HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies

Corrected oral evidence: Democracy and Digital Technologies

Tuesday 28 January 2020

11.45 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 Lipsey; Lord Lucas; Baroness McGregor-Smith; Lord Mitchell; Baroness Morris of Yardley; Lord Scriven.

Evidence Session No. 8 Heard in Public Questions 99 - 111

Witnesses

I: Jessica Cecil, Director, BBC Online Project, BBC; Matthew d'Ancona, Editor and Partner, Tortoise Media; James Mitchinson, Editor, *Yorkshire Post*.

Examination of Witnesses

Jessica Cecil, Matthew d'Ancona and James Mitchinson.

Q99 **The Chair:** First, can I apologise for keeping you? We rather ran over on the earlier session. Before we start, I'm required to read this. As you will 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 purpose of clarification or accuracy. Perhaps you would be good enough to introduce yourselves for the record, and then we will begin with questions.

James Mitchinson: I am the editor of the *Yorkshire Post*.

Jessica Cecil: I am a director at the BBC.

Matthew d'Ancona: I am an editor and partner at Tortoise Media.

Q100 **Lord Mitchell:** Good morning and thank you for coming. This question probably needs about three months to answer, but we will try to do it more quickly than that. How do you rate the current quality of public debate in the UK? What effect has online misinformation had on public debate and levels of trust?

Jessica Cecil: We are very concerned about the levels of misinformation and disinformation. This directly affects the BBC. For instance, in the Indian elections last year, there were fake polls that purported to be from the BBC. It is not just the message; it undermines our position as the messenger and it makes a difference. As a result, as you would expect, we are doing a lot to counter disinformation. First, we produce trusted news and debunk fake news as part of that. Secondly, we work in partnership with other organisations. The Trusted News initiative, working between platforms and publishers internationally, is one of those partnerships. Thirdly, we help our audiences, for instance through media education, to navigate the environment.

Matthew d'Ancona: There has been a crisis of trust, at least since the crash, which has tumbled through a series of institutions: the media, with Leveson; Parliament, with the expenses inquiry; and so on. This is not unique historically, but what is unprecedented is its precise coincidence with a massive technological revolution, the consequence of which has been to universalise the means of production and exchange of information. When traditional media organisations and political institutions are struggling with trust, the means to disrupt, subvert and offer new and unchallenged sources of authority have been completely explosive.

Think about how most people get information; they go through a white box called Google. When they go through it, they are entirely at the mercy of the algorithm. It is very cheap to make a website look as good as the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, the London *Times*, the *Guardian* or

whatever, which means that the normal semiotics of trust and authority are completely volatile. This is fundamental. This is not a finger-pointing exercise; it is a structural crisis.

James Mitchinson: I do not think all is lost, but I think at the moment the public are experiencing a sense of vertigo. They do not know who they can and cannot trust. It is for several reasons, not just Brexit or the debate becoming polarised around that issue. There has been an insidious, progressive deterioration of trust between the establishment and the general public for a number of years—media included, I have to say. The debate has taken a lead from people in responsible positions. I have just been at the Royal Institute, listening to Amber Rudd talking about politicians who deign to campaign in poetry and govern in prose. The public are desperate for politicians to leave the poetry to Keats and Co. and offer them more of the prose, with a more transparent, trustworthy lead from the top when it comes to the debate. Yes, I share the concerns of the panel that there is a fundamental dissolution of the trust contract that exists between the public at large and those who seek to govern them.

The Chair: Picking up particularly on what Mr D'Ancona has just said, something struck me very forcibly. When David Cameron twice apologised publicly—once for Hillsborough and once for Bloody Sunday—there seemed almost an explosion of public relief. Yet no politicians seemed to learn from that. It's almost as if they were prepared to say, "We were wrong", the public would breathe a sigh of relief and would be encouraged to have greater faith in them. Do you think you could offer a one-line answer as to why politicians so distrust the idea of an apology—as indeed do newspapers?

Matthew d'Ancona: To be fair, it is partly because, for so long, they have been brutalised by the media every time they have dared to say "sorry". One has to be fair on that point. There is also the whole concept of what it is to be a citizen. For example, citizens have been infantilised in two ways: by the notions, first, that the state will sort out everything, and, secondly, that in every respect they are a consumer. This has broken the notion that there is something beyond this in the fabric of democracy where, in the old model of exit, voice and loyalty, it is perfectly okay for a politician to say, "Actually, we got it wrong", just as it is okay for voters to admit that they might have got it wrong about a big issue—I will not name any, but there is one that I can think of.

Sadly, we have watched public discourse harden into a series of extremely robust statements, one way or the other, to the extent that one cannot imagine John F. Kennedy saying, "Ask not what your country can do for you" now, because his advisers would repencil it. Asking citizens to do something, just as getting a politician to say "sorry", is totally outside the rules of the game. Actually, I think members of the public like being asked to do things and like it when policies are honest. This is not a very difficult problem to solve but, at the moment, there is a digital Mexican standoff, where none of this exists.

Lord Mitchell: Ms Cecil, did you say that India passed itself off as the BBC?

Jessica Cecil: It was not India, but fake news that happened during the Indian elections.

Lord Mitchell: But somebody passed themselves off as you. That must happen all the time and must be a growing issue. How do you deal with it? How do you make it unfake or legitimate?

Jessica Cecil: We do a number of things. First, our name is very important, so we produce trusted news. We also debunk the fake stories we come across, as much as we can. During the Indian elections, for instance, the Reality Check team was out there looking at specific stories. We have also been working with tech platforms and global publishers on how to have a fast-alert system for disinformation during elections. Media education is clearly important, so the public are aware of when they should be asking questions about information they come across and when it is not advisable to pass it on to others.

Q101 **Lord Lucas:** What scope do you see for organisations such as yours, and I am thinking particularly of local media, to use the techniques in platforms such as Delib for local democracy, to promote open discussion on a set of agreed information about particular issues? It is starting to work very well in and around local government, but none of the news media seem to have taken this up at all. They seem not to want to move beyond being fountains of authority, rather than centres of debate.

James Mitchinson: Is that in terms of adopting the technology or the spirit of debate?

Lord Lucas: It is an example of what works or what can work, but could it come across to the media as a way of allowing people to discuss an issue in depth, rather than having to google every time and deal with immediate disinformation?

James Mitchinson: We do our best to encourage debate and exchanges of intelligent, constructive views. The challenge we face is, to Matt's point, the infantilisation of the debate and the propensity of people to gather around a viewpoint and defend it with a pitchfork until they die, regardless of the evidence, alternative viewpoints, perspectives or, dare I say, facts that are presented to them. You are right: we have a collective responsibility to encourage a more intelligent, nuanced debate where, on Lord Puttnam's point, there is space for people to fail and make mistakes, without having to make a catastrophic confession of guilt. If we can encourage a more intelligent round of debate, where nuance is permitted, there should be no fear of failure and catastrophic consequence. There should be acceptance and engagement with ideas and intentions, which result in high-quality actions that benefit communities.

I will pick up on the point about the rapid-alert system. That is an area worth pursuing when it comes to the social and tech platforms. During the general election, we experienced the incident of the boy on the floor

of Leeds General Infirmary. Our story was done with the utmost professionalism. One of my journalists checked all the facts and the story was verified by the hospital, and yet the narrative was destabilised by fake media accounts and people with sinister motives. Before any action was taken for the platform to confess that our story was true and the conspiracy theory was not, the damage was done. So the rapid-alert system is a very positive step forward that should be explored further.

Matthew d'Ancona: I could not agree more. It is interesting how well it has worked in a number of cases. The BBC's "Andrew Marr Show" is a good example of how pitting politicians against what they have said in the past and having a real-time fact-checking system can have a dramatic effect on the content. First, it means you do not simply get into ever-decreasing circles of what a question originally meant. Secondly, you open it up and show that you are not trying to censor or stop anything, but you are saying, "Hang on a second; this is the case", or "This is what you said." That is entirely new and to be welcomed. It is an example of how the solutions to this do not necessarily have to involve—although they may eventually—global governance. There are quite granular solutions to some of these problems.

Q102 **Lord Lipsey:** I declare an interest as a member of the ASA's parliamentary network and as a former deputy chairman of Full Fact. Pretty evidently, the tech companies' line that they are just a conduit and what appears on their thing is nothing to do with them is rapidly eroding and may even be replaced by something laid down by government, in the form of a duty of care or something. What I want to explore is particularly for Matt. We know the rules under which journalists operate in conventional media. There are certain restraints, such as the law of libel, and defences, such as being able to protect your sources. We do not have a similar set of rules applying to what can be published in this. There is a tricky balance to be struck between free speech, on the one hand, and the need not to abuse free speech, if there is such a thing, on the other. What thoughts do you have about what kind of regime might apply once we move to a duty of care or something even stronger?

Matthew d'Ancona: That is the question. The first thing to say is what you do not want, which is to end up with a Ministry of Truth—Oftruth. I do not think we want a regulator of falsity. That would not work, somehow. Part of the problem is that the available categories are insufficient. Patently, the platforms are not platforms, in the sense that they are not neutral providers of anything that lands on them. You are right to say that the time when that argument was sustainable is drawing to a close. Equally, they have a point when they say that they are not publishers in the way that Little, Brown is. The amount of content that lands on their doorstep and is published is exponentially greater.

So there is a huge collective social task here, which is to come up with—if I dare use the phrase—a third way. It will involve jurisprudence and then legislation to work out how, when most information is mediated through a completely new form, to get to a situation where the harms caused by this new form are, at least, mitigated, moderated and sanctioned, where

necessary, without having the clumsy fist of censorship too quickly. This is not a swift task; it is intellectually quite complicated. It will involve legislation, but also a new way of thinking about how information is handled. I do not think the way forward is to create a great body that stamps out what are called political lies, because often what is called a political lie is really just a disagreement. Errors of fact always need to be corrected. Libels always need to be punished in the courts of law, but there are problems that are unique to this technology, as we saw in the Christchurch horror. Content was put online and then taken down, but was then simply put up again and again.

So the tech companies are not lying when they say that the problems of moderation are new, but that is not enough of an answer. The next answer is how you throw human resources at it and perhaps use artificial intelligence to carry out some of the more rudimentary tasks of moderation. But one should not underestimate the scale of this task.

Lord Lipsey: In one case, Facebook has ruled that a lot of stuff that appears, namely anything political, is totally outwith any form of moderation or taking down, which is a very extreme position.

Matthew d'Ancona: It is, and I do not think that that position will be sustainable. One of the problems here is jurisdictional. Facebook has chosen, artfully, to align itself with the First Amendment. Facebook in Germany is very different and we need to be conscious of that. Jamie Susskind makes this point very well in his book *Future Politics*, which is that, while we all want a universal solution, we may have to settle for national ones in the first instance. That is absolutely right.

Jessica Cecil: Like Matt, we fundamentally stand for freedom of expression and we do not want to do anything to undermine that. That said, we are all subject to regulation. We at the BBC are subject to the regulation of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code, under impartiality and due accuracy, so we support the online harms White Paper's suggestion of regulation because, even if unwittingly, platforms clearly have the ability to carry misinformation and disinformation. There should be exploration of what that regulatory framework and the codes of conduct should be. But, like Matt, I think that this is going to be a big and difficult task.

James Mitchinson: You will not be surprised to hear that I am in agreement. Rather than attempt to police the wild west of misinformation, because it is too big and there is too much of it, it is much better to settle on a legislative or regulatory framework, perhaps even technological solutions, to draw people's attention to and increase the prominence of trusted sources of news and information, and bring to the fore of the likes of Google and Facebook journalism from trained professionals.

The Chair: Lord Black, can I ask you to come in on this, because it's an area that you know more about than the rest of us? I am intrigued by the issue Mr D'Ancona has raised about whether this might require national, rather than international, agreements. How do you feel about that?

Q103 **Lord Black of Brentwood:** I am happy to do that but am afraid I will have to run through my interests first, so we may be here for half an hour. I declare interests as the deputy chairman of the Telegraph Media Group, a director of the Regulatory Funding Company, a director of the Advertising Standards Board of Finance, chair of the Commonwealth Press Union, and vice-chair of the APPG on Media Freedom. It was interesting to hear the comments on the online harms White Paper, following Lord Lipsey's point about what happens if you just classify these companies as publishers. Immediately they would be responsible for all the regulations of copyright and privacy that you all are. But is the way that the online harms White Paper was couched, talking about how difficult it is going to be, just so wide that effective legislation resulting from it will be difficult to achieve? Is there a case for having a much more slimmed-down version that really targets the platforms?

James Mitchinson: My view on the online harms White Paper is that the trusted sources of news and information would require some sort of journalistic exemption. Otherwise, I fear a healthy, prosperous free press might be threatened by that paper. Quite how you apply that to billions of exchanges per day on a social platform is beyond me. It would perhaps be folly to pursue that weapon, if you like, in the fight against misinformation and fake news. I just do not feel that it would be an effective way of tackling the problem.

Lord Black of Brentwood: As the Chair pointed out, this is an international issue; it is not solely domestic.

James Mitchinson: Yes. As we found recently, when our story of the boy on the hospital floor went international, the digital marketplace is not a national one; it is international.

Jessica Cecil: I am not sure that there is a huge amount to add. We welcome discussion on what the regulator looks like and tackling the issues that Matt and James have talked about, such as national versus international regulation. But at this point I do not think that we can add much more.

Matthew d'Ancona: A very important point is that we must never see the question of regulation as distinct from the supply-side issue. None of this will be of any use if we are not systematically teaching digital literacy to children from the age of three—and right quick. It is not even that they will enter it; they are already in a world in which the primary source of information is digital. It is probably the only source for many of them. We teach children how to analyse texts and understand graphs, yet we are really only in the infancy of teaching them how to understand what to trust and how to analyse what they see in the more perplexing world of online information. To me, it seems a primary educational challenge to raise a generation of citizens who are not only digital natives but digitally literate. No amount of regulation can combat an absence of that literacy.

Q104 **Baroness Kidron:** In a sense, my question is a subset of the question you have just answered. Is there any value in treating political content

differently from this swathe of other content? If there is, would it be useful to have a regulator that deals specifically with political content? How would you identify what is and is not political content? It is a subsection; would it be useful to have that category in order to identify, verify and perhaps push it up the food chain?

James Mitchinson: People do not mind political content when they know it is political. When the Rubicon is crossed is, for example, when the CCHQ Twitter account morphs into a fact-checking service and purports to be an exponent of the truth and reality, the Sir Keir Starmer video that was doctored on "Good Morning Britain" to make him appear incompetent or, at the risk of sounding a little twee, the local newspapers that picked up the design, look, feel and tone of my local newspapers, which have served local communities for generations and are three times more trusted than social media. They received political *Pravdas* through their letterbox that said, "Welcome to your brand new free local newspaper", and that was political propaganda. So there should be a review of the nature and type of political literature that is published by political parties, particularly during election campaigns. I would welcome an agreement or acquiescence to a code of conduct that, in the future, would prevent the electorate being asked to select who might govern them without being able to discern truth from lies, even through their own letterbox.

Matthew d'Ancona: It is worth bearing in mind that the Act that regulates all this, PPER, was passed in 2000, four years before Mark Zuckerberg sat in his bedroom and invented Facebook and five years before smartphones became generally available. The problem with that Act is not its weakness but its blindness: it simply does not see a lot of the problems that James is describing, and why would it? That is certainly an urgent legislative task. That Act and the commission with it need to be updated to be fit for purpose.

Jessica Cecil: I would not want to be drawn into talking about how campaigns are regulated, but there is a flipside to this, which is that a free and vibrant press is the best way of holding politicians to account. It is what James and Matthew do, and what we do at the BBC. Scrutinising the accuracy of political statements is core to what we do every day, particularly during elections. The scrutiny of online campaigns was a particular focus for us this time round. James has talked about his trust scores and 51% of adults turn to the BBC for news they can trust the most. That is a hard-won reputation that we have to protect.

Baroness Kidron: Even though you are all reluctant to say, "There should be a political regulator", am I right in understanding your answers to say that there is something called political content that may require a less-blind look at it, to take account of current norms? You said "code of conduct", but stopped short of saying "regulator".

James Mitchinson: My view is quite simple: the public do not mind political content when they know it is political content. They want to be able to make an informed decision about the politicians they might approve to govern them. What they do not like is political propaganda

masquerading as something else. That is the crux of where I am coming from. To help us be that prosperous, thriving free local press, which is able to scrutinise local MPs in the long-term future, our plea to this Committee would be to ensure that the tech companies and the platforms give a fair deal to the content that they carry, because we are not receiving anywhere near the level of revenue that the hard work, diligence, professionalism, training, development and time taken to produce that content merit. I would genuinely like to see the size of the revenue made by the tech platforms, and then contemplate how we go about distributing that more fairly.

The Chair: We will come to that point in a few moments Mr Mitchinson. Ms Cecil, I have one quick question for you. You have been at the BBC for a while and in very senior roles. Can you think of something that has totally sideswiped you in the digital environment, which neither you nor any of your colleagues expected, and which you now have to address on a daily basis? What has been the most difficult and unexpected aspect of the world you are now dealing with, as opposed to the world you dealt with 10 years ago?

Jessica Cecil: There is a multiplicity of sources of information now. Our role is not just to inform people but to help them navigate across those sources. There were relatively few news providers 10 years ago. There are many now and, as we have heard, some can and some cannot be trusted. So it is the multiplicity of sources and, therefore, the role we have to play in navigation, as well as information.

The Chair: That is very helpful.

Q105 **Lord Harris of Haringey:** You all talked about your role in holding politicians to account and the importance of a free press. What level of fact checking should we be expecting from you as news organisations on the claims that are made?

Matthew d'Ancona: It should be very high. Speaking for my trade, I am thrilled by the development of the fact-checking industry. It is one of the most exciting and spontaneous things that has happened in this whole debate. But let us be honest: it is also an indictment of the journalistic trade, because fact checking used to be called journalism. While I welcome it, I am conscious that it is something of an indictment on us collectively.

There are two elements to this. To your point, the most important part of any inquisition, inquiry or interview with a politician is to make sure that they are telling the truth. In the past, there may have been too much effort to have pseudo-balanced panels, rather than to conduct a Socratic inquiry to get to the truth. Secondly, we have to acknowledge that facts are not enough. The way in which you present the facts and the accessibility thereof, so that they are digestible and clear, is equally important. The lesson of political culture in the last 10 years is that the story matters at least as much as the evidence. This presents journalists with a tremendous problem: how do you tell stories without bias? I do

not have a glib answer to that, but it is not simply enough to produce a wonderful data visualisation; you have to find ways to make clear why this is a fact and this is a lie. We have fallen short in that regard, and also in calling out lies. We are getting better, but we have more work to do.

Lord Harris of Haringey: Is that true of all media? It strikes me that, in the recent general election, for example, all the major parties made tendentious comments about each other. In some instances, those were just reported by saying, "This is it. This is what is being said". Is it sufficient simply to say, "This is a Conservative Party statement", "This is a Labour Party statement" or "This is a Liberal Democrat statement", and leave the reader, listener or viewer to say, "Ah well, they would say that anyway"? Do you have a duty to say, "This is a completely tendentious statement" made by the Conservative Party, the Labour Party or the Liberal Democrats?

Jessica Cecil: We worked very hard during the election to ensure that there was real-time fact checking. During the leaders' debate, for instance, there was real-time fact checking, which has been built on as this has become something we need to address more and more. There was also robust interviewing by our very experienced broadcasters. We do an awful lot of fact checking and checking. When subsequently the public were asked about the most accurate and trustworthy news provider during the election, they said it was the BBC for those reasons. We have adapted what we do to the environment in which we now find ourselves.

Lord Harris of Haringey: The BBC also, for example on "Question Time", allows comments and questions from the audience to sit there completely unchallenged and waits to see if one of the panel responds.

Jessica Cecil: We have very robust questioning. I do not want to talk about one particular programme, as you can imagine, but we do a lot through our journalists, who are extremely seasoned, as well as real-time and after-the-fact fact checking, so that our audiences get a good view of what is true and what is not.

James Mitchinson: The regional press prides itself on its level of training and NCTJ-qualified journalists. We are independently regulated to world-class standards. The amount of time I spend responding to IPSO complaints—none of which I have fallen foul of over the last 20 years, touch wood—is significantly higher than it was under the previous regulator. But I think now is a good moment for the standoff, the skirmish, between media and politicians to come to an end. It is not healthy for the Government to boycott the "Today" programme and the BBC. We all benefit from having long-form, detailed scrutiny of politicians. To give another example, the newly appointed Chair of the Treasury Select Committee, Mel Stride, has blocked two or three of my journalists in the last week or so, so we are unable to make constructive criticisms and ask well-meant questions on behalf of the people politicians represent. This is a good moment for this protracted war between the state and the media to come to an end, because it is not helpful.

Lord Harris of Haringey: Could I probe the question of balance briefly? Let us take the hypothetical argument that we are debating whether the world is round. Sometimes news organisations would feel it necessary to have a representative of the Flat Earth Society to say it is not. How do you define at what point you should be striking a balance or when you should say, "Actually, these are the facts. This is what it is all about"?

Jessica Cecil: The BBC has editorial guidelines and guidance, and impartiality is fundamental to that, but it is due impartiality. On issues such as climate change, we ensure that we take impartiality into account in the light of what science tells us.

James Mitchinson: Policy and editorial judgment are at the heart of that. The *Yorkshire Post* is able to be much more determined when it comes to shutting down the flat earthers, Holocaust deniers or climate change deniers. There are certain issues and topics for which the science and facts are indisputable, and debate is not necessary.

Lord Harris of Haringey: If I may, Chair, have your indulgence to ask one slightly different question, do you have a role in and any anxieties about breeding cynicism about the political process by taking the approach sometimes taken to politicians: "Why is this lying bastard lying to me"? Do you sometimes go too far to breed a cynicism that, in itself, undermines democracy?

Matthew d'Ancona: I am not sure it is quite as bad as it has been in the past, but there has been a "gotcha" approach, where the purpose of an interview is to catch a politician out, rather than to have a debate about what is going on and what the policy is, so that a good interview is one in which someone is made to look an idiot. Of course, that is a ridiculous journalistic test. The gravitational pull of social media means that it is a great way of getting on to Twitter, so we have to be aware of that. We must be wary of that, because cynicism is the rust on all this and the media have a role in ensuring that that is not the case.

I have never agreed with the line, "Why is this lying bastard lying to me?" because I do not start from the proposition that anyone is lying to me. On the other hand, if I think they are, I will call them out, and that seems a reasonable way of approaching it. But the premise of your question is absolutely right.

Q106 **Baroness McGregor-Smith:** Before I start my question, I want to reflect on the conversation. James, I am a huge admirer and hugely respect the *Yorkshire Post*. In all my business dealings when I was a chief executive, I felt the trade press definitely had not just the integrity but the scrutiny I would have expected in different parts of the country, so I am a huge admirer. When I first listened to the story of the young child on the hospital floor, interestingly, I did not realise it was written by you. Secondly, I picked it up on the BBC and then, later that day, I heard again that there was a risk of fake news. I thought it may or may not have come from the BBC so, until today, I had assumed the story was fake. I was quite busy and did not go into the detail, but there are so

many stories flying around, so there is a big question of how you, as journalists, argue that it is definitely a true story and get that message back to the public. I had always assumed it was fake. That is just an observation but, through the campaign, I was assuming most of what I was hearing was fake, so I was feeling quite cynical. That was just a general point. Moving on to social media, what scrutiny do you think journalists' posts on social media should be subjected to? Should they have the same standards as formalised reporting? Would you have the same standards for social media as published formalised reporting?

James Mitchinson: First, thank you for your kind words. Secondly, yes, I do not think there needs to be another regulatory code. As an editor, I insist on the highest standards and that social media activity is in line with the editor's code and the editorial standards we set. To give you a live example, a member of my staff tweeted what I considered to be unprofessional borderline abuse of a social media company managing communications for a rail company in our neck of the woods. You may be familiar with the challenges we have with rail services in the north, but he was taken into my office, where it was made clear, in no uncertain terms, that the expectations and standards that we set for the newspaper are no different for Twitter or anything else on social media. I believe we should hold ourselves to the highest possible standards, regardless of where we publish.

Lord Scriven: What about if it is a personal account? The issue with this is that you may tweet, in a personal capacity, something that is not true, but the reach of social media is so wide now. Do you draw a line between personal accounts or stories that are part of the newspaper? Do you use any delineation?

James Mitchinson: We potentially do in conversation but, when an account clearly states that an individual is working for the *Yorkshire Post*, it is not unreasonable to expect higher standards than for somebody who is not identified as working for the *Yorkshire Post*. On Matt's point about this being a long-term, structural, societal challenge that begins in primary schools, I think we should all behave much better on social media. I do not accept that you can hide behind the veil that this is a personal view, in order to start throwing toxicity around on social media.

The Chair: This raises the issue of anonymisation.

Q107 **Baroness Morris of Yardley:** This is an interesting area, and part of my problem is that the three people who are answering the questions all behave very well. But, as we said before, not all your profession does. I absolutely agree with the answers I am hearing from your mouths, but this is not the world that affects so many citizens, in terms of how they get information to make a judgment. Could you comment on that? I am not asking you to criticise your colleagues, but how can the Committee differentiate? What made me ask the question was social media. If I read an article in the newspaper, I do not then read the comments underneath. I just do not. If I want to read comments, I will go somewhere else, so I was quite surprised and impressed that James said

he would hold them to the same account.

It left me wondering. In a mainstream media article, from a newspaper or the BBC—and I read its news channel a lot—is the only difference in getting your journalist to respond to the comments that it is a different outlet? I am told that part of their appraisal is how much they put on Twitter underneath the article they have written. I thought there was a different purpose to that, which is why I do not read it. I thought that was a different thing; it does not have the same purpose of the BBC or what I trust from that journalist. This is the way I have always interpreted it: "Ah, that is Polly Toynbee as a person. I have just read her article and do not think I want to go into that". That was not a very concise question, but it is in the back of my mind, following your answers to those questions. Can you help me sort that out?

Jessica Cecil: Like James, we take what our journalists say on social media extremely seriously and there is absolutely no difference for our journalists between what they say on social media and the very high standards that we hold them to, as if they were broadcasting on radio or television. Our guidelines and guidance, which is the framework within which they work, have adapted as the environment has. To stand back and answer your question, we have to make sure we stand for the trusted news organisation we represent, and that we remain a trusted and regulated news organisation. That is the way we choose to make sure we uphold those values.

Matthew d'Ancona: It is a really important question and, in a way, we are not the best people to answer it. James is a famously rigorous editor. Jessica represents the BBC, where there are such strict guidelines on social media. I hope Tortoise carries that through. The problem is that, to a greater extent than we perhaps admit, social media is media now. It is the gateway to other media. Unfortunately, the way to amplify yourself on social media is to be shrill rather than accurate. I find it easy to resist that temptation because of what I do, but others representing broadcast or print formats are under considerable pressure to get clicks on Twitter or other newer platforms, to guide people back to their traditional formats. This is not a straightforward question. People who are not digital natives tend to see social media as something you do at the end, almost like a trailer—but, to a large extent, social media is the gateway to the information ecosphere. It is the advertising shop window, and the person screaming loudest does best.

Far be it from me to speak on behalf of the BBC, but I think the BBC does amazingly well. For instance, a question was asked the other day about the Laurence Fox incident on "Question Time" and whether that was a put-up job by the BBC to draw traffic into "Question Time". I am sure as I can be—and Jessica would know better—that it absolutely was not, but the fact that the question was asked, irrespective of the BBC, tells you how the thing works. You manufacture a row, then draw people into your print or broadcast thing. That is a big issue. A lot of this comes down to how Twitter accounts are labelled. I always think that food labelling has given us a good template to work on. What is this account? Is it the

journalist speaking on behalf of themselves or the programme? No such labels appear. It is time we had more kite-marking in the digital world and things evaluated, so that the people who see it can see whether it is someone speaking in a personal capacity. We are in the foothills of learning how to do that.

The Chair: The question from Lord Scriven, from the point of view of this Committee, could hardly be more important—so, Mr Mitchinson, please feel free to answer as fully as you need to on this?

Q108 **Lord Scriven:** I will make no comment about the *Yorkshire Post*, being a Yorkshire person on the Committee. It is clear that people gain information through different sources, broken down by ethnicity, social class or age. Social media and the online world are becoming more important, which is driven by business models and algorithms about where things are placed and how people view the information that they see. I have two questions on this. First, has this affected the viability of the news media in its present form, particularly at a local level for local media? Secondly, what should technology companies do to ensure that individuals can access high-quality journalism, particularly local journalism?

James Mitchinson: Has it impacted on the way we do business? Yes, it has. We have just had a conversation about social media and its purpose. One of its purposes is to amplify content to as big an audience as possible to generate as much revenue in possible, in a programmatic world. That has led to—and I do not include the *Yorkshire Post* in this—a real danger of output homogenised around what generates the most clicks, rather than what is most in the public interest or is likely to be to the betterment of a given community. The business model in that vein is one that, in the last decade, has seen half of the output generated by local newspapers and websites diminish, probably irretrievably.

What can be done to assist in this? Kite-marking is one way. There are blue-tick accounts on Twitter and Facebook, but that is not necessarily an indication of journalism of the highest possible standards, which has been independently regulated and thoroughly fact-checked. There is an acute, if not urgent, requirement for the tech platforms to, as I said previously, distribute the revenue generated from the content we produce more fairly. Then we can reinvest in our products, digital technology and, to Lord Lucas's point, user-friendly environments where people can engage in debate and feel like a stakeholder in society, rather than being on the outside. That for me is the priority: the redistribution of the wealth generated through the work done by people employed by the regional news companies.

Lord Scriven: Do you have a view of how that system should be formulated, James?

James Mitchinson: I do not, but I could formulate one and write back to you.

Lord Scriven: What principles would guide it?

James Mitchinson: The first step is to size the pot. Facebook's display advertising in the UK last year was £2 billion. The search revenue generated by Google last year was £6 billion. That is gargantuan in comparison with the regional press, yet I strongly suspect that a significant proportion of that revenue comes off the back of toil done in our centres. I reiterate the plea to size that revenue. We are not after a handout, just a structural redistribution of a fair amount of the revenue that comes off the back of our content.

Q109 **The Chair:** Ms Cecil, what can the BBC do, using its digital facilities, to support local accountability?

Jessica Cecil: We do quite a lot. James has talked about the economic issues. For a few years, we have been running our Local Democracy Reporting Service, with up to £8 million of BBC money. That pays for 150 local reporters, who produce local accountability journalism, reporting on councils across the United Kingdom. Those stories are then available to local news providers. We reckon they reach 8 million to 10 million people a week. We are keen to see that expanded and Tony Hall, the director-general, has talked about the expansion of that scheme, but we cannot afford to put any more money in. We are keen that tech platforms, among others, help us to extend the local accountability journalism we are talking about to more councils, to NHS trusts for instance and, where there are no market implications, to courts.

The Chair: I am making this up as I go along, but if the Committee were to press for some form of digital levy, whereby the big digital companies help underpin local accountability, including the reporting of courts and planning decisions, do you have any thoughts on how that could be implemented, properly used and transparent, so that people understand that their lives are being made that much richer by some form of digital intervention?

Jessica Cecil: The Local Democracy Reporting Service expansion I talked about was endorsed by the Government's response to the Cairncross review yesterday. That is our preferred way of increasing local accountability journalism. As I say, 8 million to 10 million people reached a week suggests that this is what people are interested in and want to know about. Traditionally, as James has said, this is something that local media had the means to cover.

Q110 **Lord Scriven:** Mr Mitchinson, you offered to send something in to the Committee. If you could do that, it would help to give us a broader picture. I do not know whether you are still on the levy or revenue but, beyond that, is there anything else that the technology companies or social media platforms could do? There are issues about where things are placed, the algorithms, et cetera. You could think about more collaborative issues, such as partnerships. Do you feel there is anything else that would underpin good journalism, particularly at local, rather than national, level?

Matthew d'Ancona: Algorithms are interesting. One way to make someone from a tech platform put down their smoothie, put away their yoga ball and look at you in a cross way is to mention the word "algorithm". It is the black box of this conundrum and they do not want to open it. I am looking forward to the first person on the planet who gets them to do so, because it will happen. We already know that algorithms bake prejudice into systems. They reinforce prejudice and shut down debate. Much as they also direct us towards the things we like, are useful, tell us what we want to buy and give us the information we want—so they are not uniformly wicked—they are the most powerful system in the world today.

I am totally in favour of a digital levy hypothecated for not just local news but also towards digital literacy, because we need to teach teachers how to teach. Until government and democratic representatives can force tech companies to say more about algorithms, conscious of their commercial confidentiality, this debate will stall. It has stalled, because you simply cannot get them to talk about it.

Jessica Cecil: We are seeing our relationship with our audiences increasingly mediated by the platforms. We are concerned that the discoverability of trusted news is protected through attribution, so you know it comes from the BBC or the *Yorkshire Post*, and that it is seen in the environment of curation. Instead of filter bubbles, you have a sense that you are seeing all the top stories.

Q111 **Lord Black of Brentwood:** I will make a quick observation on that last question, which is of fundamental importance. There is quite a lot in the Cairncross review about how local journalism could be supported by the platforms, suggestions for codes of conduct and so forth. The CMA is looking at this area. I suspect the difficulty, and Matt referenced this, is that it is impossible to see how to get the platforms to the table to talk about it, without the threat of legislation. Legislation takes a while and, as we know, the problems for the local press are here and now. They are not in three years' time. This is the magic wand moment: if the Government could do one thing—and I have to limit you to just one—to ensure better-informed public debate in the digital age, what would you choose?

Jessica Cecil: I would choose that the Government support a vibrant free press in this country. We are incredibly fortunate to have a diverse ecosystem. We are a part of that and, for us, the secure funding of the BBC is key to the way in which we can deliver news to inform and help our audiences navigate. In that context, talk of decriminalisation of licence fee non-payment is of concern, because the Government's own independent review in 2015 showed, first, that it was not advisable and, secondly, that it is likely to cost the BBC around £200 million, which would have an effect on the content of our journalism.

Matthew d'Ancona: I agree with all that Jessica said, but I also think the next Budget should have a digital levy in it. Although the Government have been in power for a long time, they keep referring to themselves as

the "new Government", which is exciting. In that spirit, it would be nice for them to do something along the lines of the new Labour Government's windfall tax, and influence and introduce not a windfall tax but a digital levy in the first Budget of the new Parliament.

James Mitchinson: I agree. I too would support the digital levy, as part of the next Budget. I would press home the need for regional and local press to receive a fair deal for the revenue generated by the content they produce.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I am sorry we have run 20 minutes over. But it has been hugely valuable. Thank you very much for spending time with us.

Our next meeting is next Tuesday at 10 am,