HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on Communications and Digital

Corrected oral evidence: The future of journalism

Tuesday 16 June 2020

4.00 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. 15 Virtual Proceeding Questions 123 - 134

Witnesses

I: Sir Robbie Gibb; Julie Etchingham.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

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

Examination of witnesses

Sir Robbie Gibb and Julie Etchingham.

Q123 **The Chair:** Our next witnesses are Sir Robbie Gibb and Julie Etchingham. Sir Robbie is a public relations professional but, most importantly, a former journalist and former political hack. Julie Etchingham presents for ITV News but has also worked at the BBC and Sky. I think both of you saw the tail end of the previous session.

Thank you both very much indeed for joining us and taking time out of your busy day. Our inquiry is into the future of journalism, and it started before Covid, so it is not focused on bias and all the things that have arisen during Covid, although those things are to some extent relevant. It is about the future of journalism as a profession, access to the industry, what people want from journalism and public policy areas that we ought to be addressing to secure the future of journalism, which as a Committee we all value.

Today's session will be recorded and broadcast on parliamentlive.tv. A transcript will be provided, which will be used in evidence in the report that we produce.

I invite you briefly to introduce yourselves and to give us a quick overview of how you think UK news broadcasters have adapted to change in the production and consumption of news. That change has hastened, has it not, during Covid, but it was happening?

Will you give us your initial thoughts and a bit of background on yourselves? When you have done that, we will go around the Committee and invite questions.

Julie Etchingham, do you want to start with a brief introduction?

Julie Etchingham: Thank you very much indeed, and thank you for inviting me to give some thoughts to this Committee.

We are in the teeth of this extraordinary crisis, so, to contemplate a way forward, we can maybe step back and take an overview of what we have had to cope with under the pressure that we have had in these past few weeks.

I shall give a brief introduction to my career. I present "News at Ten" and "Tonight" programmes for ITV, and I report for ITV's current affairs investigative strand "Exposure".

I have fronted the ITV debates on elections and referenda since 2015, and hosted key national events for ITV.

Previously, as you mentioned, I was at Sky News for eight years and at the BBC for 10 years, so I have done a bit of a grand tour. I joined the BBC as a regional news trainee in Birmingham, after I graduated from university.

As to how we have adapted to the changes that we have lived through, ITV is the biggest commercial free-to-air channel in the UK. We are the commercial news broadcaster with the biggest audiences in the UK. We

have three main bulletins each day. Our "Lunchtime News", "Evening News" and "News at Ten" reach around 9 million viewers. Those figures have gone up considerably since the lockdown and the crisis hit. As I shall speak a little further about shortly, that has all accelerated the pace of our technical change, extraordinarily in this crisis.

Even previous to that, as your previous two contributors discussed, we have had a period of technological change and opportunity in television production and news journalism. We have gone from being able to broadcast with a satellite truck and huge amounts of kit to going live from a mobile phone on a breaking story, if we need to.

There have been some extraordinary changes simply in how we can get to air. Digital platforms mean that we can show livestream news when we perhaps cannot do it on our main channel. Material can be edited on a laptop and fed in just before we go to air, so we can get things on a very fast turnaround basis.

We have had to get up to speed with a great deal of technical areas. We have had to understand how we get our content to where our audience is, and, of course, that is increasingly on digital platforms.

Alongside our considered take, there is a wrap-up of the day's news on "News at Ten". Our content is now adapted across the day for Twitter and Facebook. We have an extraordinary news service for younger audiences that launched a few months ago, "The Rundown", which is a digital bulletin aimed at 13 to 17 year-olds. That has had extraordinary take-up, particularly with the crisis; 11 million people have looked at it during the course of the crisis.

Our webpage views have tripled in the past year. Our expert correspondents can blog and tweet alongside stories. Most of the time that is an advantage, although it obviously has danger areas for impartial broadcast journalists, as I think we will probably discuss later.

We have a variety of podcasts, which means we can reach a more diverse range of audiences. Rageh Omaar has been working on a podcast called "Young British and Muslim", to speak very directly to and engage with that part of our audience.

The key is that, within that great pace of change, we have had to accelerate it practically overnight in relation to Covid. We have 37 bases around the UK and four bases outside the UK, and every single one of our newsrooms has had to adapt to working from home. At the height of the crisis, we had 80% of our staff working from home, yet we were still keeping all our news bulletins on air, both network and regional.

That has really been appreciated by our audience; we have seen enormous audiences for our news bulletins. I was just looking at some of the figures, which show a 67% increase for our "Lunchtime News", a 22% increase for "Evening News", and a 36% increase for "News at Ten". We have been paying a great deal of attention to our public service remit and trying to fulfil it at every turn. That is a quick, whistle-stop tour of where we have been at.

Q124 **The Chair:** Thank you very much indeed, Julie. That is a lot of change.

Sir Robbie, you have seen journalism from both sides, as a political campaigner and from a long career at the BBC. What changes have you seen, and what challenges do you think they present to broadcasters?

Sir Robbie Gibb: Most of my career, as you said, was at the BBC, although I should clarify that I do not work for the BBC now, so I do not represent it at this meeting. I spent six years at "Newsnight", where I was deputy editor; I then went on to be editor of "Daily Politics" and "Sunday Politics", and was editor of live political programmes and head of BBC Westminster.

As you alluded to, I left in 2017 to become director of communications at No. 10 for Theresa May and left when she left No. 10. I am now an adviser for the communications consultancy, Kekst CNC. I also have one foot in a newspaper camp. I am now chief executive of the *Jewish Chronicle*.

Most of my insights, for what they are worth, will be through the prism of broadcast rather than through newspapers.

My overall take on the situation with respect to journalism can be summed up by the poll that came out this morning from the Reuters Institute, which showed a big fall in trust in the media since 2015. It backs up a series of other polls and other information that I have seen from focus groups and a poll done by Kekst CNC showing a fall in trust in the media. The one that we did at Kekst CNC followed coverage by journalists—and by broadcast journalists in particular—of Covid.

We all have our views on the causes of that fall in trust, and we all have our own prescription. To chip in at the beginning with what I think is the cause, and the related issues around the solutions, I think people want to know what is going on in the country—not just what is going on. Yes, journalism is about holding to account, but it is also about distilling and explaining to the public—particularly with a company such as the BBC, but more widely across broadcast—the actual content and knowledge of what has happened, particularly with Covid but also with Brexit.

The second thing is the issue of impartiality and accuracy. It still plays a big part in broadcasting, as Julie just mentioned, but it is about prioritising it. If you do not make it your No. 1 priority, it becomes part of the mix and can be lost.

The third area is Twitter and social media—the big change that has happened. The biggest concern about social media, from my perspective, is how it reveals biases and views of individual journalists. I think it is referred to as "revealed preferences". Before, an interviewer would put a contrary position in an interview, whether it be Julie, Andrew Neil or Nick Robinson, and that was always defended, because of course you take the contrary position, which is how the interview works. But then they repeat those same arguments on Twitter, which demonstrates that they were not taking a contrary position—it is their real position.

The biggest change that has happened over this period is with social media platforms, because it plays in crucially to trust in journalism, particularly in broadcast, where, before, people had assumed that all BBC and broadcast journalists were impartial.

Q125 **The Chair:** That is very interesting. We will come on to social media in a moment. I have one specific thing on social media and impartiality. The BBC has commissioned a review of how social media is used by journalists. What is your view, and what do you think it should be saying?

Sir Robbie Gibb: It is very interesting that it is not just the BBC and not just in the UK that broadcasters are reviewing the use by staff of Twitter, in particular, although it goes wider. Twitter is basically the problem. Richard Sambrook, who cares passionately about impartiality, from everything that I know about him, was a great appointment by the BBC. This is not something that the broadcasters do not care about: they do care about it, but it is tricky. It is one of those things that is easier said than done.

To step back to ask what the problem is with Twitter, first, Britain is not Twitter, as David Cameron famously said. It distorts our journalism and distorts the way in which interviews are carried out; it gives a false impression to journalists about the views of the public. It encourages car-crash interviews and an emphasis on the personality of journalists, as opposed to content. It also rewards journalists giving strong opinions. You get hooked on it. You get tweets and retweets, and it drives and terribly distorts the way in which supposedly impartial journalists operate.

I will just make one reference to the Emily Maitlis "Newsnight" situation. Emily is a very good friend of mine. As I said earlier, I worked on "Newsnight" for six years, and once you have worked on "Newsnight" you are always "Newsnight". But it was a massive mistake, and it was driven in my understanding by the programme's desire for impact on social media and for retweets, which has totally distorted its editorial and impartiality agenda on air. This was one of those occasions when I thought that the BBC managers were absolutely right and needed to be applauded for responding so firmly and quickly.

The Chair: We will come back to the whole issue of social media a bit later in the questions and, particularly, what training journalists need to operate in the world of social media in the fast-changing world that Julie described more broadly. Before we get there, let us talk about some other issues.

Q126 **Baroness Bull:** Thank you both very much for being here and for those presentations. I am going to ask you about diversity in the workforce.

Journalism as a profession is, as we know, largely white and largely made up of those from more privileged backgrounds. We have had lots of suggestions from previous contributors who have spoken about the role of universities in career progression and pathways, particularly given

what we know about the likelihood of progressing to university if you are from a disadvantaged background.

They have talked about the prevalence of free internships and how this links to London. Astonishingly, 65% of journalists are employed in London, and, generally, across the economy, 29% of any workforce is employed in London. As we know, London is an expensive city.

They have also talked about how local journalism training schemes have diminished, so lots of reasons have been given. From each of you, I am keen to hear what you think needs to happen to increase diversity, by which I mean every kind of diversity—socioeconomic as well as ethnic—within the profession. What needs to happen from a policy perspective, and what does the profession need to do for itself?

Julie Etchingham: I think this has been brought into extraordinarily sharp focus because of the atrocity of the George Floyd death, which we have witnessed and covered in our bulletins at great length in the past few weeks. It has brought all of this into very sharp focus.

To rewind slightly on my own experience, I came into journalism through a BBC regional journalist training scheme, which was very tied to my own patch. I went to a comprehensive school in Leicester. I started out at a local radio station in a classic way—making the coffee, getting myself into the newsroom and seeing if I could persuade somebody to let me out with a bit of recording equipment to get stuck in.

I was very fortunate to be in a newsroom environment where quite a lot of the people working in the newsroom, although some of them might have been graduates, would have come up through the local news ecology—through local newspapers—and felt very tied to their patch.

I went to university and kept my local radio work on while I was there; I did not work at the university newspaper but stayed in broadcasting. I then worked at the old "Pebble Mill At One" in Birmingham, alongside a whole variety of people who did not necessarily have graduate backgrounds. They were simply people who had worked and knew the patch inside out. If you have worked in a region or a city, you always carry it with you; you always carry a certain perspective on life through your first experiences in journalism.

I went to a comprehensive school and I acknowledge that I was fortunate to go to university. I had parents who were teachers, who gave me every encouragement possible, so I know that I had a very privileged level of support in getting into this industry. But I am always grateful that it was rooted in a regional patch and I did not go straight into a network newsroom.

It was really interesting that, when I moved to London to work in the main BBC news environment—I worked at BBC "Breakfast News"—in the late 1990s and early 2000s, you really got the sense that this was a graduate profession. By that stage, most people had been drawn in from universities. Inevitably, because of the backdrop of society, that meant that diversity was not as it should have been in its connection to and understanding of the communities that it was serving.

That is a little explanation of how I see this. If you have worked in a regional or a local newsroom, you understand, I hope, why it is important to have really strong connections with localities.

I suppose that is one of the things that ITV News tries to concentrate on. I am very aware, working in the network newsroom in London, that we still have a long way to go on diversity. Significant work is being done at grass-roots level. We have a lot of outreach and apprenticeship schemes. In some of our regional and national newsrooms, such as ITV Cymru Wales, we are partners with high schools locally to make sure that they engage local students in the language of journalism, making it open to them as a profession.

We have an ITV newsroom day—an annual event across the whole of our network, where we draw in 300 school-age children from diverse backgrounds to spend a day in the newsroom with editorial staff.

We have had the Breaking into News competition since 2011, which makes a great effort to draw in young people from diverse backgrounds, including 31% from BAME backgrounds. They apply to their local ITV region and get mentored by journalists and are able to bring their stories to fruition. Fourteen out of 20 finalists in the past two years have gone on to work in mainstream newsrooms.

So there is a lot of work at grass-roots level to draw in people from different backgrounds, because we absolutely recognise that that connection with local and grass-roots audiences, and a whole diverse range of people from all walks of life, is vital for us to be able to provide a news service that is a proper public service broadcast for our audience.

In my view, what matters next is that we make sure there is visibility in other layers of our news organisation, in middle and senior management, so that people can see a pathway, that they are visible within our newsrooms and that they can see a reason for staying in an organisation. Most people would say that in most newsrooms there is still significant work to be done on that.

I would underline the fact that it not essential to have been to university. I have some very senior colleagues alongside me. One of our leading correspondents, Emma Murphy, did not do A-levels or go to university. She came up through local newspapers and regional news, and she is one of our leading foreign correspondents. We have to find our way back to those pathways and make sure that we connect with our local communities via our ITV regions and draw people in.

Baroness Bull: Thank you, Julie. I know that the clock is against us, but is there anything that you would like to add, Sir Robbie, particularly on policy, so that organisations are not pushing water uphill?

Sir Robbie Gibb: As I think you saw from Julie, there is almost an industry consensus about diversity, but it is not just diversity that we are talking about. It is diversity of ethnicity and, obviously, gender and disability.

It is also about diversity of thought. In the end, one of the main reasons we want diversity in journalism is so that it has the outlook that reflects the country as it is. You can have a situation, which I think you have in a lot of newsrooms, where you will not find a single person who supported Brexit. That is very dangerous, because you find broadcasters completely misreading the country, whether it be on immigration, Brexit, Churchill's statue or how Covid is covered.

There are two specific things. One is on public policy and one is practical. On public policy, which I think was alluded to by Fraser in the previous session, there are issues around work experience. Journalism is incredibly competitive. There are hundreds of applications, on the rare occasions when broadcasters actually advertise and there is an opportunity, and people who have been on work experience are at the front of the queue, because they know the people and have gained something for their CV.

The trouble with that is that work experience requires not being paid, generally speaking, which means it is for people who live in London and the south-east, who have wealthy parents who can support their kids after university and who can live at home. If you live in Dudley with less wealthy parents, it is inconceivable that you could find a way to maintain a work experience placement. That is one of the key areas.

The second area is a practical one. At the BBC, where I used to be, there is a lot of talk about diversity—of course there is. But what would happen, particularly with ethnicity, is that everyone would talk about increasing diversity on their programme, but there was a recruitment freeze. So you would have this ridiculous situation whereby the same people were chased around the BBC, which made no difference overall at the BBC.

So, rather than just holding my hands up, when I was at the BBC I set up a freelance researcher-producer pool, targeting particular groups. We had about 200 applications to join our pool and we selected about 10. We paid them a salary during the period of training and gave them free training on things that you need to do if you are going to be a freelancer, from law for journalists to health and safety, data protection and writing to pictures.

Those are all skills that you need. There is no point in just pitching up at a broadcaster and saying, "Hey, I'm available", if you cannot work in a newsroom because you do not have those skills. So we gave them all the tools.

I then set about talking to other broadcasters, friends in ITV, Sky and Channel 4, to say that we had this pool of great people; I can tell you what the targeting was in a second, if you wish. It really worked. Without listing people's names, because I do not think that they would appreciate it—and this is more on the producer side than the on-screen side—quite a number of quite lauded producers started through my freelance pool.

Stepping back, it really was a diverse group and diverse in the list that I made. Yes, there was diversity in relation to ethnicity and women, but, for once, we also had some Conservatives whom we targeted.

I have to say—and this will make me sound bad—that I think graduates are quite important. Nowadays, when everybody has an opportunity to go to university, and a huge proportion of the country goes to university, it is not a bad filter for having people with the aptitude and skills to write and be across lots of information. I also think that someone from a diverse background is quite capable of going to university; there are great opportunities.

We would target underrepresented groups via where they mix. Because we are a political programme, we would look in the House of Commons for researchers, with a very strong eye on making sure that we fulfilled all our diverse criteria. As I say, that is a very small example of it, but I wondered whether something like that could be scaled up, as it is practical, is shown to work and just gets on with it. We can talk about this, and people have been talking about it for years, and we can set up these big schemes, which work to an extent, but, in the end, you need to get down and give people practical help on the ground.

The Chair: Thank you. We will move on and come on to a little more to do with skills and then move on to diversity of thought.

Q127 **Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** Sir Robbie, you said that you thought there was an industry consensus about diversity, and I have no reason to suppose you are wrong. You were talking about skills, and Julie talked a bit about it before. What I do not sense is an industry consensus about skills, based on what the two of you have said to us. As briefly as you can, will each of you say what the skills are that you think an early-career journalist needs and how they are best acquired?

Sir Robbie Gibb: There are different skills for different roles. You can divide up the roles in broadcasting into three buckets. There is the production side, with the editor at the top, and producers and researchers. That is one bucket. You have the on-screen talent, such as Julie and the reporters. Then you have the craft area—cameramen, designers and so on.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: May I stop you for a second? Would you classify all those skills as journalistic skills?

Sir Robbie Gibb: No, the first two, I would say. That is a good point.

On skills on the production side, picking up on something that Julie said earlier, the technical skills requirements are much higher than at the point when I first went into broadcast journalism. When I went in, it was pretty much about research and whether you had an expertise, understanding and interest in politics. I had my first job on a programme called "On the Record"—I do not know whether you remember it—and I learned my skills there. It was pretty much that, if you understood politics and you could write a bit, you were in the game. Now there are

all kinds of editing systems, and there is understanding how to upload data and information to the web, so the requirements are quite high.

One problem for people trying to get those skills without being inside a broadcaster is only the broadcaster has that equipment. Unless you are being trained by those at one of the colleges, or you go in on a BBC or ITV scheme, or you get involved in one of the freelance panels, if they still exist, it is a huge and new barrier to entry to get into the production side.

To step back from that, you mentioned public policy. In the end, it is an incredibly competitive market. A lot of people want to work in it, and the skills level in relation to academia is quite high in order to be able to write at pace. On the practical side, young people lend themselves very quickly to editing and that side of things, but in the end you cannot structure out this problem. It requires editors and managers to take these things seriously, look at the barriers and remove them.

Q128 **Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** Julie, would you like to add anything?

Julie Etchingham: Yes, I would. I am very fortunate to work in a newsroom with some incredible young journalists, and I am always really struck, even when they are at a very junior level, by what their technical levels of skills already are. It is possible to teach yourself how to edit at a basic level on a laptop, and quite a lot of them will already have worked out how to use a camera.

When they come to us, what is crucial, if they are self-taught or they just have an ease with the technical equipment, is that we train them to operate in an impartial broadcast news environment, and that takes editorial input. They need to know about the law as it affects journalists. I remember when I was a journalist trainee that you sat a law exam as part of your traineeship. So there is a whole host of editorial back-up, resource, time and expertise that has to go into training a broadcast news journalist. ITV News is one of the few news operations that still has a trainee scheme at scale, which is part of what we see as our remit as a public service broadcaster.

On social diversity, quite often in broadcast news soft skills are crucial. Confidence and ability to express an argument and exchange views in a robust manner and the ability to be able to pick up the phone and persuade somebody to give you an interview are soft skills that are all part of our job. If you come from an environment where, perhaps, you have not had that confidence built up for you in the school that you have been at or the background you have come from, that is all part of how we have to learn to operate as journalists.

There are clear technical and editorial skills, but there is also a real necessity for us to support and encourage confidence in young people, to make them feel that, if they have an aptitude for this trade, there is a way of developing their personal skills to match the requirements of the job.

I just wanted to put that out there, because it is an important element of how we draw people into our newsrooms.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: It is also quite a big dividing line between people, as you have already indicated.

Julie Etchingham: Yes, it is.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: How, within training programmes that you are aware of, do you attempt to backfill that deficit, as it were, in the people who have it?

Julie Etchingham: Mentoring is used very widely across the industry. I am mentoring a young woman who is working on our "The Rundown" digital news bulletin, and she has enormous potential. It is a great pleasure to be working with her.

But it is about more than mentoring. We actually have to sponsor people within newsrooms, and I think all of us have to take some responsibility. If we see somebody in our newsroom who looks lost, or as if they are trying to find their place in the ecosystem of the newsroom, we should all take a responsibility to make sure that they are part of how we operate. That does not take technical or editorial skill; that is simply a person-to-person skill to encourage people to make them feel that they are part of the newsroom, and a vital part of our newsroom, because we need to draw people in from backgrounds, as widely as possible, who may not have had the encouragement to be confident and smooth and charm their way in. We desperately need people to make our newsrooms relevant to our audience. We have to go there, and we all have to take responsibility for it personally.

The Chair: Let us stay on the issue of what happens in newsrooms.

Q129 **Lord McInnes of Kilwinning:** I think Sir Robbie has answered my question to a degree, so perhaps Julie could answer this. One big issue that the Secretary of State has raised and that has been raised more generally is diversity of thought. As Sir Robbie said, given social media, everyone is more aware of people's revealed preferences. I know that in a secular way within the newsroom you have raised understanding of religiosity as well as politics. I would be interested in your view of the difference between impartiality and diversity of thought, and whether an impartiality that is complete deals with any lack of diversity of thought, or diversity of thought is required in a newsroom to bring about impartiality. I want you to explore that.

Julie Etchingham: Impartiality has been at the core of how I have been trained as a journalist, from when I entered the doors of the BBC when I was in my early twenties to how I operate now. It is the obligation under the terms of how we operate as news broadcast journalists in this country.

If you do not have sufficient diversity of thought in a newsroom, by definition you are not really understanding the whole range of opinions and perspectives that are out there. It all feeds back into the same pot. The more voices that we can draw on around an editorial table, the

better informed we are then to make an impartial and objective judgment on how to proceed on a story.

I know that Sir Robbie—and I completely expected him to—raised the issue around Brexit. Actually, in most editorial meetings that I have sat in, what we have had to do for our audience was just simply to make sense of it. We know that it was a heated issue, but it was an extraordinarily complex one too. Our first responsibility to our audience was to unpack it objectively and make sense of it. Our news bulletins are there to make sense of what is going on and make sense of the voices that people might be dipping in or out of on social media, or they might hear on a radio phone-in or a discussion programme, or whatever.

We have to provide bulletins for our audience that take a step back and analyse as clearly and impartially as possible. That is always the absolute aim of what we put on air night in, night out. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes we may have got it wrong, but I do not know a journalist in my newsroom who operates with any other intent than to provide an impartial take on the day.

Questions are raised very legitimately around the impact of social media on how impartial news broadcasters operate in a wider field, but I wanted to make it clear that our aim is not to provide a discussion programme; it is to provide bulletins that make sense to our audience.

It is interesting that you raise the issue of religious literacy. I have had clear experience of this, which might seem like a side issue but, actually, it was quite informative, when we were covering the assisted suicide debate. There is a viewpoint where a lot of people feel that that is where the bulk of people's opinion is, that they were in favour of the progression of this legislation, not in a religious sense, but there are other voices to be brought into that. It was one of those issues—it was just really interesting—on which you absolutely had to make sure that, editorially, you were putting out the contrary voices to some of the louder voices you were hearing. It was one of those interesting areas where a religious or philosophical perspective adds to the debate.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Sir Robbie, do you have anything to add?

Sir Robbie Gibb: I agree with what Julie said. There is a risk of group-think. If you have diversity of thought and opinion, you pick up things. With loaded language, for example, you may just not notice it. It is the same with lack of diversity in gender; things that a group of lads would not notice is very different to the sensibilities of women or ethnicity.

How we got around it when I was at the BBC, when I was very involved in the referendum campaign, was that we said to output editors to read the running order with a metaphorical remain hat on and ask if it feels fair and reasonable. Then they should take off their metaphorical remain hat and put on a metaphorical leave hat and ask whether it felt reasonable. It does not mean the same number of stories but, for a fair-minded person, does it seem reasonable? It is about language, the stories and how you approach it. Are you referring unintendedly to

anyone who wants to control immigration in a pejorative way? It is about all those kinds of considerations.

It is much easier said than done. The issue with Nissan is a classic example. When Nissan was looking as if it might close because of Brexit back in the day, there was huge coverage and it led bulletins all over the place. A few weeks ago, when it actually turned out that Nissan was closing its Barcelona factory and opening it in the UK, I am not sure that it appeared anywhere. That would be as a result of the lack of diversity of thought.

The Chair: That is interesting, and we could explore it at considerable length. It is fascinating and a very important part of the debate that we will be hearing more about, but, sadly, we must move on.

Q130 **Baroness Buscombe:** I hope I do not lose you. I am in the middle of the most incredible thunderstorm up here in Oxfordshire.

My question takes a different perspective. How can journalists appeal to and reflect the concerns of all audiences? Julie, you talked about audience. Of course, the difficulty—or I should call it the challenge—for you is that you have to appeal to an extraordinary breadth of listeners and viewers. Let us take, for example, the business community, if I can call it that, and people in non-metropolitan or rural areas. How do you face that challenge, given that it is really hard to ensure that there is sufficient expertise?

Are we in danger of concerning ourselves about having the soft skills to appeal, when we do not have what I would refer to as the hard skills? In my view, there is a dearth of people on broadcast now, for example, who know much about business; they talk about it, but it is so obvious that they know very little about it. It is the same with people lacking in understanding of life in rural areas. Are we putting in place men and women to fill slots in a politically correct way that does not actually respond to the need to have hard news and quality content of that news?

Julie Etchingham: I will very happily respond to that. Thank you for the question. First of all, I would say that we have an excellent business editor in Joel Hills, who is part of our family of specialist correspondents on "News at Ten". He was breaking a story last night about British Airways, and he has been on almost every evening throughout the Covid crisis to help our audience to navigate the unfolding economic disaster that lies before us in the wake of this pandemic.

We have specialists rooted in our regions, too. One of the core remits for our specialist work across all our output, but particularly on "News at Ten", is to draw on our specialist insights. We have our political editor Robert Peston, our security editor Rohit Kachroo, our arts editor Nina Nannar, our business editor Joel Hills and so on. Somebody will text me in a moment to say that I have missed them out, so forgive me.

We draw on a body of expertise, and they operate across the whole of our network news, as well as online. We will get extra content, of course. Robert Peston has just posted a blog this afternoon, for example, setting

in context how the Government are currently dealing with this crisis in comparison with the financial crisis in 2008, which he charted so minutely when he was at the BBC.

In each of our regions, we have political editors who deliver for people in their patch. One thing that I stress about ITV News is that almost half of our audience is in the C and D socioeconomic demographic. We have a very loyal audience in the north of England, in particular; our roots are absolutely in north-west England and beyond, and across the north in general, I would say.

Where the BBC has had its big move to Salford, and Channel 4 is creating this great footprint in Leeds, ITV's perspective has always been rooted firmly in those heartlands, particularly in the north of England. I know that when I go out of London to cover stories when I am working for the "Tonight" programme. It is the most-watched current affairs programme on British television; not very many people will have realised that. But the bulk of those programmes are made in Salford.

It is worth mentioning, too, that when I have done the election debates, we do them in Salford. It gives things a different perspective; it shifts the whole of the commentariat out of London, sticks them on a train and sends them up to Manchester.

To really wave the flag for ITV News, we are rooted very deeply within our regions, and we respond and react to them. I did some work for a programme that took in how ITV News has delivered PSB during the pandemic, and the first thing that our viewers talked about, when we talked to a panel of viewers, was how much they appreciate their contact with their regional news programme. Quite often, I will pick up the phone and chat to a journalist in the region, just to get a feel for something outside the London loop, and I think that is vital.

As a PSB, we do our best to deliver on that basis, and we have a different audience from the BBC.

Baroness Buscombe: I am glad that you said, by the way, that you are putting them on a train rather than in a helicopter or chauffeuring them up there, as I gather the BBC does, which is crazy.

Julie Etchingham: I do not know about that. I usually see them on the train afterwards, when I sort of keep my head down.

Baroness Buscombe: You cannot possibly comment. Thank you for that answer. Over to you, Robbie.

Sir Robbie Gibb: Not that I am here to defend the BBC, but I do not think that the BBC is going to Salford by helicopter; I am pretty certain about that.

At the risk of contradicting Julie, it is very important that we do not replace metropolitan London with metropolitan Manchester or metropolitan Leeds. You alluded to different types of Britain, including the countryside. Of course, a lot of the story of the last general election was based in the small towns. With the "Today" programme, rather amusingly, its way of going out into the country during the general

election, fought in the red wall seats of the north of England, was to go to university towns, which gave a completely false perspective.

Expertise is absolutely crucial to cover stories on business, rural affairs, politics and science, but if you prioritise impartiality, whereby presenters or reporters are not trying to editorialise or call a story or use their great insight in relation to a story, you rarely trip up. You have to build your package and your journalism around collecting the facts from your research, finding voices that support the proposition and are opposed to the proposition, and do not try to make it about the programme or journalists trying to steal a march on competitors. It is about sticking to accurately and fairly reporting the facts and explaining what is going on, forgetting all the pressures and excitement of social media and all the applause you might get if you managed to break some politician's career with your probing question. Forget about all that or make it secondary.

You have to focus on explaining to people what is going on and speaking to people. That is the other aspect: finding out what is going on by speaking to people. The editor of the *Daily Express*, Gary Jones—I hope he does not mind my mentioning him—has spent a lot of time going to readers' conferences, where he listens to what *Express* readers actually think and, funnily enough, he reflects that in his newspaper. That is why the *Express* is a very good newspaper.

As I said earlier, Britain is not Twitter. Audience research is Britain, and speaking to ordinary people is Britain. Do not be cowed by certain issues that you think are a bit difficult, and do not allow your metropolitan bias to determine your editorial line on what you think is important. Do not remove the graffiti off Winston Churchill's statue. Understand that that is important to a lot of people in this country. If you do that, you will not go far wrong.

When it all gets a bit complicated is when people are trying to impose their analysis and reading of the story, throwing things forward and saying things that they do not know, making predictions for the future and allowing their own personal perspectives to colour how they structure the package.

Julie Etchingham: May I add a footnote to that, which I should have mentioned earlier? It is a very brief one. We have viewers' panels that meet regularly with each of the editors in our regions. They are drawn from a diverse range within the communities and feed in directly to the editorial process in each of our regional newsrooms. That is a key point: we are listening closely in our regional patches. They are not just metropolitan patches: they might be in ITV Anglia, ITV Border or beyond. We try very hard to listen very closely to what our viewers want from our programmes.

The Chair: We have four questions and 10 minutes, so questions and answers need to be tweets rather than in-depth reports, if we can.

Q131 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Sir Robbie, you have just said that journalists' use of social media distorts the way in which they operate and adversely affects audience trust. Should they just abandon social

media, or should they be retrained in the use of social media to help to restore trust?

Sir Robbie Gibb: That is a good question, and I will be brief—I will do as I am told. It is a bigger problem on certain types of social media than others. The reviews should come up with some good recommendations, and I would wait for those.

I think it involves definitely retraining in how it is used, because it is a bit of a wild west out there. Probably the way forward should be some kind of opt-in scenario for broadcast journalists to decide that they would like to be on Twitter and then have to get permission, rather than the other way around, whereby you just assume you can until you mess up. I think that people tweet too much, tweet about everything and get themselves in all kinds of trouble, revealing preferences. So I have a preference for reducing the number of tweets and reducing the number of people who tweet.

Q132 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Julie, you have talked about the benefits of broadcast journalists using social media. Can you explain why it is so useful to get your message across?

Julie Etchingham: Yes, it is part of how we provide content to our audiences. We know that people are looking at Facebook and Twitter, and it allows us to break stories. If I am working on a particular story—and I am quite rigorous about it—I tend to retweet the reports that my colleagues have worked on, or I tweet stories that I have worked on myself. It just gives another layer of access to our audience.

It is worth saying that ITV News applies the Ofcom diligence to impartiality online, as well as when we are broadcasting, so we are all very aware of that. I acknowledge that Twitter is a seductive and tricky place for impartial news broadcasters to operate in because, of course, it is part of our instincts as journalists to want to take part in a conversation and to be part of the debate.

We absolutely have to be rigorous in how we engage and about which stories we like or retweet. I am very careful on that, and I do not have a huge footprint on Twitter, because I am very aware of my obligations as an impartial journalist and the fact that I actually front our news programmes and am there on behalf of the audience to unpack the day's events for them. I feel that I need to think about it with a double layer, if you like, but to take us off that platform would mean that we miss reaching an audience with our trusted, highly researched journalism; but I absolutely see the pitfalls of being drawn in too deeply.

The Chair: Lord Storey, do you want to pick up on that?

Lord Storey: I thank you both for what has been an absolutely fascinating conversation. I want to go back to the issue of social media. Julie, you said that you thought it could be pretty toxic as well. There used to be a time when journalists would report, and now journalists comment on the news, and they have a social media presence, as we all know; their hashtags are often on their news pieces as well. I worry

about this whole impartiality area. I have looked, for example, Julie, at some of your tweets and retweets, and it makes me think, "Did she really say that? That's not really impartial". I know that, following on from the Emily Maitlis affair, the BBC got Richard Sambrook to carry out an investigation into the whole business of journalists' impartiality using social media. Will the other terrestrial channels take on board what he comes forward with?

Julie Etchingham: Thank you very much for your question; I will answer as quickly as possible. I am concerned that you thought that I expressed something that was not an impartial view, as I am extremely careful at all times, and, actually, engage far less on Twitter, for example, than many of my other colleagues, because I am acutely aware of the obligations. If there are occasions when I have got it wrong or crossed a line, or you have formed an impression from something that I tweeted—I am extraordinarily careful for that not to be the case—I shall go back and look and consider it again, but I think more than twice before I tweet; let us put it that way.

There are definite areas of subject matter where I am deeply interested, because I have done a lot of reporting on them, for example, so I will perhaps show an interest in particular issues that are a matter of political debate, but putting them out there does not necessarily mean that I am taking a view. Without exact examples, it is hard to comment on that.

We are reminded at every turn, not least during the election period or a period when there is a heated debate around any given subject, what our obligations are on social media. I certainly take that very seriously, and I know that my colleagues do as well.

Some of my colleagues have enormous social media footprints and write for other media outlets, and, indeed, have their own programmes, like Robert, our political editor. But those of us such as me who are absolutely rooted in particular programmes—mine are a news bulletin at the end of the day and a current affairs programme for ITV "Tonight"—take that obligation very seriously.

Sir Robbie Gibb: Julie has never been on my radar as an abuser of Twitter, and I tend to be looking for troublemakers.

It is not just opinion on Twitter that is the problem, as I mentioned earlier; it is the effect that it has on programmes, as we discussed. Journalists use it as news gathering; it becomes a one-stop shop, and they retweet stuff around a particular story. You can go through particular journalists and see that, even though they are proper in their individual tweets relating to journalism, it is all in one direction. It is an absolutely sinister and destructive tool that is abused at our peril because it undermines not just the journalist and the programme but the entire organisation, with a few people. Most people do not do this, particularly at the BBC, where I know more, ordinary journalists are head in their hands when mistakes are made by particular journalists.

To go back to you saying that you thought journalism was about news and that it has become more about commentary, I could not agree with you more.

The Chair: We have three minutes and two questions, so it really is time for succinct, well-thought-out tweets that do not land you in trouble, if you can.

Q133 **Lord Allen of Kensington:** Sir Robbie, thank you very much. I have found your responses very insightful.

This is a question that probably needs a long answer, but if you were writing the report, as a journalist, what would you like the result of this inquiry to be?

How could public policy or public bodies better support journalism? Examples would be PSB funding and resources for journalism, or Ofcom regulation online.

Julie Etchingham: What I would like to see is making sure the health of the PSB system continues in this country. It is directly related to our ability to provide news and an alternative to the BBC. News should absolutely remain the cornerstone of PSB content. In policy terms, that means that we need visibility on platforms.

We are now really operating in an ever-tighter financial landscape. We now have an extreme economic environment in which PSBs operate, and commercial PSBs clearly will feel the pressure on their overall budgets, which will put pressure on news. We have to have visibility on the big social media platforms across the board so that people know how to access our content. That is one of the key things that we ought to be looking at.

There could be a way of finding the big platforms space to contribute towards our content. We are giving them this expensive, highly researched, good journalism that they can put on their platforms, and we do not get a great deal in return for it. So, from a policy point of view, they are areas that I would be keen to see progress on.

Media literacy training for the young in schools should be a plank of the curriculum for all young people.

Sir Robbie Gibb: I would like you to get broadcasters to prioritise impartiality and get Ofcom to intervene on issues of impartiality more frequently and readily, and to encourage broadcasters to limit the use of Twitter by staff, and with more responsibility, and to pass the responsibility for improving diversity on gender, ethnicity and, crucially, diversity of opinion to broadcasters.

The Chair: A final brief question and, again, really tweet-length replies this time, from Baroness Grender.

Q134 **Baroness Grender:** What is the scope for collaboration between larger and smaller news organisations? Does it require a nudge from government—for example, the BBC local democracy reporter scheme?

Sir Robbie Gibb: I shall be quick. I mentioned the BBC, and I think that the BBC has had all kinds of proposals. I am not sure where we are with those in relation to operating with other local media. As I mentioned, there are freelance pools and other efforts to get greater diversity. There is a lot that can be done, if there is the will.

Julie Etchingham: Very briefly, I go back to my previous point. It is the health of the whole commercial PSB sector that will ensure our longevity. That is where I would really like to see a lot of the focus resting.

As for larger and smaller, we collaborate on occasions with newspapers. We have worked on two big investigations with the *Guardian* recently. We have operated with other newspapers in the past, so we can form a joint team that can boost people's investigative powers in terms of their journalistic skills. But they are moments that work well. What we need is something that makes sure that ITV News has a long-term future as part of the much-needed diversity and plurality of the news offer in this country.

The Chair: Julie, you will have been very pleased with our last report on the future of public service broadcasting, which we were very supportive of and made strong recommendations to the Government to guarantee a future for the BBC, ITV and the PSB sector.

Thank you both very much. You have been outstandingly good and interesting witnesses. I know that the Committee has very much enjoyed your contribution. It will be used by the Committee in evidence and, obviously, we will send you a copy of our report. You may even cover it, Julie, if we are lucky, and you could both even tweet about it. Thank you both very much indeed for giving us your time this afternoon. It has been a very interesting and useful session.