HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies

Corrected oral evidence: Democracy and Digital Technologies

Tuesday 11 February 2020

10.10 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Puttnam (The Chair); Lord Black of Brentwood; Lord German; Lord Harris of Haringey; Lord Holmes of Richmond; Baroness Kidron; Lord Knight of Weymouth; Lord Lipsey; Baroness McGregor-Smith; Baroness Morris of Yardley; Lord Scriven.

Evidence Session No. 11   Heard in Public   Questions 136 - 146

Witnesses

I: Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Director, Reuters Institute; Angie Pitt, Director, NewsWise; Dr Elinor Carmi, University of Liverpool; Helen Milner OBE, Group Chief Executive, Good Things Foundation.

Examination of Witnesses

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Angie Pitt, Dr Elinor Carmi and Helen Milner.

Q136 **The Chair:** Good morning. Thank you very much for joining us early. Professor Nielsen will be joining us; he is stuck on a train at the moment. Before I ask you to introduce yourselves, I am required to say this. As you know, this session is open to the public. A webcast of the session goes out live and is subsequently accessible via the parliamentary website. A verbatim transcript will be taken of your evidence and put on the parliamentary website. You will have the opportunity to make minor corrections for the purposes of clarification or accuracy. Perhaps you would be good enough to introduce yourselves, and then we will go to the first question.

Helen Milner: I am the Group Chief Executive of Good Things Foundation. I was also a commissioner on the Speaker of the House of Commons' Commission on Digital Democracy.

Angie Pitt: I am the Director of NewsWise, which is a news literacy project from the Guardian Foundation, the National Literacy Trust and the PSHE Association. We are a primary news literacy programme.

Dr Elinor Carmi: Good morning. I am a research associate at the University of Liverpool, working on a project called Me and My Big Data, understanding citizens' data literacies.

The Chair: Elinor, you have something you want to submit to us in addition.

Dr Elinor Carmi: I am sorry for only circulating this now, but we are just processing the survey that we just conducted, and I want to circulate our initial findings.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: I should just say that I was chair of the Good Things Foundation for a number of years, and I am the patron of the organisation.

The Chair: But now it has really taken off.

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Yes. Now I have been booted upstairs into the lovely patron role, it has all gone really well.

Q137 **Lord German:** I will start by asking you a basic question, so that we are all singing off the same hymn sheet, in Welsh terms. Do you have, agreed between you or in your own view, a definition of what digital literacy is? As a subset, does your definition include the core skills and knowledge that you need to be able to understand and take part in digital online democracy? Thirdly, is it future-proofed, so that it evolves with people's understanding of online behaviours? Will it improve as it goes along? Do we have a standing definition, a future-proofed definition and one that includes core skills?

Helen Milner: I love the fact that you think it is an easy question with three sub-clauses. The Good Things Foundation works with adults who lack digital literacy and digital skills. In the UK, we have an agreed definition of essential digital skills for adults. That has been through a lot of consultation with companies and third sector organisations, and is now owned by the Department for Education. The essential digital skills entitlement, which is now in law, puts literacy and numeracy equal with digital skills, and that comes into effect in the summer of this year. That has five elements to it: communicating, handling information, transacting, problem-solving, and it is underpinned by safety.

On your question about whether it is future-proofed, the application of it should be. From reading what the framework and the standards that support it say, I do not think it teaches the skills to stay safe in a 2020 digital world but, if it is applied properly and people do not just learn the skills but also how to apply them to be confident and resilient — which they ought to do in the application and learning of those skills — then it is future-proofed.

The part about online democracy is difficult. I am sure we will come on to that in other questions. Does it help you to search for candidates in your local elections? Yes, it does. Does it help you to search what Select Committees are on? Yes, it does. That is part of democracy. Does it fully embed critical thinking to help you assess whether an email is from the person you are expecting it from or whether the news is from a trusted source? Again, the framework itself does not include all of that, but the application of it should.

Angie Pitt: It is an interesting question, because we all have different definitions in digital literacy. That is one of the issues. For NewsWise, digital literacy is about being able to use digital technology, so how to search for, access and share information—the functional elements of using digital technology—but also critical questioning of the information that we find.

My specialism within that is news literacy, so applying those skills specifically to news. Engaging with news is involved in being part of a democracy. We talk about understanding what news is and what it is for, critically navigating news or digital information, and then being able to share your voice using digital technology, but doing so in a fair, safe and responsible way.

On future-proofing, we work specifically with primary school children. We know that their use of platforms changes very quickly. Ofcom just last week told us that WhatsApp and TikTok are on the rise. For young people, platforms such as Facebook are declining. What is interesting, from our point of view, is that the critical skills needed to access and use those platforms safely are constant. The kinds of questions you need to ask, and of whom, remain the same whatever the platform. I know that some platforms are doing lots to protect young people; others are perhaps doing less. We are trying to empower young people and,

importantly, their families to engage with online content in a fair, safe and critical way.

Dr Elinor Carmi: In our project, we reviewed the way that academics have been thinking about digital literacy, and there has been no unified definition of it. We discovered that critical thinking is one gap, so I am glad it has been mentioned here. We developed a framework called data citizenship, which we divided into three main domains: data thinking, data doing and data participating. To focus especially on data thinking, these skills are extremely important for people to engage with online platforms. One of the core ones is to understand the online ecosystem and how different platforms are funded. Throughout the years, Ofcom has showed that most people do not understand that Google and Facebook are advertising companies, and the way that they show you information depends on that.

We also managed to look at other kinds of critical thinking, including being aware of the different kinds of rights you have, whether locally in the UK or at the European level, such as GDPR. It is also about being aware of the different privacy measures you can have through your browser, for example choosing a more secure browser, such as Brave, or a more secure search engine, such as DuckDuckGo. As you will see in the document I gave you, we have different kinds of skills. I do not think that we can guarantee that this is future-proof, because these online forums are moving forward extremely quickly and we have to catch up. It will never be future-proof, but critical thinking is extremely important and something we emphasise a lot.

Q138 **Lord German:** The Government do not have a definition of digital literacy in their advice to teachers. The simple question is whether we think it important that the Government should have a definition of what digital literacy is, or is it an impossible task? You have just described a variety of different approaches; therefore, is it the case that it is an impossible task, not worth doing, and we should not worry about it?

Angie Pitt: It is not an impossible task. It is about bringing all the programmes, research and data together, and collaborating. In the world of news literacy, in 2018 we set up the News Literacy Network, with the purpose of creating a shared definition of news literacy and, therefore, a shared definition of what works and creates impact. That was not difficult when we had all the interested parties around the table, and there were lots of ideas. That helps educators to understand what they are trying to achieve. It is not impossible and it is really important.

Helen Milner: If we can do it for adults, I am sure we can do it for children. For me, digital literacy, media literacy, news literacy and information literacy all mean the same thing. They are all about having the skills, confidence, resilience and ability to use the internet and digital tools in a way that benefits you but is also safe and legal. Having a framework for adults has helped us enormously, and it is being replicated in other countries. It also means that we can then measure. It is Safer Internet Day today, and I have already seen two completely different

indexes about which country is best at keeping children safe online. If you had an agreed definition, you could then measure your progress and, going back to the future-proofing question, ask how to adapt it to make sure it is fit for purpose as technologies change.

Baroness Morris of Yardley: I am glad that you all brought up critical thinking, because that seems crucial. To be honest, we know the education system can do the other stuff; it is good at that. Each of you said that, if that critical thinking skill was in the application, we would be all right; if it was not, you were sounding more worried. My question is twofold. If only those concerned with teaching adults and children digital literacy are going to concentrate on critical thinking, we will not make it. From your experience, is there a problem that teaching of critical thinking is not there in the curriculum or what we do with adults? You have to have something to build on; you cannot just do critical thinking as far as digital literacy is concerned. I am a bit worried that we have not laid the foundation stones for teaching children critical thinking. This hampers a lot of what you are going to do, so I wonder if you could comment on that.

Dr Elinor Carmi: I do not know exactly how children are taught, but you have a great point that children and adults are not aware. If we strengthen those aspects, and not only focus on coding, for example — I know that there is a lot of push towards coding — but also on other topics, such as history, law and ethics, students and adults will be able to think about these things more critically.

The Chair: I do not want to intimidate you, Angie, but Baroness Morris, to spare her blushes, launched NewsWise in a room that had been fitted out in Farringdon Street. I remember because I was in the audience. It is interesting that, all these years later — not that many but a few years later — we are all here.

Q139 **Baroness Kidron:** Follow that. I have two separate questions. One is about this idea that it is skills and safety — or even skills, critical thinking and safety — and that there is a missing piece, which is about understanding the purposes of the technology you are using. Someone already said that most people do not know that Facebook and Google are advertisers; they think they are something else. If I put to you that we should be looking for skills, the purposes of technology and the likely social outcomes, would that be a more holistic way of thinking about it?

I would love each of you to respond to another thing. We hear a lot about digital natives, but all of the research shows that children are on the lowest rung of digital opportunity, because they spend most of their time in highly commercial places that are very determining of their experience and so they do not get all the good stuff out there. Could you also respond to that?

Dr Elinor Carmi: I do not know if you saw that we managed to identify five types of users, one of which is social and media users only. They are young people from a lower social class. They only have GCSEs and they

mainly use social media. That demystifies the whole notion of digital natives, because they mainly use social media. We also discovered that they are not using different kinds of privacy measures and are doing less verification of information. I totally agree that we need to get away from that myth; it is extremely important. They have similar features to our limited user groups, which include people who are also using a limited amount of media and do not use critical thinking.

The first part of your question is a bit problematic, when thinking about purposes, because often we do not know the purposes of these platforms and how our data are used. When I press "consent" on various platforms, I do not know which kinds of companies are involved, for what purposes they are using the data and for how long. For example, just last week, we saw that more than 400 councils share private and very sensitive information about people. I am sure that the people who use these sites did not expect that.

Baroness Kidron: I am sorry to interrupt you, but is that not exactly my point? If we do not know the purposes, we are not literate in any sense.

Dr Elinor Carmi: Yes, but a lot of the times these platforms and services do not expose these purposes, which also change according to business models and the different kinds of business collaborations they have.

Angie Pitt: I will take the second part first and the first part second. In relation to how young people and adults engage with digital technology, you are right that, on the whole, we see young people who can absolutely pick up a tablet and use it functionally, but they do not have the critical skills to question how that information reaches them and how they are using it. We see the same in adults. Aside from the benefits of having access to lots more information and debate, digital technology has changed the way that adults consume news, for example. It is a much more solitary occupation and families are not engaging in debates around news or information as a family unit. We know from National Literacy Trust research that, in areas of deprivation, nearly half of families never talk about the news at home together. Children are missing out on all sorts of opportunities to discuss and analyse that information together.

We have even seen digital poverty so, in this climate of digital natives, we still see children in some of the poorest areas we go to who do not know how to use an iPad. When there is one iPad per class of 30 children, it is difficult to give every child the digital skills to use it. There is still digital poverty out there, despite a generation of digital natives.

In terms of purposes, at NewsWise we have tried to incorporate the purpose within the digital thinking element of our unit work. We think understanding the purpose behind the information you are looking at is part of thinking critically about it. For example, in the "Understanding the news" section, we have lessons on feelings, emotions, how news can elicit certain emotions, what you should do about it as a young person and where you can go to have safe conversations about things you have seen, read and heard. A couple of weeks ago, a teacher told me that her

class were really worried because they had seen the headline that World War III was starting; they had nowhere to go to ask questions and they were genuinely anxious about that. It is part of critical thinking.

Our lesson on disinformation focuses on what the purpose of that disinformation is, so how the curators and creators of that information are trying to affect the way you think and, therefore, the way you act, and how your behaviours might be changed by thinking critically about that information.

Lastly, we have a PSHE lesson, quality-assured by the PSHE Association, about targeted information. For the first time, it explains to young people how information is targeted at them and how they are not given access to everything happening in the world. They are given access to certain pieces of information and that can create a bubble. Part of that lesson is literally bursting the bubble for young people. You are right: purpose has to form part of the critical thinking; otherwise it does not really work.

Helen Milner: Our work is with the 11.9 million adults who are not digitally literate and lack essential digital skills. They are typically poorer and have not done well at school. We have a network of over 4,000 hyper-local partners — community centres, small libraries and even a fish and chip shop. Often, people come to say, "Can you help me to get a job? Can you help me to apply for universal credit?" Back to your purpose, they have a specific purpose in mind.

Because we do this in a very different way from Angie, part of the challenge is how to build the building blocks of confidence, resilience and critical thinking into that learning journey, when somebody has to sign on for Universal Credit, because that is real money coming into their household. They have to apply for work, because they might be sanctioned or they want to get a job. It is really difficult, but we break everything down to be really simple. We have an online learning platform with a reading age of nine. We have lots of people for whom English is their second language. You are right to focus on the social outcomes because, for them, it is very much about how we make sure we are embedding helping people to find jobs, to improve their health, to save money, to reduce loneliness and, at the same time, to build skills, because they think they have come for a particular outcome. You are then embedding the soft skills as you go.

It is very hard to do that at that level, particularly with adults who have not done well in life or at school. Our research shows that they have low learning confidence, so you have to overcome an initial barrier, as they do not believe in themselves and that they can learn anything. Interjecting soft skills into that journey is quite difficult.

Q140 **Baroness McGregor-Smith:** Building on what you have said already, in terms of whether everyone in the UK is digitally literate or not, could you break it down more for us now, by focusing on age groups, regions of the UK and socioeconomic backgrounds, so we can have a deeper feel of where the lack of skills exists?

Angie Pitt: NewsWise works with nine to 11 year-olds, and we are also piloting resources for seven to nine year-olds. We also train teachers and work with primary school children's family members, so we run family workshops for adults and children. Research from the National Literacy Trust has shown that only two per cent of young people have the critical literacy skills to identify fake information and fake news. That sounds really low, but a Channel 4 research report showed that only four per cent of adults had those skills, so something is not working somewhere in terms of critical skills.

We know that those rates increase in areas of socioeconomic deprivation. Children and adults who have less learning confidence, as Helen mentioned, are less likely to be able to discuss those issues outside the classroom and at home. In areas where there are low literacy rates and deprivation, and perhaps less access to technology, with schools facing funding challenges, it is a real challenge to upskill these young people.

As we have mentioned already, we call primary school children digital natives, but I would not call them critical digital natives in the way they need to be. In our family workshops, we see that parents have the same ability as their children. We invite parents in, ostensibly to support their children learning about the news, but it is actually also a programme to upskill adults by stealth. If we said, "We are the Guardian Foundation and we are educating you about the news", they would leave, but if we say, "We are here to talk to your children, and you are here to support them", we can upskill both at the same time and they leave the workshops with the beginnings of a conversation around news, which they can continue at home.

Dr Elinor Carmi: As I said before, we identified five different types of user. We saw that their levels of skills, understanding and participation in the online world depend on age, income and education. The political extensive users are doing more political actions and reading more news; they are more educated and have a higher income. The lower your income, the more limited your use and understanding are. To tap on what Helen said, one of our aims is to understand people's networks of literacy, which means which kinds of people and organisations they interact with. Young children and even young adults have specific institutions to which they can go to learn but, when we are talking about adults, it is more difficult. They have organisations such as the Good Things Foundation, but they do not really have places where they can learn these skills. These are the kinds of things we are trying to understand so that we can tackle those people, because it is a big portion of the population. They are slipping between the cracks and we want to understand and help them.

The Chair: Helen, you half-answered the question last time, but would you like to add to it?

Helen Milner: Some 11.9 million adults in the UK lack essential digital skills, and income and educational attainment are the main two factors. If we were to look at it geographically, as you asked, London would appear

to be doing a lot better but actually, if you go to Hackney or Tower Hamlets, that is not the case. We tend to look at it at ward level and use the indices of multiple deprivation, because everything else almost qualifies itself out.

There are 4.1 million adults who have never used the internet; Elinor was talking about the difference with these limited users. They may have one but they will not have all the essential digital skills. Older people are disproportionately in that 4.1 million people who have never used the internet, but again you overlay income and educational attainment. A woman who is 82 years of age, went to university and has a good income is going to be digitally literate and be an internet user.

The other factor is disability. People with a disability, interestingly, fall into two categories: 50 per cent are those who are not internet users or are limited users of the internet; the other half use the internet and technology a lot, because it massively helps with their disability.

Baroness McGregor-Smith: It is such a wide debate. What three things could you do to massively change that? You talk about two per cent of young people or four per cent of adults. What three things would you do, if you had the entire Government's support and resources at your disposal?

Dr Elinor Carmi: As we are focusing on adults, one of the main things that we can do is to provide funding for libraries. In the past decade, around 800 libraries have closed down. Libraries are places where adults can go. They have computers there. Most of them are not that sophisticated, but they are still worth going for. They are also places where you can find news for free. For people from lower economic situations, these are places where they can engage with others, and also with librarians. We are forgetting that, before Google Search, librarians were — they still are — much more suitable to provide advice about finding information that suited the people with whom they were engaging. That is the first thing for me, because, if people do not have anywhere to go or do not have funding, that is a place where they can find that for free. It is one of the last free public places that we have.

For me, the second thing would definitely be regulation. We need to regulate platforms so that they are more suitable and have fewer different measures that confuse people about what they can do online. These are my two main things: to provide funding for libraries and to regulate online platforms.

Angie Pitt: From an education point of view, something is not quite working in the curriculum. The Government's response to Cairncross and the media literacy strategy was that there is critical thinking in the curriculum, for example questioning the source in history and critical analysis in English. That is all true, but missing is the ability to bring all those skills together and apply them to the real world, for example not just looking at a poem and thinking how the language is trying to affect the way I feel, but applying the same questions to a news text, saying,

"What is this trying to make me feel and why? What can I do about that to balance that out?" The curriculum is number one, and that does not mean a brand new subject. It just means adapting it for the real world.

The second is to help all of us doing this stuff to collaborate. Help bring us together to develop a shared understanding of what works and how we can all add value and support each other. We are doing that on an ad hoc basis, as we meet different projects, working out how we can work in partnership, but that is a lot of work alongside delivering your programme, day in and day out, so help to bring everyone together ahead of the media literacy strategy in the summer.

The last one is resources. We all agree that what we are doing is hard work. NewsWise, in its team of three in its first year, covered 10,000 miles across the UK, going to the hardest-to-reach geographically as well as socioeconomically. That is really hard work, and we want to do it because we are passionate about what we do, but any support in terms of how we do it, even train fares, would be something to help us reach more young people on a larger scale than we do currently.

Helen Milner: I have a six-point plan for a 100 per cent digitally included nation for adults. Choosing three of the six, the first is to be much more ambitious. The Prime Minister has announced £5 billion to fix broadband infrastructure. There is a fraction of that investment in the skills and ability to make sure that those 12 million adults who cannot use it are properly skilled, let alone skilled in a way that will keep them safe. If they just learn it from their mates, they will probably not get particularly digitally literate or safe. It is definitely to be much more ambitious in scale. Our blueprint calls for a 100 per cent digitally included nation. That is what I would like, but something nearer would be much better.

The second one is about motivation. We know one of the key barriers that keeps people from learning how to use the internet is that they do not understand the benefits, but they also think it is a scary place. In the work that we do, we have to balance what we say about how the internet will help to improve people's lives. It is going to help people be more connected not just to family living far away but to their community, and it is going to improve their confidence and self-esteem, and help them interact with government services and commercial services that they want to use and that will help them. They hear all the bad things about people having their identities stolen and the scams around every corner. We need to make sure that we educate them in such a way that they understand how to spot the scams and keep themselves safe, but do not stay off the internet because of those reasons.

The third one is about skills. We need a massive investment in the skills infrastructure. I will be controversial and say, particularly for these 12 million adults, that we should not be forcing them on to qualifications. We should take them on learning journeys that meet their needs and take them down a pathway to their end purpose. There is a government obsession with saying that, if we are paying for this learning, you need a

qualification at the end of it. Actually, we want digitally literate and confident citizens. That is a big problem.

Investment in libraries is good, but so is investment in community organisations. We work with 4,000 organisations. About half are public libraries, but the other half are essential. They are already in the core of their communities, where people on low incomes, who have no or low qualifications, are already going. They can hand-hold them, so that people like them are taking them on that journey. That is hugely important. The money that they have available has been decimated by the cuts in local government.

The Chair: I have a supplementary from Lord Knight but, before that, we can use this opportunity to welcome Professor Rasmus Nielsen. Please introduce yourself and then plunge straight into what three things you would like to add to the list.

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen: First, I apologise for the tardiness. I had to bow to the higher power of Great Western Railway in getting here from Oxford. I am Professor of Political Communication at the University of Oxford, and I direct the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, which is tasked with exploring the future of journalism worldwide, which we do through programmes for mid-career journalists, leadership development for senior editors and executives in the industry, and independent evidence-based research.

Very briefly, on what our research shows narrowly for news literacy — as a subset of digital literacy, which I know other experts here have spoken about — we can demonstrate that people's familiarity with how news is produced, funded and displayed is directly associated with their patterns of news consumption. People with high news literacy are more likely to rely on broadly trusted brands, such as upmarket newspapers and regulated broadcasters. They are also more likely to be sceptical of news that they come across on social media and search, for example. News literacy is intrinsically important in a democratic society, but it is also important for how people behave and engage with that society.

We have found from UK studies that the majority of the UK population has limited news literacy. When we ask a set of factual questions and give them options, one of which is correct, the majority get less than half of the questions right. The problem is particularly pronounced in older adults, who have significantly lower levels of news literacy than younger people, primarily because very few older adults understand how platforms such as Facebook operate and why they see what they see there. A very large number of people in this country rely on platforms such as Facebook, Google Search, YouTube and the like for news, but a minority understand why they are seeing what they see on these platforms. Younger people have higher levels and, as Helen and others have said, we also find very clear socioeconomic differences; people with less privileged backgrounds have lower levels of news literacy.

What could be done to change the situation? I will say three things. The Government have convening power, as has been suggested by others, and there is a question of whether the initiatives that exist in civil society, public service media and the private sector can be aligned.

Secondly, as Helen suggested, investing in technical infrastructure without investing in social infrastructure is like giving everybody a car without giving them an opportunity to get a driver's licence. It is really dangerous. The overall theme of your work is whether we should embrace or fear digital technology. I suppose we should both embrace and fear digital technology, and help people be competent users of very powerful tools.

Thirdly, there is always room for improvement, in every part of the population, in people's news literacy. Our research suggests, narrowly within the area of news, that older adults are by far the most vulnerable part of the population and the least likely to understand the media that they increasingly rely on. They understand what I crudely call old media quite well, but they do not understand the underlying technologies, business models and operations of platform companies that they have embraced, in very large numbers, and are heavily reliant on for news.

Q141 **Lord Knight of Weymouth:** I have two quick geographic questions, particularly for Helen. First, in the international work you are doing, is the pattern you have identified in the UK around age and education factors unusual or normal? Secondly, the four nations of the UK have different education systems. Do you see differences across the four nations that indicate that education makes a difference, or is it more cultural?

Helen Milner: From the work that we do in countries such as Australia, it is pretty much the same. It is income and educational attainment, which is fascinating. We have rolled out a Good Things Foundation in Australia, which has a huge geography and a slightly different political system— although they have greens and reds — but the barriers, reasons and demographic breakdown are the same. We have also done some work in Kenya and the Philippines, and we find it is the same; they are just behind.

I hate to tell you this but I started working in this field 20 years ago, when only a third of the population were internet users. If you think about the population, a third are going to go for it; a third absolutely need our help and support, whatever happens, to understand the benefits and get the education they need; the third in the middle will probably muddle through but will probably need some help with some of these more complex things.

The work that we did in Kenya found the same thing. They are just further behind. There are people going online, but it is also much more expensive. There are all those other things. There are people who are getting there; they have mobile phones but they are not using them for anything other than WhatsApp. Some of the things around Facebook being the platform are very worrying, because they are not looking at a

breadth of different platforms. You then see the people on low incomes, who have never been to school, who are massively left behind and who have not really been touched by this yet.

Globally, we have only just passed half of the world's population being internet users. If we look at this as a global issue, half of the world is very slowly now coming online. It is not the revolution we see in our own backyard, with all the things people often say about everyone having a mobile phone so it will all be fine.

It is the same across the UK; it is age, income and educational attainment. Northern Ireland is behind. I am not an expert on education systems. Some may argue that Scotland has a better education system, but it is exactly the same. I am also talking for adults only, so 16-plus. If there has been any change in the under-16s, I would not know.

Baroness Morris of Yardley: I was listening to you talking about different platforms and some being more trustworthy with information. That was true when people relied on newspapers or the written word for their political information. Is there a connection? We worried, but not as much, when people read only certain newspapers that one might think were not as factual as others. If you are not good at discerning false news from more accurate news when looking at the written word, does that transfer to your digital skills? Is there a connection? Can you use that skill? I suppose the question is whether it is a transferrable skill.

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen: Our research suggests that these are complementary but different skill sets. The news literacy that helps a citizen to make informed choices about what news he or she engages with to be entertained, diverted or outraged, and which forms they engage with to be informed and to make consequential decisions — trusting that the information is accurate and credible — is in itself an important skill set, but it does not automatically give the same person an understanding of how ranking decisions are made by platform companies, what business models are behind those companies and what reasoning is behind the community standards and terms of service by which they operate.

It seems that we have two vectors and, if we want a healthy, functioning 21st-Century democracy, we have to confront the fact that the majority of people's public engagement will be mediated by digital technology, much of it operated and owned by for-profit companies based in the US. We have to help them with both. They have to be capable of making their own informed choices about what they want to rely on for what, but also understand the institutions and increasingly intermediate their access to them.

Dr Elinor Carmi: I want to emphasise and also echo what was just said. You are talking about trying to understand content, but we also see interface design with online platforms that, a lot of the time, is meant to deceive people. In 2018, there was research by the Norwegian Consumer Council that was called *Deceived by Design*. It examined platforms such

as Facebook, Google and so on, and showed how they do not comply with GDPR. They make something called dark patterns, which means different kinds of interface design, in terms of colours and phrasing, that is meant to deceive people.

Just two weeks ago, Google tried a different design in their search results and it was really difficult to identify what were ads and what was actual content from the search results. It was only because of journalists and public outcry that they backtracked on that. It is important to understand what is quite new with online platforms, which is that we are dealing with not only different kinds of content — it might be disinformation, misinformation or malinformation — but also different kinds of interface designs that make it difficult for people to interact in ways that are meaningful and beneficial for them, being more aware of privacy and things.

Q142 **Lord Scriven:** You started to touch on the question I wanted to ask when Baroness McGregor-Smith asked her supplementary. I will just ask what you think are the main barriers to overcome for good digital, media and political literacy. I would particularly like you to concentrate on how you think they can be overcome. Think about it at the government legislative level, the platforms, the companies themselves and the individual, because there are different levels to overcoming this, rather than just a legislative approach.

Angie Pitt: The biggest barrier I see is a lack of confidence, particularly in areas of deprivation. People who have not engaged in education or who are not in school at the moment do not feel that they have the skills to teach or to identify disinformation, bias, opinion or rumour. That is the same not just for young people but for teachers. In research, teachers strongly felt that there should be space for this in the curriculum and that disinformation was having a harmful effect on young people, but they did not feel that they had the skills or the confidence to teach it. Something needs to happen to give confidence at a much higher scale and give teachers the ability to learn about this and have resources they can use.

The other side of the coin is overconfidence. With higher literacy rates, we often hear of the third-person syndrome so, "Yes, fake news is an issue, but I am not the one sharing it". We need a way to level everyone, so that we all accept that this is an issue and go forward from there. There have been interesting ideas in Ireland, in terms of campaigns bringing broadcasters, media, charities and educators together to help share the message that we are all in this together. This is not some communities or people more than others.

Some element of campaigning would really help, as would making the messages simple. When we go into complex descriptions of types of disinformation, infiltration and leveraging filter bubbles, people switch off. At the primary level, we have tried to break it down to: question the source; look at what other people are saying about this piece of information. At a UK level, we need to do the same for adults. We need to make it as simple as possible, because lots of complex arguments have

the effect of causing people with low literacy to switch off and people with high literacy to switch off, because they think they know it already.

Helen Milner: I have answered some of your question already. I would like to pick at this concept of good digital and political literacy. The Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy was a while ago — the report came out in 2015 — but, as a commissioner, I went around the country and ran sessions with real people in real communities, to talk about what democracy means. I am a really optimistic person, but it made me really pessimistic. I met a 22-year-old young man who had three children but did not know what a polling station or the electoral register was, had no interaction whatsoever and felt that this was all an irrelevance to him.

When the report came out, the only thing that anybody in the media covered was that the commission recommended online voting. The report had lots of wonderful recommendations in it, for example that education about democracy ought to be part of the school curriculum, because of the number of people who did not know about it. Once you leave school, how are you going to know? There was an obsession about elections, so democracy and politics are just about who you are going to vote for and your elected representative. It is part of what I was going to call the urban myth: that people are interested in policies, not politics. If you are interested in policies, the bit that happens between elections, such as select committees, is more interesting than who you are going to vote for, particularly if you live in a constituency where you cannot affect who is elected.

We have done a number of things around what democracy means, so the information piece, around who you vote for, what that means and how Parliament works. There is also how to engage with democracy. We have done a lot of work, particularly with women from ethnic minorities, who have English as a second language, about how they could contact their elected representatives — so both MPs and local councillors — to engage in conversation and dialogue with them, and then also about their role.

We ran a project called Voicebox Cafés, which was part of the women's centenary fund in 2018. It was primarily focused on women under the age of 30, but we let older women in too. That was about asking our hyper-local partners what democracy means for the women in those local areas. That included people running mock elections. We know from our surveys that 26 per cent of those women had never voted before. They then registered to vote in the next election, so they became more engaged. You had younger women who started campaigning. They thought they wanted more information about how democracy worked, but realised that they were really interested in period poverty. They set up an online campaign about period poverty because, for them, that is what democracy meant; it was about their own positive action.

What we are talking about here is that we obviously want people to have digital literacy, critical thinking skills and the soft skills to thrive in a digital world, but we should not necessarily conflate that to say that they

would be politically literate. Those two things are slightly different, from my experience.

The Chair: Could I switch this slightly by asking Professor Nielsen a question to do with communication? In the past week, there has been a lot of discussion about the coronavirus and misinformation. This is possibly me being slightly critical of the research community. If you go back 15 years, there was a tremendous amount of discussion about the three vaccines for children. I am not aware of any research that has been done recently looking at the reality of that. How damaging was it? How many children became ill because of the misinformation? How damaging was that debate? It is interesting now. Apply that to the coronavirus; what a wonderful opportunity the media have to explain the dangers of misinformation. I am not sure the media are picking it up and running with it.

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen: Guilty as charged. I could not agree more. I had the rather dubious honour of serving on the European Commission's rather grandly named High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation. The most shocking of several shocking experiences was that there appears to be almost no independent empirical research on misinformation in Europe. Almost all of it is based on reporting, which can be good but sometimes less so, advocacy groups that collect data in good faith but with a clear agenda, and submissions by interested parties. It is shocking that we are talking about the future of our democratic infrastructure with almost no evidence. Imagine if we talked about climate change on that basis. We would still have political debate — reasonable people can disagree on the right responses — but utter ignorance seems like a bad place to start.

We tried, with the best of our modest ability, to do some of that empirical research at our end but, at the end of the day, this is something that can only be done collectively. It requires real empirical research, which requires real resources, not just the time of a lecturer who has a heavy teaching load. There is a cost to doing good research, as we know from public health and elsewhere, and this does not just happen of its own accord.

Q143 **Baroness Kidron:** This is a slightly aligned question. Tristan Harris says that 70 per cent of what we read or see is recommended to us via the platforms. What is your reaction to that? Is that a barrier to literacy, in that you are being fed the next piece based on the last?

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen: This is a wonderful opportunity to unpack where we are a little. First, I have tremendous respect for Tristan and his work, but I would ask where that figure comes from, what it is based on and how do we know. I would be really interested in seeing where that comes from, but a lot of these nuggets take on a life of their own and are treated as fact. That may be correct. I just do not know; I have not seen the underlying research.

Secondly, 70 per cent sounds high to me, but the number is high. We know that, in this country for example, the majority of the population rely on algorithmically curated environments, such as search, social media and video-sharing sites, for at least part of their online news. We know that the sites of news and information providers, whether established or digitally born, account for something like three per cent of the amount of time that people spend online, whereas the combined portfolio of sites run by Google is about 22 per cent; the combined portfolio of sites run by Facebook is about 14 per cent. Add to that Twitter, TikTok and a few others and you quickly get to a large part of people's total information diet.

My personal view is that we have many reasons to believe that this is not only a bad thing. People are voting with their feet for experiences that they prefer, and find empowering and useful. Research suggests that, contrary to the fear of filter bubbles, relying on these environments exposes people to more and more diverse news than what they seek of their own volition, but it is very clear there is an underlying problem of intelligibility. There is a structural weakness in a democracy in which people rely on institutions that they do not understand.

In response to the previous question, we can now see that, in addition to the operational objectives of how we pursue digital literacy, there is an intellectual component that is about something Helen implicitly suggested earlier, which is to supplement critical thinking with affirmative thinking, so that we do not only teach people to be sceptical, but also help them to make decisions about what they feel is right for them. There are few politicians who were on the doorsteps late last year who feel there is a deficit of critical thinking in this country. I do not know very many journalists who feel that the public are insufficiently critical in their thinking about the state of journalism and news media in this country either. People need to be critical, but also be given tools to make decisions about what, in an imperfect world, is best for them and people like them.

Dr Elinor Carmi: We need to remember that these platforms benefit from engagement. This is something that they have said multiple times. Facebook, for example, changes the way the algorithm makes or shapes your experience. Several researchers have showed how, in 2015 and 2016, it decided that connections with friends are more beneficial than with newspapers. A lot of researchers say that that may affect the way that people engage with different kinds of newspapers. That also means that, with their business model, they have more incentive to promote this kind of sensational information. A lot of the time, this disinformation we are talking about is actually a cardinal part of their business model, because they benefit from more engagement, more clicks, and more sensational and emotional information.

Let me just remind you that, in 2014, Facebook conducted an emotional contagion experiment. We should remember that. One of the reasons it did that was to engage people to see what makes them act and engage

more. One of the downsides from that research was that, when people did not see emotional content, they engaged less and had what they called withdrawal, which is, as we know, a term for people who use narcotics or different kinds of addictive products. Keep that in mind while you are thinking about this. These platforms have incentives to show us disinformation, because it is part of their business model. The kind of information, whether it is news or different kinds of things, depends on their business model.

If we want to move forward in a democratic society, we need to allow different kinds of business model. At the moment, we have one business model, which is personalisation and selling our data to different kinds of data brokers and digital and ad tech companies. There are very few alternatives at the moment, or there are alternatives, but people are not aware of them. If we can tell and show people that there are different ways to experience the web, which is not necessarily through personalisation, but could be through subscription or different kinds of platforms — as I said before, browsers such as Brave or search engines such as DuckDuckGo — which do not trade you data, then we will have better informed consumers who can engage more meaningfully.

Q144 **Lord Black of Brentwood:** When it comes to ensuring that we have active digital citizens, there are a lot of stakeholders in this area. We have talked about schools and libraries, but there is local government, the technology companies, the wider media, Parliament and wider civil society. All that means that there is often inaction. Who should be responsible for ensuring that we have active digital citizens?

Angie Pitt: All of us should.

Lord Black of Brentwood: I thought you were going to say that.

Angie Pitt: It does not help to point the finger at others and say it is their responsibility. The establishment of NewsWise was an attempt to bring all of those people together. We are a charity, the Guardian Foundation. We work within the Guardian but we also collaborate with other media, so the BBC, First News and, importantly, local news around the UK. We are funded by Google, which has the resources to do that, until August. We work with schools, so we are trying to upskill teachers as well as young people. NewsWise is an attempt at a model in which we all work together to bring out the best that everyone can bring to the table, as opposed to saying that other people should be dealing with this. It is not as simple a question as saying it should be one tech organisation or the state. We should all be working together.

To reiterate on the affirmative issue, at NewsWise our mantra for children and adults is, "Stop, question, check, decide". The "decide" is really important. This is about empowering people to engage with news and civil society, and make decisions based on facts. All of us together should reiterate that critical thinking is an empowering skill, not a negative one.

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen: I see my role as an expert to offer evidence and assessments of likely consequences of public policy choices. The question of who has responsibility is for elected officials, not for me. I am happy to share my personal view, but it is no more or less important than anybody else's. My analysis is that we can see that civil society and for-profit business alone have addressed some of these issues and generated the situation that we are in today. I do not see any reason to believe that civil society or for-profit businesses alone will change the situation significantly. If one thinks that the current situation is not good enough, the Government are the one actor that could make a difference. I do not see that it could come from civil society organically or through the competition between different for-profit businesses alone, but that is just my personal view and it is a political question.

The Chair: In the 20 years I have been involved in this, I have watched Ofcom dodge the bullet. We have the impression from the Department for Education that it sees it as going into the "too difficult" box. This vital Cinderella issue could drift around looking for a home for a long time.

Helen Milner: I agree that all sectors have a role, but Government should lead.

The Chair: When you say "Government", could you be more specific?

Lord Knight of Weymouth: Do you mean central Government?

Helen Milner: I mean central Government and not a single Government department. Part of our problem is that we work with six different central government departments in the UK and do slightly different things with each of them, but they are all interested in part in the digital literacy of the citizens of the country, as part of all of those programmes. We also work with significant investment from industry.

If we are going to tackle this at the scale that we want, Government has to be the lead and has to have the ambition to fix it, seeing all the other sectors as part of that overall plan. In the summer, the media literacy strategy will come from the DCMS. It is for all ages, as a response to the online harms White Paper, but that Online Harms White Paper did not even talk about fraud. The people I meet in communities around the country are most interested in the dangers around losing money but, because that is a different department, it is not in the White Paper.

Q145 **Lord Scriven:** My guess is that you are all going to say Government, but my question takes it a bit further. Is Government, in its present form, able to do that, or does Government need to make a change or bring in different skills? This is really important, because you deal with it on the coalface. Do you see that changes are needed, if government is going to have to do this?

Helen Milner: I am not sure this is a whole answer, but I hope it will help us get to the answer. One of the big problems that we have is that we, as organisations trying to change the world, as well as citizens in the street, do not know who to trust. There is a big issue around trust. When

thinking about digital literacy and helping people to have affirmative or critical thinking, a lot of it is about trust. I believe that Government is the only organisation that we should absolutely be able to trust, but there is some distance to go. I do not have an answer, but that is what I know from talking to people in the street.

Lord Black of Brentwood: This is a very quick one. Angie mentioned that she is funded by Google. It would be interesting to know where funding comes from for the other organisations.

Dr Elinor Carmi: We receive our funding from the Nuffield Foundation.

Helen Milner: In the UK, we receive funding from the Department for Education, NHSX, the Office for National Statistics, HMRC, Her Majesty's Courts & Tribunals Service, the Department for Work and Pensions, the foundation Google.org, the JPMorgan Chase Foundation, Lloyds Banking Group, BT, Accenture and some others.

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen: We are part of the University of Oxford. Our core funding comes from the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, the information company. We work with more than 35 other funders beyond that, including news or media organisations, such as the BBC and counterparts elsewhere. Ofcom, as a regulator, supports some of our work, as do regulators elsewhere in the world and foundations. We also work with some technology companies. Currently, Google is one of our funders.

Dr Elinor Carmi: I want to complement what has already been said in that it is important to collaborate between a lot of sectors. One of the findings from our survey is that more than 90 per cent of people, throughout all the user types, do not trust social media and do trust government. It is important to separate that when tackling these issues. We also need to be mindful of people's journeys when we are thinking about how to tackle these things, both for the Government at a national level and also locally, and to think about how we create different programmes for different types of user, but also in different regions, in a way that makes sense to their lives. The Good Things Foundation, which we work with, does a great job in trying to adjust the kinds of skills to what makes sense to their life stage or life journey at that time. We should also collaborate with other different NGOs and with academics, who are doing different things, not only in research but in developing educational material. It is important to collaborate between all these institutions and, hopefully, slightly less with the actual organisations and big media companies.

Q146 **Lord Lipsey:** I want to deconstruct the notion of government in this context. It contains all sorts of things and includes politicians. I do not want to make a party-political point, but a party called one of its election communications "factcheckUK", which was damaging for those trying to get factual checking. Otherwise, I see a landscape in which you have different departments that do not necessarily talk easily to each other, generally with the right kinds of wishes about what they do, but without a

central point within Government that is driving through a holistic agenda. Some of you are nodding. Does that description ring a bell, and can you think of a mechanical way in which Government can tackle these problems more effectively?

Angie Pitt: That sums up my experience from this side of the table. A number of departments have been involved in this discussion, from the DCMS, the Home Office, the Department for Education and the FCO. I have been around the table with them. There have then been a number of select committees. It has not always been clear, for example, how the DCMS Sub-Committee on Disinformation works alongside the DCMS's work on disinformation. What is needed from my side is real clarity about which one person is co-ordinating this. Where is the one team to which we can go? We want to add value. We are living this at the grass-roots level all over the UK, and we want to come back and add value to the strategic work that is happening, but some transparency over how we can do that, where we can go and the best way to do it would be useful from my perspective.

The Chair: Thank you; that was a massively helpful answer. I encourage the rest of you, as this is very helpful evidence for us on the machinery of government and the inadequacy of Government as presently structured to address these issues.

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen: More broadly, to state what I think is something that all of you will have thought about, in some ways, digital literacy and, as a dimension of that, the problems around misinformation are the worst kind of public policy problems. They are complex, boring, slow and expensive; that is nobody's favourite kind of problem to deal with. That means it is not super-surprising that no one wants to stake their political or professional career on being the one who will lose his or her job, if we do not move the needle on that.

Lord Lipsey: I am sorry; may I just interject there? That is one side of the picture. On the other hand, it is a jolly fashionable thing to tackle. A young politician on the make might well decide to be the person who has a grip of this.

Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen: That is a fair observation and one informed by more experience on the political side of this than I have. I would add that there are certain kinds of political problem that everybody loves to talk about but nobody loves to do anything about, and this might be one of them. It suffers from another curse, which is that it is the kind of problem that everybody agrees is important but nobody agrees is more important than X.

This gets to the point made by several of the other speakers here about the question of funding. This country has decided to make very significant investments in expanding the technical infrastructure that enables people to make use of digital media, and there has been no parallel investment of even a fraction of that in significantly changing or expanding how we give people the skill set to use these tools in what they feel, personally

and in their communities, is the best way. That is a political choice. As an expert, I do not see how one can do anything other than just say that this is the situation we are in. I do not think of myself as a shadow SpAd. Addressing that is a political question.

Helen Milner: The challenges we have are that, as you said, Ofcom has dodged the bullet or tried to. It has a responsibility for media literacy. If I were making the decision, I would set up a new arm's-length body to do it and would give them the equivalent of the £5 billion for broadband infrastructure and a 10-year timeline.

The Chair: You said "billion", I hope.

Helen Milner: I said "billion", yes. We might as well invest the same amount of money in our people infrastructure as our physical infrastructure. We do not even know if the physical infrastructure is future-proof, so why not spend the same money on people? It might actually have a longer-term lasting effect. Part of me says, "Why would you set up a new organisation to do this?" It would have absolute focus, and you would make sure that it had absolute leadership and support from the highest places within government. You could also make sure that every Permanent Secretary had it in his or her objectives to make sure this works. That is attractive, because it is a bold move, but should Ofcom's feet just get held to the fire? Are we going to wait three years for another regulator to come along, then hold their feet to the fire?

Often, it feels like the right thing to do is to establish a new organisation or arm's-length agency to do this thing, but is there something within the infrastructures that we already have? I would love to think that the civil servants in the DCMS, the Department for Education, DWP, the Cabinet Office and the Home Office could work together on a common plan and implement it together, but that has never been done, as far as I am aware. I would much prefer that, because it is pragmatic and could start tomorrow, with the right leadership and funding. But would it ever work? Is this too important to take a bit of a punt on that kind of experiment?

Dr Elinor Carmi: I want to expand on what Helen said and think about these things, and avoid the danger of isolating this, as if it is not related to everything else we are dealing with, including health, security, work and so on. If we want to create this kind of institution, it should work with all these departments, including the ICO, which should probably get more funding, because it is dealing with a lot of things that it cannot handle at the moment. When we are talking about digital skills, it is not only education. We need to collaborate and understand this more holistically, and not think about it as silos of technology or education only, with NGOs and academics who have been working on this for a long time.

I have been in the DCMS digital skills working group, and we have been trying to do a lot of things, but it takes a lot of time. This goes back to how different kinds of educational materials and programming skills need to adapt to what is happening. They maybe need a different pace than

other governmental procedures, because a lot of things need to be adjusted for immediately. The way that these programmes are put forward should be thought about.

The Chair: Angie, I was knocked out by the document you prepared with Google and the PSHE Association, but only 35,000 copies went out. My real issue here is not the quality of what you did but the scale at which it is possible to get it out there. These are not little companies; Google is not an impoverished business. How do we move to scale?

Angie Pitt: That is the million-dollar question. Google gives us limited funds and we have to reach as many people as we can, within that framework. One of the ways we try to reach scale is by making everything free online, so anyone can access all of our resources. We have seen people accessing our resources across the world, which is heartening, the most popular being the one about fake news and the second most popular being about how to understand the difference between opinion and fact. Another way we are doing it is to train teachers around the UK to train teachers in their networks, to create a pyramid effect.

We are one NGO. We have 12 staff in the Guardian Foundation — the National Literacy Trust and PSHE Association are bigger — and that is why we need support from Government departments to help us do this. We would love this to be truly addressed in the curriculum, so that we could reach every young person. We would love to help whichever government department takes responsibility to do that, based on our evidence. The offer is there.

The Chair: You have all been very kind and generous with your time. I do not think that anyone around the table would disagree with a word you have just said. Thank you very much indeed to the four of you.