kept our website free to view because we wanted as many readers as possible to discover how the *New Statesman* had changed and how we are taking it up-market by publishing long read and essays. We made the politics more unpredictable and sceptical, and we wanted to attract a new generation of readers to the site.

At the end of 2018, some years after the *Spectator* and other publications, we introduced a pay wall to the website. It is fairly porous;

you can view four or five pieces a month before the wall slams shut, as it were, but it is doing pretty well.

What has surprised me is how many people are prepared to pay for the journalism we produce online, and it is harder for us than for the titles of the right because we occupy a liberal space. The *Guardian* also occupies a liberal space. We have slightly different politics and we publish different pieces. Nevertheless, the *Guardian* operates a free content model. You can read as many pieces as you wish on the *Guardian*.

Similarly, we also have the BBC website, which is free to view. I appreciate we all pay a licence fee, but we are competing with the huge and powerful BBC and *Guardian* websites, so we have to be nimble and pragmatic.

Nevertheless, I am very encouraged by at least the position that the *New Statesman* is in; similarly, the *Spectator* and, I suggest, other publications in our space, such as the *London Review of Books*, which has a growing circulation, *Prospect*, and of course the *Economist*. This is a very vibrant niche of the magazine market.

If you look elsewhere, you see that the trends in magazine journalism reflect those in newspaper journalism. Look at what has happened to general interest magazines. When I was growing up in the 1980s, I read all the music papers: *NME, Melody Maker, Record Mirror* and *Sounds*. None of them exists today as print titles.

Look at what has happened to sports magazines; look even at what has happened to luxury magazines. They are retrenching, cutting back and reducing the number of issues they publish. It is a very turbulent media landscape.

One should always consider the tech giants that operate as platforms, but nevertheless in some way also as publishers. They are not accountable in the way we are. I think that is something for your Committee to consider, particularly as these huge tech platforms are drawing the advertising away from traditional legacy publishers.

The Chair: We will definitely want to come back to that and discuss it further.

You both referred to the impact of changing technology on the industry but also on your publications. It seems to me that one of the things that has happened is that in the past you would never have broken the news, but now, to some extent, you do. You have journalists very well connected in Westminster and elsewhere, who, through your social media and websites, are competing with newspapers to break news. Is that significant in the way you have developed your journalism?

Fraser Nelson: The *Spectator* has a political staff—James Forsyth, Isabel Hardman and Katy Balls—that we never used to have, but I would not describe it as news as such; it is live, on-the-day analysis.

The difference is that we will give you 500 or 600 words on what has happened and how to understand it. That is what people come to the *Spectator* for; it is news as a commodity. That is a very difficult market

to be in, because the BBC will have it free on its website instantly. That is why newspapers are struggling so much. If you want to find out what has happened, you can do so instantly and do not have to wait until the next morning, and there are so many free providers and social media that will give you news instantly. Live, on-the-day analysis is a harder commodity.

If it were not for digital, the *Spectator* would have nowhere near the high circulation it has now. We would not have the staff we now have; we would not have the depth of political coverage. Digital has transformed our prospects for the better. We are closer to the newspapers. Last week, I saw that our circulation was higher than that of the *Guardian* on Monday to Friday. I would never have thought 10 years ago that that would happen.

Jason Cowley: In some ways, we try to operate a bit like a monthly magazine and a daily magazine, by which I mean the weekly publication has the ambition of a monthly magazine. We publish long essays and long reads and pieces that are worked on over many weeks and are edited very rigorously.

Equally, we want to be in the game competing with the daily political titles. For example, we had a little scoop last week when Tim Montgomerie wrote about his disaffection from the Boris Johnson Government, having been close to Boris and inside the Government. You would not have thought that kind of piece would be published in the *New Statesman* 10 years ago, but, because we are a viable and vibrant digital title, we were able to publish Tim's piece and have considerable impact with it as a consequence.

Although, like Fraser, we are not specifically news-makers or breakers, we do make news and break news, if that is not contradictory, because we like to comment and analyse the breaking political news and beyond. We are not just a political magazine; we are also a cultural magazine, but the website has enabled us to become the kind of title that the *New Statesman* would never have been 10 years ago. Indeed, I think that without the website the *New Statesman* print magazine would not have continued.

Fraser Nelson: The majority of new subscribers to the *Spectator* probably come for our daily analysis on the website. We have a weekly magazine, but for both of our titles we do several pieces a day, and that is primarily what new people come to read.

The Chair: That is interesting.

We want to talk a bit about what audiences are demanding and the public policy implications.

Q117 **Baroness Buscombe:** Thank you for what you have said so far—it is really interesting. I shall focus on the prospects for magazines in terms of popularity and financial viability, on which you both touched. From listening to you, there are a few things I would like to throw into the pot—why popular, why now and whether it is sustainable going forward.

Fraser, you said you had been through something of an industrial revolution. Could it be that in terms of quality of content you are a bit of an antidote to that, in the sense that with the development of social media and so on we all assume that magazines, particularly print, will go into decline, but people are turning to magazines perhaps because social media are letting them down in the delivery of what we might call real, trusted information?

The point is that it is not what you say; it is what people want to hear. Are people looking to you as a kind of echo chamber to some degree to validate what they feel? Are they feeling let down by other media? There is a lot of feeling about bias in the BBC, for example. Are people turning to either of you in looking for what they would call real news?

With the Covid crisis, we all have more time on our hands. I am sure almost each and every one of us would admit to spending a lot more time searching and reading more than we might in normal times, so in that sense is this fantastic increase in circulation sustainable?

People want to pay for content, but what about age profile? Jason, you touched on the new generation, but are you talking about young people or different people of all ages and backgrounds becoming more interested in analysis, and in the great mix of social media and all the digital information you provide during the day?

Fraser Nelson: To your first point, you are absolutely right. People come to magazines and newspapers as a refuge from what they find on social media. If you are interested in current affairs, it will not take long before you get pretty sick of what you can find for free. You have the BBC and the *Guardian*, but if you want more you increasingly have to pay for something to get away from the hysterical tone of social media conversation. They come to us as a refuge from that.

On your "echo chamber" point, I find it is the reverse. People come to the *Spectator* for diversity of views. They want a forum where people can exchange and disagree with one another civilly without having to resort to the kind of Punch and Judy punch-up that we see in social media. For example, every day I get figures from the day before showing the articles people read before subscribing. The mix is striking. Yesterday, we had a piece by Nick Cohen—basically, a left-wing journalist—who wrote about how there should not be a no-deal Brexit because the red wall Tory voters do not want it.

That was our No. 1 subscriber generator of the day. Nobody could call Nick Cohen a Tory. We have a whole mixture of things. There are publications that reinforce readers' prejudices. I do not mean that pejoratively, but there are titles that you pick up so that you can disagree civilly. I like to think you might disagree with half of the *Spectator*, but you would read all of it, so that is what we are trying to do.

Age is very interesting. We do not survey our readership very much, but in the pre-lockdown days we held events. I was always struck by the diversity of age. You have young people—sometimes school-age people—

and pensioners, but I have not noticed any discernible difference in what they like. Taki, one of our columnists, has been with us since the mid-1970s. He has an incendiary feel to his columns that young people tend to like.

I have never really worried about the readership getting old. We have lots of young people coming to us, mainly on digital, but they come not to be patronised and given reading that we think is supposed to hit a certain demographic.

These are all trends. Ten years ago, it was harder because only the quality publishers were online, as was the BBC. A lot of papers were free 10 years ago, so why would you pay? There was far less reason to pay for media 10 years ago than there is now. Now, there are pay walls. As Jason said, it is difficult because he is up against the *Guardian*, which is free, and the BBC, which is now the No. 1 player in the written word as well as the No. 1 broadcaster. More people read their news from the BBC's website and apps than from any newspaper.

That is a really significant trend. The digital world has allowed the BBC, the hegemon of the industry, to occupy space it never occupied before. That makes it tougher for local newspapers. It is not a direct competitor to the *Spectator*, and, as you say, a lot of people come to us to get another view from the consensus that tends to prevail on the BBC.

Jason Cowley: I think we have successfully attracted a new generation of readers to the *New Statesman* who perhaps were not aware of the *New Statesman* as it used to be or were aware that the *New Statesman* was once associated with decline, having had a particularly great period in the 1930s to the late 1960s and early 1970s. We did that because of the website. What we have done—very successfully, I think—is discover and nurture a new generation of journalists and commentators. Some of the names who have been with us over the past eight to 10 years have gone on to become very significant public intellectuals or journalists of note: Laurie Penny, who is now in the United States; Mehdi Hasan, a ferocious polemicist who is also in the United States now; Helen Lewis, who has just left us after eight years to join the American magazine the *Atlantic*; Rafael Behr, one of the most sophisticated political commentators in the UK, who is now at the *Guardian*; Stephen Bush, who is now our political editor; Amelia Tait, who writes about culture; Anna Leszkiewicz, who writes about culture, and so it goes on.

We have successfully discovered a new generation of journalists with their own followers who come to read the *New Statesman*, so that is terrific. We have managed to keep hold of many long-established *New Statesman* readers, too, and I respect and value them.

We are similar to Fraser in the sense that we value heterodox opinion, unpredictable opinion and sceptical thinking. Our most read article every day may be one of Stephen Bush's quick blogs analysing what is happening at Westminster or an essay by the political philosopher John Gray, who has a huge readership all over the world. If John delivers his verdict on the Covid crisis or Brexit, that can be read by hundreds of

thousands of people all over the world, and they will then come to our website. Some of them will return again, and some may subscribe.

One of my concerns about the British printed media in particular is that too many publications have what I call top-down programmatic politics that is established either through the ownership or at the very top of the organisation, which stifles debate and free expression. As we know, the printed media in the UK are predominantly right wing or lean to the right, unlike in the United States, where the great publications are, I think you can say, all liberal institutions, with the exception of the *Wall Street Journal*. You have the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic*, and the *Washington Post*; but in the United Kingdom you have the *Telegraph,* the Associated Newspaper Group's *Times* and the News UK Group, and *Financial Times*. They do not all have the same politics; some supported Brexit and some did not, but at times there can be a top-down programmatic stifling of dissent.

We do not operate like that, nor does the *Spectator*. I think it means these publications are fun to read. They are different from what increasingly feels like a polarised, hyper-partisan debate on Twitter. If you wander into the fetid waters of Twitter, you find that the atmosphere is increasingly deeply unpleasant. The American writer George Packer said: "The berserk has returned to the public square". It can feel like that. One looks to the legacy publishers and the great magazines that have lasted for a century or more to offer a cooler, more sceptical, more deliberative approach to commentary and political life.

Q118 **Baroness Quin:** My question comes from a slightly different angle and is about how and whether public policy could better support the financial sustainability of UK journalism. In some ways, perhaps I am not asking the appropriate people this question because you both have successful experiences at the moment. As Fraser pointed out, some public money in the form of furlough has been given back.

Jason mentioned the particular difficulties of local and regional news outlets, so the question of how we support journalism is relevant. In addressing it, will you say whether you have any knowledge of international comparisons? For example, I know that Canada has come up with a fund to support journalism, and in the UK—I do not know how successful it has been so far—we have the pilot Nesta journalism fund.

Jason Cowley: I am worried about this issue, in particular local newspapers. If I had more time, I would keep a close eye on local government. I think that *Private Eye*—an amazingly successful publication that does not have much of a digital presence, by the way—does it admirably and very well.

I am very worried about local newspapers and media, particularly the great national Scottish newspapers, which Fraser will know more about than I do. There has to be a way of looking at the tech giants and how you may bring them more into taxation and how you challenge them on being publishers as well as platforms. For example, if we publish something on our platform that is potentially libellous, we are held

accountable. For a platform such as Twitter, anything goes. An individual may post a libellous tweet, and you can track down that individual and sue them. Equally, multiple individuals operate on Twitter with proxy accounts using burner phones to set up those accounts and you simply cannot work out who they are. Twitter is not being held accountable for what it publishes on its platform. At the same time, it is drawing advertising away from traditional publishers. In many ways, it is cannibalistic of the content produced by legacy publishers such as ours and others and is making enormous sums of money as a consequence.

How do you look at the revenues that are being made by Google, Facebook, Twitter and others? Can you make the argument as policymakers that you use some of that revenue to create a public fund that supports local and regional newspapers, minority media and niche media in a way that is not being done?

I am a big supporter of the BBC and I believe profoundly in the ethos of public service broadcasting. The BBC's revenues are about £4.9 billion a year, of which about £3.7 billion comes from the licence fee. How does one look at that fund? Is that just the BBC's money, or can some of it—maybe a tiny amount—be used to create another fund for local papers and media? A particular concern of mine is the viability and health of local media.

I was encouraged that VAT was removed from digital subscriptions for publications. That was a very positive intervention by Chancellor Sunak.

The News Media Association negotiated an agreement with the Government at the beginning of the crisis whereby the Government advertised in national and local media. I think the fund was about £350 million to be shared over a three-month period, but news magazines such as the *New Statesman* and the *Spectator*, which were dedicating enormous resources and sums of money to reporting on the Covid crisis and its economic consequences, health consequences and so on, did not receive any of that advertising money. Could that have been looked at? We did not take any furlough money at the beginning of the crisis. We are fortunate to have a very supportive owner and we are a group that is diversifying. As well as having the core *New Statesman,* we have other businesses—B2B publishing businesses—that in time will generate considerable revenues. In that sense we are okay, but I am concerned about the viability of other publications.

Fraser Nelson: There are lots of problems facing newspapers and publishers. I am not sure to what extent public policy can help and save them. Some of the most worrying words a journalist can hear are, "I'm from the Government and I'm here to help". It is well intentioned, but the most journalists can ask for is to be left alone by government. We have a very long and proud tradition of press freedom in this country, which has come under question now after the Leveson inquiry and the idea of regulating the press. I am very pleased that did not happen.

Other than that, there is not really much more journalists can ask for. We need to make sure we come up with journalism that people think is

worth paying for. If we do not, we ought to try harder. That is the bottom line.

I do not share some of the concerns you often hear in the industry about the tech giants. I know newspapers have lost a lot of advertising revenue to them. Twitter is full of nonsense a lot of the time, but you always have the option of switching it off if you do not like it. I do not regard that as a thorn in the side of publications.

What we could do with is more competition among our suppliers. For example, Royal Mail is the only option we have to get our magazine to subscribers; there is no alternative in this country. If the Royal Mail decides not to post on a Saturday, as it did recently, my readers and Jason's readers do not get their magazines in time for the weekend. We have nowhere else to go because of a lack of competition.

You can see concerns about competition in things such as paper mills, printers and distributors. That is something to keep an eye on. We ought to be careful that we do not end up drifting towards monopoly provider situations, because publishers really would be in trouble.

Overall, I think journalists ought to ask for freedom. A lot of countries interfere in papers; they regard them as being part of politicians' trainsets. I know that is not your Lordships' inquiry or intention, but VAT was a very positive move. The principle in this country is that we do not tax books or newspapers, so why was it ever extended to digital publishers? Now that that tax has been lifted it has been a very big help, and a great example of government helping by not getting in the way.

The Chair: The competition issue you raise is very interesting. We do not have time to explore it now. Fraser, we may come back to you and ask you a little more about that after today's session, particularly on the Royal Mail issue. Sadly, we do not have time to explore it because we want to move on to internships, access to the profession and training, which are at the heart of our inquiry.

Q119 **Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** I want to ask about the way you grow your journalists. Jason, you talked about having discovered a new generation of journalists and cited some very impressive names, with which we are now all familiar, so clearly that is working. I would think the *Spectator* would be able to give just as good a list. In fact, Fraser did mention some names.

We have spent a lot of time wondering about the value of internships, how important they are, why you use them and how you select people for them. Of the people you are talking about, how many do you think came into the industry via that route—internships or similar—and when you are looking for your interns what are you particularly interested in discovering?

I will tell you exactly what I am interested in. Both of you are producing what would in almost any other bit of journalism be called long-form journalism. Even your short stuff is long by most people's standards. You are looking for people who can write at length or can learn to do so. Talk

to us a bit about how you grow those kinds of journalists.

Jason Cowley: Did you say how you grow journalists or how you discover them?

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: How do you grow the kinds of journalists that you particularly need? I am thinking about your particular focus on long-form writing.

Jason Cowley: We do not have any formal entry requirements to work for the *New Statesman.* What I am looking for first and foremost is interest, enthusiasm and sensibility. If you want to work and write for the *New Statesman,* first you should read it. I edited a magazine years ago called *Granta*, a prestigious literary magazine that came out four times a year. Many more people wanted to write for it than read it or subscribed to it. People used to send me their work. I always wrote back to say, "Maybe you should buy the odd copy or read it perhaps, as well as wanting to write for it". I said that politely, of course.

For the *New Statesman,* it is about sensibility. I can immediately tell if someone is a phoney and they are not really interested in the title, politics or culture. I am not from a particularly privileged background. One of the accusations made against what you might call higher journalism in this country—the so-called quality press and magazines such as ours—is that we privilege public schools, Oxford and Cambridge and a very narrow socioeconomic dynamic. That is levelled against the media, particularly the lack of diversity. All these things are in my mind when I am looking to recruit, but, first and foremost, it is about sensibility.

When I first became editor it was a completely different situation: the *New Statesman* was struggling, it had a declining circulation and it was losing a lot of money. I had to be nimble and inventive. I was not in a position to buy in superstars; one had to create one's own talent, as it were. If you recall, at that time a lot of young people were blogging. They set up their own blogs and showed a lot of initiative. This was before many of them moved to Twitter, which is a microblogging platform, but they had their own blogs. I used to read the blogs and was very interested in what they were producing. That was where I identified some young talent. We advertised some opportunities. We had writing prizes and things like that. Then you talk to people and meet them and try to get a sense of who they are and what they want, but there is no formal process of entry to a publication such as ours; we are too small.

Fraser Nelson: We have a more formal process. Every year the *Spectator* takes on about a dozen interns, and when we recruit we tend to look to our interns.

Internships are the way you get into journalism. The Baroness asked how many of my colleagues started as interns. The answer is probably the vast majority of them. I remember my internships very well. When I was doing it you had to write to about 12 or 15 places to get one offer, if you were lucky. When I did get that offer, I was struck by how many other interns were the sons and daughters of the well-connected—people

who had a family "in". In many ways, journalism is a favour-trading environment, so people could do a favour for their contacts by taking their son or daughter into a placement. It does not cost the company anything.

There is a culture of informal internships, which I think makes the industry far less accessible to those with aptitude and ability, but no contacts, who would like to break in. That is a real problem for the industry. The *Spectator* was small enough that I was able to change the rules, with the support of Andrew Neil, who is very supportive of social mobility. We take interns from the Social Mobility Foundation. They tend to be school-age people; they tend to qualify for free school meals and be smart enough to get straight "A"s at GCSEs. That is what we call a work experience programme.

Then we have our internship programme, which I run separately. We have no CV policy; people do not hand in their CV. They will do an aptitude test of between three and five questions, and all of them will write in. The deadline for this year's internships was yesterday. When they write in, we process them and give each of them a city name, so we do not even know their names when we are assessing them. We will mark them out of 100 and give offers to the top 12. At the time we give them offers, we have no idea who they are or where or whether they went to university.

When I did this, I expected to find a wider diversity of graduates or recent graduates. I was surprised to find a diversity of ages and stages of life. One of the interns was a 48 year-old mother of three who had never worked before. She has an incredible aptitude for journalism. In the space of a year she had a very good job at the *Sunday Times*. Her kids had left school and she was able to apply herself to a career. When we consider interns, often we think about young people in their early 20s. Why is that? If we are all going to be working until we are 70 or 80, why should you not roll the dice in your late 40s?

We also had as interns people who were in another job. Not everybody starts in their dream job career at the age of 22. A lot of people go down a slightly wrong path that is not for them and think they are stuck and cannot restart the dial because when they put their CV in—I shall give you an example. Our broadcast editor, Cindy Yu, was a little store manager before she started with us. She is a brilliant journalist. The world will know her name, but I do not think her talents were particularly matched to retail. She came to that conclusion herself, and now she is heading up our podcast division with 1.5 million listeners a month.

I found people applying for internships with us in their holidays from work. Quite often, we would take them not from university or school but other lines of work. We ended up in our CV-blind internship scheme exposing ourselves happily to talent in places we would never have thought to look. We have hired these interns.

Our internship scheme now has a sufficient profile that people who get on it can find jobs elsewhere. For example, Madeleine Kearns was a

former qualified primary school teacher. She did an internship for us and now she is working for the *National Review* in America.

I will not bore you with other stories. Suffice it to say that we dispensed with CVs because you cannot put journalism as an aptitude on a CV. You have it or you do not. Either you have the aptitude and longing to do it or you do not. Given the opportunity, it is incredible what people can achieve, but I think the industry can do more to give people these opportunities and put an end to informal internships.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: Do you support your interns in a way that allows them to do what you need of them and live satisfactorily in London, where you are based?

Fraser Nelson: Yes, and we also help them with accommodation if they need it.

Jason Cowley: On formal internships, when I arrived as editor there were unpaid internships in the office and they had been in the *New Statesman* for a while. When Helen Lewis joined us eight or nine years ago—I cannot remember exactly when—we abolished the unpaid internships.

We do not have formal internships directly at the *New Statesman*. For five years, we had a paid internship in association with the Wellcome Trust. We were looking to find potential journalists from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds who wished to be science writers. For five years we ran a formal internship, which was very successful, but it was funded by the Wellcome Trust.

I thought that was a particularly good initiative, not least because it looked for a new generation of science writers perhaps from backgrounds where we did not see many science writers, but, unlike the *Spectator*, at the moment we do not have formal internship directly on the *New Statesman*; there is a wider group internship through the parent company. It is something we should look at setting up. It would have to be paid and formalised, and I think it would have to have clear training structures.

This summer we are introducing five paid graduate traineeships. We are looking to hire five new graduate journalists at entry level, and those roles will be advertised and paid of course.

Q120 **Baroness Meyer:** Thank you very much; that is really interesting. In some ways, you have already answered my question. It reminds me that when I was in Washington I asked Ben Bradlee, the late editor of the *Washington Post*, how he hired journalists. He answered, "Above all, not from journalism schools because basically they do not have life experience, they have no practical skills and they all think in one way without being original". Would you agree that journalism schools, or degrees in general, are not the most important things for a good journalist?

Jason Cowley: I could not agree with you more. I never went to journalism school; I have no formal training as a journalist. I am not

prejudiced against those who have been to journalism school, but I am not looking for potential staff who have had formal training in journalism. I think it is about sensibility, enthusiasm and commitment. You will find the best journalists if they are sufficiently committed.

I remember that years ago I did a bit of work experience at the *Times* after I graduated. I ended up working for the *Times*. It had nothing to do with the work experience I did there. I remember one of the senior editors saying to me that he had never met someone who truly wanted to be a journalist who did not make it. If you want it enough and are dedicated enough, you will make it.

Baroness Meyer: Especially in your quality magazines, how do you deal with writing skills? The articles in both your magazines are incredibly well written, which is not always the case with other newspapers.

Jason Cowley: The barriers to entry are high because we value good writing above all else. Equally, younger writers can learn to write better, and one can give them the opportunity to do that through the website. As long as they are edited properly, the editor is sympathetic and offers young journalists feedback, as we do, those journalists can improve and become better and more sophisticated writers.

It is a bit like riding a bike. If you get on a bike and pedal, you learn how to do it. Of course, we cannot all be Virginia Woolf or Proust.

Fraser Nelson: Some of the best journalists are people whose names you never see in print: the sub-editors and commissioning editors. The writers you read are just the most visible part of the process. In the *Spectator* we are primarily a commissioning and editing operation. I think we work with some of the best sub-editors and commissioning editors in the country.

I did a journalism postgrad. I think these things demonstrate intent. As Jason said, to commit yourself to journalism is really important. There are so many setbacks in the profession that anybody who is not entirely committed will probably go off and do something else, but I do not think you can learn it. I am not even sure that a degree in journalism is particularly relevant either. Two years ago, of the two people who scored most highly in our internship scheme, one was an Oxford don looking for a career change; the other was a guy who had left school with two "E"s at A-level. He is now working for the *Daily Telegraph* as Ben Gartside.

Jason Cowley: It wasn't Jeremy Corbyn, was it? Didn't he get two "E"s?

Fraser Nelson: No. Ben Gartside has done far better for himself than Jeremy Corbyn.

CVs and academic attainment show how life was going for you at a certain period of your late teenage years. Talent and writing ability can come in all shapes and sizes, and a good publication will look far and wide to find it.

Jason Cowley: Probably our best journalist in the 20th century was George Orwell, and he did not go to university.

Fraser Nelson: But he went to Eton.

Q121 **Lord McInnes of Kilwinning:** You are both very strong proponents of diversity and social mobility within your own publications, but do you think there is a problem in the wider industry with not only diversity of thought but diversity of social and economic background? Do you think that within the industry, outside your own publications, other publishers are addressing, or trying to address, that as best they can?

Fraser Nelson: It is a very good question. I have been lucky to be able to do our scheme, which is an expensive one, because I have the backing of Andrew Neil as chairman and the Barclay family who own it. I was speaking to an editor a couple of years ago who said, "I would love to do the scheme you do for our national newspaper, but I would not be able to get it past my HR department and the other powers that be". It can be more difficult. You need a real commitment to a proper social mobility internship scheme to make it happen.

I struggle to think of the editor of any paper who is not a little worried about not getting enough diversity of background. If we are supposed to write about the country, we need people who reflect that country and all of its experiences.

The other problem is that journalistic salaries tend to be pretty low. That is not a problem if you are from a wealthy family. It is difficult to get around that problem, but it means there are certain things as being rich enough to afford a low-paid job. As the fortunes of the industry have declined, salaries have gone down. That means that people who are not from a rich background, who want to do good in the world, perhaps cannot afford to live in London on £22,000 a year.

That is also a problem. I think the industry realises that and is probably taking a lot of steps towards it, but I think that abolishing informal internships and coming up with a more formal scheme would be a great help to publications seeking to do that.

Jason Cowley: From conversations I have had with my peers, I know there is no complacency on this issue. Nevertheless, there is a lack of diversity, certainly at the top of British journalism.

Equally, journalism is not a profession: it is a trade, and, as Fraser says, it is increasingly a poorly paid trade for many of those entering it at the very bottom. That means all publishers have to redouble their efforts to encourage those who may not be from more privileged backgrounds to enter a trade where many are from privileged backgrounds.

Inside the organisation we have talked about these issues for a long time. Fortunately, our chief executive—a British Ghanaian, Ken Appiah—is very motivated by this subject and leads many discussions within the organisation. The events of recent weeks will no doubt accelerate change, as it must.

The Chair: You have given us a lot of really interesting evidence and we are very grateful to you. We will take one final question to wrap up from the Bishop of Worcester.

Q122 **The Lord Bishop of Worcester:** I am speaking to you from God's own country, Worcester. I declare an interest: I enjoy both your publications and am delighted they are thriving. As Stephen says, we have had lots of insights this afternoon.

You have already given some caveats about public policy and public bodies supporting journalism, but, as you look from the perspective not just of your own publications but journalism as a whole, will you give us very briefly what you might like the results of this inquiry to be, and whether there are ways in which public policy and public bodies can better support journalism?

Fraser Nelson: I would like the importance of press freedom to be remembered and underlined. It is continually at risk. People who want to help journalism quite often can end up interfering with it in some way or another.

To answer your question, I would say our industry needs your prayers.

Jason Cowley: In an era where the President of the United States is attacking some of the great institutions of journalism, such as the *New York Times* and, more recently, the *Atlantic* as fake news, I echo that appeal for freedom of the press. It matters more than anything else. Defend our freedom to offend and scrutinise.

Baroness Meyer: And analyse.

Jason Cowley: Of course—always analyse.

The Chair: Fraser and Jason, thank you both very much. We really appreciate the time you have given us. I know that both of you have magazines to get off today.

One of the things that you probably would not have expected at the beginning of this is that you can publish a magazine with everybody working remotely. The technology has enabled you to do that. I imagine that was far from your thoughts as you entered Covid.

Thank you very much indeed for the time you have given us and your evidence. We might come back to you subsequently on one or two points that are of particular interest but which we did not have time to explore. You are welcome to sit in and watch the rest of the evidence session, but, if not, thank you very much indeed for all your time today.