



Select Committee on Communications and Digital

Corrected oral evidence: The future of journalism

Tuesday 14 July 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; Lord Storey; The Lord Bishop of Worcester.

Evidence Session No. 20

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 169 - 179

Witness

I: Rt Hon John Whittingdale OBE MP, Minister of State for Media and Data, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken.

Examination of witness

John Whittingdale MP.

Q169 **The Chair:** Our witness today is John Whittingdale, the Minister of State for Media and Data in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Minister, welcome, and thank you very much for joining us. As you know, our inquiry is on the future of journalism, with a strong focus on journalism in the digital age, the impact of digital media platforms on journalism and access to the profession, diversity in newsrooms, and the sustainability of journalistic models. We want to talk to you about a range of those things.

We started this inquiry before Covid, but it has clearly had a significant impact on journalism and news media organisations. Before we talk about some of the more specific subjects, are you concerned about the impact of Covid on news organisations, particularly non-PSB commercial news organisations, and their future viability? If so, is it an area that you as a Minister think we need to look at from a public policy perspective?

John Whittingdale MP: Good afternoon and thank you very much for your invitation. The subject you have chosen to investigate is tremendously important. This has been a matter of some concern for quite a long time now. As some of you may be aware, quite some time ago, I was chair of the House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, and I remember doing an inquiry into the future of local media—around 10 years ago—when it was already apparent that local media would come under increasing pressure, as would national media, as a result of the transition to digital.

That has continued since then, with more and more advertising revenue moving away from print and broadcast to online platforms, with viewers and readers following them and getting their news from those platforms. That has undermined the economic model which has sustained the media in the UK and indeed in almost every other country.

The Covid crisis has accelerated what was predicted to occur over the coming years so that it has happened in the space of a few months, with a huge take-up of online news material from newspapers and other platforms. At the same time, we have seen enormous pressure put on the traditional publishers. Firstly, for commercial media because of the almost complete collapse in advertising that took place very rapidly after the beginning of the crisis. When the country went into lockdown, that put a lot of pressure on businesses, and inevitably advertising expenditure was one of the first things to be cut back. Publishers and broadcasters saw their advertising revenue drop massively.

On top of that, while broadcasters in television and radio saw their audiences increase dramatically, it was even more serious for newspapers because they found that a lot of their readers were unable to purchase their newspapers because places like news vendors in railways stations and airports closed down, as did many high-street stores. They saw a significant drop in sales on top of the enormous decline in

advertising, which put vast financial pressure on them. Of all the media, the only one that was largely insulated against that was the BBC, because it has the licence fee, although it too saw some drop in licence fee income. Also, its studios had to cease production, as they did at ITV and others.

There is a long-term problem which the Government were very anxious about and which we asked Dame Frances Cairncross to look into. She made a number of recommendations. That is ongoing and we are still watching it very closely. You will have seen that the CMA produced its report just a week ago.

On top of trying to address the long-term decline and find ways to help the industry develop new business models, we were then faced with the immediate crisis caused by an almost instantaneous and substantial loss of revenue for all commercial media. The Government had to step in with measures to address that. Even though we hope that we are now seeing a small pick-up in advertising and things are beginning to recover, the long-term trend has not changed, and if anything it has now been brought forward. We are therefore looking at what further measures can be taken to help the industry to adapt to that trend.

The Chair: Thank you. Let us explore some of those measures. We have had a lot of evidence about the impact of the way the digital advertising market has changed and the consequences of that for the media.

Q170 **Baroness Meyer:** Thank you for being here. That leads on to my question. Will the Government implement the CMA recommendations for online platforms and digital advertising, and if so, by when? In our last evidence session, we heard from two witnesses who praised the CMA's report and wanted its recommendations to be implemented as quickly as possible. However, the CMA representative told us that that would take a long time, and in the meantime we are all worried about the future of journalism. Can you tell us how we could make this happen more quickly and give us your views on it?

John Whittingdale MP: I fully understand the feeling in the industry that we do not have time to have a long debate about this. Several very valuable reports have now been produced, starting with the Furman report, which looked at competition in digital markets and made recommendations for codes of conduct.

Dame Frances, who looked specifically at journalism, also said that measures needed to be taken to restore the balance between publishers and platforms. Now we have the CMA report, which is a very thorough piece of work. It is also 2,000 pages, so I have to admit that I have not read it all yet, but I have obviously seen the main conclusions.

All these inputs will be considered by the Digital Markets Taskforce, which is looking at what measures could be introduced. There is already widespread agreement that some kinds of code of conduct are desirable. One or two other countries have gone further than that, particularly Australia, which has moved very rapidly. I will have discussions with the publishers, and indeed the platforms, at round tables, but I hope to have

agreement by the end of the year on the kinds of measures that need to be taken, and that may well lead to action.

As you will understand, the CMA report has only just landed, so we are still considering it, but it is without question a very useful and valuable report.

The Chair: Thank you. In fact, Minister, this Committee, in March 2018, ahead of the other reports you mentioned, called for an investigation of the digital advertising market.

John Whittingdale MP: There are clearly things wrong. A very interesting report by ISBA came out recently on the supply chain in digital advertising. ISBA took the sum total spent by advertisers and tried to work out which part of the supply chain received which proportion. In the end, it was impossible to identify where 15% had actually gone. Clearly there is work to be done, because something is not working properly. I know from the publishers that they have felt strongly about this for some time, so I am no doubt that this issue needs to be addressed.

The Chair: Thank you. So more on this, then.

Q171 **Baroness Buscombe:** Hello John. It is good to have you with us. Given everything that you have said so far, would you consider perhaps asking the CMA to take more action to support the news industry, such as launching a market investigation into the open-display advertising market, or maybe, following your reference to Australia, what Australia is introducing, which is a mandatory bargaining-power code for platforms and publishers?

The issue here is surely a terrific time lag if the CMA is saying that we will have to wait until, we think, around 2022 to allow for the primary legislation to set up a digital market unit, to allow for a code of conduct to be developed, and, of course, to make sure that the right people with the right expertise are hired to occupy this unit. Surely more needs to be done now, because we keep hearing from publishers that time is not on their side.

If a market investigation is not practical for whatever reason, the CMA has in its remit the ability to launch an investigation into, for example, abuses of market dominance. There is nothing to stop the Government encouraging the CMA to do that now. Given the fragility of the advertising market, surely this would be the right thing to do, given the anti-competitive behaviour in the market that we are witnessing and have witnessed for some time, and, indeed, the amount of evidence which the CMA accrued during its work to develop the report thus far.

John Whittingdale MP: The CMA report is very thorough. Rather than immediately tasking it to do a digital markets investigation, we need to look carefully through what it recommends. We have the Digital Markets Taskforce, which I hope will produce recommendations much sooner than that. Nevertheless, the reasons you have given for why it may take some time are absolutely right. It is extremely important that we get this

right and that we get the right advice. If there is legislation, that will obviously require us to find an opportunity in the timetable and to put it through.

I do not want to delay this any longer than is necessary, because I sympathise entirely with the publishers, who are seeing a steady erosion of their income as a result of the transition, which is inevitable: we have to accept that people's consumption of news will be different in future, and it is changing very rapidly. Therefore, it is right, if people are going to get their news content overwhelmingly online, that we make sure that there is no abuse of the dominant position of the platforms. That is exactly what these reports have been asked to address and whose recommendations we are now considering.

Baroness Buscombe: I would love to come back on one thing. You will find in the small print, and indeed the CMA told us last week, that its primary focus was on harm to consumers and that it had not actually quantified the impact of a delay of several years on news publishers vis-à-vis the process for setting the DMU, et cetera. I find that rather odd, given that harm to publishers leads to serious detriment to consumers. One leads naturally to the other; one cannot exist without the other. I want to press you a little more on behalf of the Committee that this might be the right thing to do.

John Whittingdale MP: I do not necessarily distinguish. If there is abuse of dominant position, that will be detrimental to consumers, but obviously it will also be detrimental to others in the supply chain. At the end of the day, people get their news more and more from a handful of online providers.

Getting back to the subject of your inquiry, and why I think it is such an important issue, these platforms do not employ a single journalist.

Baroness Buscombe: Exactly.

John Whittingdale MP: Therefore, if we see a continuing decline in newspapers and broadcasters, who are the people who actually employ the journalists, that has profound consequences for the functioning of our democracy and ultimately will deprive the platforms. They have begun to recognise that, and I welcome some of the measures they have taken.

A much more fundamental issue is the market position. The CMA has already identified problems in terms of detriment to consumers, but of course we also will draw on the work that Furman did and which the Digital Markets Taskforce is now coming forward with.

So I am in absolutely no doubt about the need to address this as swiftly as possible, but equally, as you say, we have to get it right.

Baroness Buscombe: Thank you, John.

The Chair: Thank you. The decline that you describe is particularly pronounced in local and regional newspapers and is accelerating as a result of Covid, which we would like to talk about next.

Q172 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Good afternoon, Minister. I would like to ask you about the BBC's local democracy reporter scheme. It has obviously been a great success, and in your own submission reporters have been able to uncover stories that publishers might otherwise not have had the resources to discover. Late last year, the BBC announced that it hopes to expand the scheme if additional sources of funding can be secured. Would you as Minister like to see this expanded, and if so, how could you help that to happen?

John Whittingdale MP: I claim a degree of paternity of the scheme, because I think it was the Select Committee that first proposed some kind of public service reporting. When I had the task of negotiating the charter renewal a few years ago, I raised it with the BBC as an area that it would be well placed to address, and I was extremely pleased that Tony Hall agreed. As a result, we created the local democracy reporter scheme from the charter. The BBC has committed to putting in £8 million a year until 2027. All the reports that I have seen to date are that it has been extremely successful. The 150 reporters are scattered around the country and producing a lot of stories, quite a lot of which would probably never have been uncovered had it not been for the scheme.

As we see local newspapers shedding more journalists, sadly even in the last week, that reinforces the need. Personally, I would like to see more reporters—the 150 are still spread quite thin across the country—and there are also other areas that I am equally concerned are going unreported. I am thinking particularly of court reporting; it is very rare now to see a court reporter perched, taking a record of the proceedings. That is something that I have spoken about alongside Igor Judge, the Lord Chief Justice at the time, who was of the view that—in the rather hackneyed phrase—justice should not just be done but needs to be seen to be done. So I think the scheme could be extended to cover courts, and certainly there are other local institutions, particularly if we see more devolution occurring, where it is very important that there should be accountability and scrutiny by the media.

That takes me to the difficult part of your question, which is how we do that. I accept that the BBC is under a great deal of pressure financially. It has had to pick up the cost of the over-75s' licence fee for those on pension credit, which is quite significant, and it has seen pressure on its income during the Covid crisis. I am sure your witnesses will tell you in the next session that they are probably not in a position themselves to put more money into the scheme.

It was certainly the hope, when they moved the scheme into being administered by a foundation rather than directly by the BBC, that others might come and contribute.¹ Some of the big tech platforms that we have just been talking about would be well placed to do so, particularly for the reason that I gave earlier that they ultimately depend on

¹ Note by witness: The question of extending the LDRS is for the BBC. One possibility for the future of the scheme is that it will move to being administered by foundation. The BBC has committed to running the scheme in its current state until 2027.

reporters to provide the content. I will continue to press them to consider contributing to it.

Whether or not the Government will be in a position to do so is equally challenging in the present financial circumstance. I am looking at every opportunity that we can have to continue to support both local and national reporting. Undoubtedly we will be talking to the Treasury about a variety of suggestions for how that can be done in the course of the spending review that is coming, but certainly my view is that the scheme has proved its value and I would be very keen to see it continue and, if possible, expanded.

Viscount Colville of Culross: We have already heard about how the platforms have their own schemes for supporting local reporters, so they are not going to want to come into any kind of foundation with the BBC. The charter is up for examination in two years' time. Might that be looked at then?

John Whittingdale MP: What is happening in a couple of years' time is what is termed a mid-term review, which is not a charter renewal but a sort of health check, principally around the governance arrangements, which obviously were new at the time of the renewal of the last charter when we created the BBC board in place of the trust. We also have the licence fee settlement coming up shortly. So we are in regular dialogue with the BBC.

I do not anticipate the BBC being able to put a lot of extra money into the scheme beyond what it does at present, although obviously I would be delighted if it did. I have already had a conversation with the new director-general, who will shortly take up his post, and he has assured me that he remains very supportive of the scheme. So I am very optimistic that the scheme will continue, but we will be looking in every possible quarter to see if we can find people who might be willing to contribute to it.

To some extent, you are right that the platforms have set up their various initiatives, such as Google's Digital News Innovation Fund and the Facebook Community Fund. However, while it is all very well trying to encourage newspapers to provide their content online or to help them to recruit new journalists, if those newspapers themselves do not survive, those initiatives will not be worth much. This is an existential threat, as unfortunately we have seen already with the closures that have continued to take place.

Q173 **Viscount Colville of Culross:** Thank you. I want to move on to the Nesta Future News Pilot Fund, which in your submission you say represents a wide range of new ideas and tools for building financially sustainable business models and engaging communities in the news process. We have heard from a number of witnesses how desperately the media industry needs financial support for new innovative start-ups. Do you think this scheme should also be extended and expanded in order to provide that service and that financial help?

John Whittingdale MP: The first task was sustaining newspapers, and indeed to some extent broadcasters, through the present crisis, so we put a number of measures in place specifically to assist them in dealing with the pressures of Covid. Then we are faced with the task of helping them through this transition to the new digital world. While a lot of newspapers are now providing more and more content online and a number of them have subscription platforms, and their digital subscriptions are increasing, the truth is that in the main the revenue that they are getting from digital subscriptions is not replacing the revenue that they are losing through the loss of sales.²

Part of the answer to that is exploring new models. Some of the projects that were supported through the Future News Fund pilot are proving very interesting. For instance, I do not know if you have heard from it but there is a project to allow consumers to have a digital wallet to make micropayments to individual newspapers to read specific content.³ That might well be a way of increasing digital subscriptions without necessarily requiring people to take out a full subscription for a year. I think that kind of measure is well worth exploring.

The fund has come to the end of its first period. Whether we can extend it is a conversation that we will be having with the Treasury, but it has proved valuable in one or two of the projects that it has supported. I would be keen to see us build on that work, but ultimately it will be a matter of us convincing the Treasury to support it.

Viscount Colville of Culross: So you will really push the scheme, will you? Will you try to expand it as well?

John Whittingdale MP: I would certainly like to see it extended. We have already found that the number of applications for funding vastly outnumbered the projects that we were able to support, so there is certainly demand there. Equally, we may have to look for other interventions to support newspapers through this transition. There are a number of other suggestions on the table; tax incentives or tax credits are another possibility. We are certainly looking at a variety of interventions to try to help the industry, but that will all be part of the spending review process.

Q174 **Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall:** Minister, I want to ask you about apprenticeships, particularly in connection with journalism and the media sector. This Committee has looked at the apprenticeship levy in connection with a number of areas, particularly within the cultural sector and the media industries, and found that on the whole it does not work very well for those industries.

We have also discovered in this inquiry that the diversity among journalists coming into the profession is not great, that a very high proportion of them, probably over 90%, are university graduates, and that not very many of them have come through apprenticeship schemes. That seems a pity, given that newspapers and other media outlets are

² Note by witness: This refers to print sales in particular.

³ Note by witness: The business referred to by the Minister is Axate.

quite keen to use the apprenticeship model.

The Prime Minister said recently that he wanted to guarantee every young person the opportunity to do an apprenticeship. First of all, do you think the apprenticeship levy is working well? Do you think we are wrong to suggest that it is not, particularly in relation to the news industry? If you think it is not, is there anything you can do to improve it and to make it work better for the cultural sector?

John Whittingdale MP: As you will appreciate, the apprenticeship levy and the apprenticeship schemes are administered through the DfE and not by us, so it is not my prime area of responsibility, but obviously I am keen on any measure that can support the newspaper industry.

The apprenticeship levy is a good idea in principle, but of course there may be ways in which it could be improved. The Chancellor said in the Budget that we would look at what improvements can be made. Every industry is different. I think you have been looking at the screen skills apprenticeship scheme, which addresses a very different type of industry in which there are a lot of freelancers. People move from one production to another production and they are largely freelance, so there are adaptations to the scheme to meet that. Newspapers and journalism generally are not. They are much more about people being taken on and remaining with an employer for some time. Apprenticeship schemes generally last for 18 months or so, or maybe more.

You are right to say that the majority of recruits—90% plus—have university degrees.⁴ On the other hand, I certainly know people who have spent a lifetime in the industry who started out without even having A-levels, let alone a university degree. They would join as a cub reporter very early on.

We are certainly keen to see more apprenticeships. The National Council for the Training of Journalists already has a scheme in place that allows people to join and I think it has been heavily subscribed.⁵ There are other schemes as well, such as the one we talked about earlier that is run by Facebook on community news.

Could the scheme be improved? I suspect that it probably could and it is something that I would be happy to talk to the industry about along with talking to my colleagues at the DfE, but obviously this is for them.

On diversity, a lot of work has been done in broadcasting, but in newspapers there is probably still a lot more to do. We would not wish to instruct newspapers about who they should employ or what they should do, but we can certainly encourage them to try to become more diverse and inclusive, and that is an ongoing conversation which we will have with them. Apprenticeships may be one way of achieving that, particularly those supported through the scheme.

⁴ Note by witness: Reuters journalists in the UK found that, of those journalists who began their careers in 2013, 2014, and 2015, 98% have a bachelor's degree.

⁵ Note by witness: The Minister is referring to the NCTJ's 'apprenticeship standard for journalism' scheme in which apprentices complete their level 3 diploma in journalism.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: May I press you a little more and point out that your colleague, the Secretary of State for Education, has recently let it be known that he thinks that the 50% target for people going to university is no longer relevant. I assume, therefore, that his inclination will be towards finding other ways of providing skills training for young people that could and probably should include a greater concentration on apprenticeships.

Of course, behind this lies the question of whether journalism is a profession, a trade or even a vocation; there is some diversity of opinion on that. Would you agree that it would be helpful to the industry if apprenticeships were more readily available in order to meet some of the questions of diversity? Also, although you are right to say that people have come up through the industry, they are now mostly not, shall we say, in the first flush of youth. There are very few such people at the bottom end of the career ladder who come in via that way.

John Whittingdale MP: I am not sure I agree entirely with that latter point. My own experience is that one of the consequences of the financial pressures, particularly on local newspapers, is that their newsrooms are greatly depleted in number, but those who are there are generally very young people who have just come out of journalism college. That may be a reflection of the fact that more senior journalists are more expensive journalists and therefore newspapers find it more difficult to afford them.

I do want to see more people coming into journalism. Journalism has always been a pyramid so that the people who are now at the top started out at the bottom. If you talk to somebody like Nick Robinson, I cannot remember exactly where he started but it was on a local newspaper somewhere a long time ago.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: I think he was at the University of Oxford before that.

John Whittingdale MP: He may have been.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: That was rather my point. Newsrooms certainly have a lot of young people in them, but most will have come through the university route. I was just pointing that out to you.

John Whittingdale MP: You are absolutely right, and I have seen surveys on this. Reuters did one which put the figure at something like 98% of journalists having been through university. That should not be the only means of getting into journalism, and I would like to see more apprenticeships. There are some very distinguished journalists who have not been to university, and there is nothing like on-the-job training in that respect. I am happy to talk to my colleagues at the DfE about ways in which we could improve the scheme, but I would certainly like to see more people take it up.

Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall: That is very helpful. Thank you.

The Chair: Let us now pick up on issues of diversity.

Q175 **Lord McInnes of Kilwinning:** Minister, I want to explore the issue of

diversity a bit more. One of the interesting pieces of evidence we have had is about the issue of invisible diversity as opposed to visible diversity. This was something that the Secretary of State picked up on in his speech in March when he talked about diversity of thought, especially in broadcasting newsrooms. Today I want to speak mainly about Ofcom and its powers in this. First, do you accept that there is an issue with diversity of thought in broadcasting newsrooms?

John Whittingdale MP: Yes, I do. You will be unsurprised to hear me say that I thought the Secretary of State was absolutely right to raise it in his speech at the Enders conference earlier in the year. The big difference is that Ofcom has a responsibility to regulate broadcasters, whereas in newspaper publishing there is no requirement to be impartial—it is just the reverse in most cases—so while there is independent self-regulation, Ofcom has no current involvement.

On diversity of thought, I do not think that you can levy that criticism at newspapers, because every strand of opinion is represented in the columns of both the national and local newspapers. The challenge for newspapers is making sure that they survive, not diversity of content. In broadcasting, I do think that we have seen a slightly metropolitan view of the world in too many broadcast newsrooms.

It is very easy to question broadcasters on issues of impartiality. I have never thought that they are pro the Labour Party or the Conservative Party or party political in their coverage, but they have been guilty of having the same mindset. Too many people are of the same mindset and background and certainly did not take account of the strength of feeling on issues outside London and the south-east. That is why things like the outcome of the Brexit referendum appeared to come as such an incredible shock to broadcasters, as indeed to some extent did the result of the last election. It was clear that the changes in political viewpoint taking place, particularly in the north of England, did not seem to be recognised sufficiently in the newsrooms of the south-east of England.

That is something which the broadcasters are aware of. I am sure that David Jordan, who you will be hearing from next, will have some interesting thoughts on that. It would be very difficult to regulate this, so the broadcasters themselves need to think carefully about how they can ensure that their news coverage properly reflects the diversity of opinion, which was the point that I think the Secretary of State was making.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: At the moment, Ofcom monitors visible diversity in terms of gender, race and disability. It has asked twice now to look at other characteristics that it could monitor, and that would be a matter for the government. On the issue of background, do you think that Ofcom should think about socioeconomic background when it comes to broadcasters?

John Whittingdale MP: I would be reluctant to legislate to give Ofcom more powers to require information to be supplied. Particularly given the economic difficulties the industry is already in, imposing greater burdens on it is something that I am reluctant to do. However, the broadcasters already record a lot of this and can supply that information, and they

could well do more. I am sure that is something the PSBs are very much aware of and already trying to address.

- Q176 **Lord McInnes of Kilwinning:** Moving on from diversity to impartiality, one of the big challenges now for broadcasters is of course the ability of broadcast journalists to give their personal opinion—in a way that they would not be able to do in a broadcast setting—online, on Twitter or wherever it happens to be. While there is a reaction when, for example, Emily Maitlis gives a long piece to camera at the beginning of “Newsnight”, it is much more difficult at the moment for broadcast journalists to know where the line is with regard to their own Twitter account or blog. Do you think Ofcom should move towards greater involvement in broadcast journalists’ online activity?

John Whittingdale MP: I am not yet convinced that that is a matter that requires Ofcom intervention. I am interested that the broadcasters themselves are now recognising this. There have been occasions when individual broadcast journalists have expressed views through Twitter or online commenting, which inevitably has led to questions over their impartiality. I believe that Channel 4 has now said that its journalists should not, and I think that the BBC has asked Richard Sambrook to consider whether it should follow suit.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Self-regulation.

John Whittingdale MP: To some extent, I will wait to see whether the BBC does so. I have certainly been unhappy in the past about certain incidents that have occurred, and I welcome Channel 4’s decision.

- Q177 **Lord Storey:** Good afternoon, Minister. I want to talk about digital literacy. I have been interested in how many of our witnesses have talked about this subject and the lack of importance that it is considered to have. I was taken by one of our witnesses, who said, “Actually, we need to encourage the co-ordination of existing media literacy and digital activities into a cohesive strategy in order to have the greatest impact”.

Of course, the people who suffer the most are those with poor socioeconomic status. For their children, in many ways, it is a double hit. As a former teacher, I know that it affects their literacy as well because of the impact on reading matter on the home as well as their interest in digital matters. I wonder whether you have thought about that and what your opinion is.

John Whittingdale MP: Media literacy is a very broad term that can encompass a lot of different, highly desirable skills and knowledge. The Government accepted the recommendation from Dame Frances that there should be a media literacy programme. That is something that Ofcom was tasked with developing back in the Broadcasting Act 1996, and it is becoming increasingly necessary. It spans from basic skills—how to use Google, Zoom, Microsoft Teams or whatever—through things like raising awareness of the risks of cybercrime, online fraud and phishing, to questions of harmful content, particularly for children, and educating children about the need to be careful about not divulging personal

information and not trusting someone who appears to be one thing but may turn out to be another.

Another dimension that has become particularly important in the last few weeks during the crisis is being able to distinguish between trusted information, based on evidence and fact, and—I will use the colloquial term that everyone now uses—fake news. That has become increasingly important. We are very conscious that, for instance, the vast majority of misinformation and possibly disinformation that has been circulating around the Covid crisis has started off mostly on Facebook but also elsewhere. We have been talking to the platforms about the need to address that.

Media literacy covers all those things, and they are all very important. They apply at a very early age, because young children need to be educated particularly about safety. Then again, elderly people, for whom technology can be rather frightening and confusing, need reassurance as well. We are developing a media literacy strategy and I am hopeful that we will be able to set that out within the next few months, before the end of the year. I have no doubt that the last few months have proved the need for one, even if it were not already apparent.

Lord Storey: For children and young people, do you think there should be an agreed package that is taught in all schools?

John Whittingdale MP: A lot of work has been done by a variety of organisations. Organisations like CEOP have been going into schools and distributing the message about child safety, and Google has been doing a great deal. A lot of the commercial companies and platforms have made this something that they have prioritised and worked on. Indeed, some of the ISPs have found that they can promote themselves as being child-safe.

So it is a variety of things. It is inevitable that it will form more and more a part of the school curriculum as more is done online, particularly in the last few months when teaching has had to take place online with the closure of schools. The extent to which you want to have a specific subject in the curriculum is again a matter for my colleagues in DfE, but it is certainly becoming a more and more important life skill to possess.

The Chair: We found in previous inquiries, particularly when looking at online harms and the range of organisations teaching children about such harms, and this also applies to wider digital literacy skills, that there are a lot of very good programmes out there but they are not all terribly joined up. Some are different from each other and some are slightly at odds. It is not about a lack of investment. A lot of resources and money are being invested by a number of players—commercial organisations, charities and NGOs—but it is not sufficiently joined up. We took the view that that joining up was the function of government.

John Whittingdale MP: I have a lot of sympathy with that. I too am aware of a lot of schemes. As well as the ones that I have mentioned, there are organisations like Childnet, the Internet Watch Foundation and the UK Safer Internet Centre. There are a lot of people doing very good

work, but I entirely agree that that could well be improved by greater co-ordination between them.

I suspect this is something that will form part of the debate that is coming very soon about online harms. Obviously the Government intends to release legislation in the area of online harms relatively soon, and I hope that will provoke a debate about how we can tackle, through legislation, some of the most damaging abuses that take place but also about how we can generally improve the environment to make the internet a safer place.

The Chair: Lord Colville wants to press you a little on what you mean by “soon”.

Viscount Colville of Culross: The online harms White Paper raised a lot of interest when the Government brought it out last year. The Covid crisis has shown the importance of trying to deal with fake news. Can you give us a legislative timetable for when an online harms Bill will come before Parliament?

John Whittingdale MP: I do not think that I can give you a date for its introduction as that is not my specific responsibility, although I talk closely with the Secretary of State and Caroline Dineage, whose responsibility it is in the department. I think we are hoping to introduce the legislation before the end of the year. That is my understanding.

The Chair: Thank you. We have time for a final question.

Q178 **Baroness Greender:** Minister, thank you so much for coming to give evidence.

You have mentioned “All in, all together”. I want to ask you a bit about that scheme, because we have had some evidence that the small independent players saw little of the money; 95% of the £35 million allocated went to the larger players via the News Media Association. Some of our witnesses would argue that the very large players are squeezing the smaller independent players out of existence. Are you comfortable with that? When we asked representatives of the bigger players why the £35 million largely went to them, they said that we should ask you.

It is great that you are here today, because it would be good to hear about what level of transparency there was and what consideration was given to ensuring that more of the money was pushed towards more of the small independent organisations. Also, who decided that it should be only for print, for instance, given that there are the small digital players that might have a better reach to inform audiences, which was part of the purpose?

John Whittingdale MP: Obviously, the issue of reach was tremendously important. The first thing to say is that this was a campaign to support the Government’s messaging during the Covid crisis. It was not about a need to prop up newspapers. It did have the very beneficial effect of providing advertising revenue for newspapers, which had seen a massive drop in sales, as I mentioned earlier.

The primary purpose of the campaign was to get the Government's message across. The first part was done by me and by the department. We said, "We need to get the message across and the media can fulfil that function". We persuaded the Cabinet Office of that. The Cabinet Office has overall responsibility for government information, so it took the decision to fund a £35 million campaign that would run for three months. Which publications would get that money was decided by the Government's media buying agency, OmniGov. It was the agency that decided which titles should get the money.

Part of the difficulty is that OmniGov are professionals in buying media space for advertising and they are obviously very familiar with the national media—the broadcasters and the national newspapers, and indeed the big regional titles. Therefore, it was relatively easy to set up a campaign with titles that they knew about. They had done due diligence, they understood the reach—the audience that they would be getting to. I too was concerned that the funding should not just be the big titles, and in the end 600 titles, I think, benefited from government advertising, and it reached something like 95% of the population.⁶

We were keen to ensure that some BAME audiences who would not otherwise have access to the messaging should receive it, so we tried to support, for instance, Asian radio stations and some newspaper titles. The vast majority were members of the NNA, but that is because the organisation represents most of the large publishers.

When I talked to people from the Independent Community News Network, which represents the micro hyper-local outlets, I said, "Do get in touch with OmniGov", and I basically pitched to them why their publications or platforms would reach people who otherwise would not have the opportunity to see the messaging.

I know that some benefitted from that, but the difficulty was that OmniGov was starting from scratch. It had never had any dealings with these very small publishers, so they had to go through a process of assuring themselves that these were reputable, legitimate publishers who would get to the people we needed to reach.

It is also very difficult to administer hundreds and hundreds of individual tiny contracts with very small publishers. Whereas, if you talk to Newsquest, Newsquest controls 150 titles, so you can instantly reach a lot of local communities. Would I like to have seen more titles benefit? Yes, but we managed to provide support and get the Government's message across to an awful lot of local communities through the campaign.

There will be further campaigns on the continuing Covid message. As we emerge from lockdown, there are some new restrictions while others are being lifted. That requires a messaging campaign. We also need to do separate messaging to businesses and individuals about the end of the

⁶ Note by witness: When the Chancellor announced the £35m advertising spend, it was estimated that the government messaging would reach 92% of UK adults each month.

transition period. There will be a lot of government information to get across.

I hope that OmniGov will continue to talk in particular to publishers whose readers, viewers or consumers possibly do not have access to other media. This is not the end of the process. I understand why the hyper-locals felt left out, but it really was very difficult to put the support package in place as quickly as we had to do and to reach them when basically they never had any contact with government before.

Baroness Grender: Thank you. I can see that other colleagues want to come in, but I hope that you will be able to exert some influence in order to push any future spend slightly further away from the 95%, if at all possible.

The Chair: Minister, you have given us very full answers and we have just one minute left to squeeze in quite an important question.

Q179 **Baroness Bull:** Thank you, Minister, for your time today. Could you say a word about the role of freelancers in the ecology of journalism in a healthy ecosystem going forwards? We know that the freelance community has been hugely challenged and is therefore at great risk at the moment. How do you see the role of freelancers, particularly as they bring independent voices to journalism? How can government best support them?

John Whittingdale MP: The challenge facing freelancers during the past few months has been considerable. The DCMS covers a lot of sectors where freelancers form quite a significant proportion of the employment, particularly the film and TV production sector but also in journalism, as you have rightly said. There is a place for freelancers and we have tried to put a self-employment income support scheme in place that has benefited freelance workers. However, they have faced additional pressure, particularly in public newspaper publishing, because the titles themselves are under such pressure and to some extent they are likely to be the first to find that they are without jobs. I certainly think that they have an important role to play and I hope that we will be able to continue to support them.

The Chair: Minister, you have described an industry that is under existential threat. In this report we will cover very important areas of public policy, so thank you for engaging with us on many of these issues. We will produce the report in the early autumn and I think that it will be a useful contribution to policy-making in this area. We may then ask you to come back to us to talk about some of our recommendations and your thoughts on them once you have formally responded. Thank you very much for your time.

John Whittingdale MP: I agree with you entirely about the importance of this inquiry and I look forward to reading your recommendations.