

## Written evidence submitted by Channel 4

### Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation

#### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Channel 4 welcomes the opportunity to respond to the DCMS Sub Committee's inquiry to investigate disinformation on COVID-19. Channel 4 has always played its full role as a public service broadcaster, providing the public with up-to-date, trusted information. This has become even more important during the COVID-19 crisis which demonstrates more than ever the need for a strong public service broadcasting (PSB) sector to offer trusted information and to fact-check misinformation.
- 1.2 As the UK public goes through a phase of significant disruption and uncertainty, the value of PSB has never been more apparent. At a time of crisis, PSB has helped bring the nation together and amidst significant uncertainty and disruption, the public has turned to PSBs for trusted news, information and entertainment.
- 1.3 Channel 4 is unique within the PSB sector for our ability to reach younger audiences and to represent the UK in all its diversity. We take seriously our responsibility through the current crisis to support the public health response with clear, authoritative news. Against a backdrop of fake news and widespread anxiety, viewers need trustworthy information.
- 1.4 We believe public service broadcasting in the UK, acts as a successful 'antidote' to the disinformation and misinformation found on social media platforms. On disinformation specifically, one of the pillars of Channel 4's response to the COVID-19 crisis is an editorial emphasis on 'Truth and Facts' where we have been getting accurate information out to the public, fact checking myths that are circulating online and distributing vital public health information.
- 1.5 Furthermore, we consider Channel 4 to be an important force for a shared national identity – we stand out among PSBs for taking creative risks, tackling challenging issues, and enabling a representative range of voices to be heard. Particularly, the high-quality, trustworthy content provided by broadcasters such as Channel 4.

#### 2. About Channel 4

- 2.1 Channel 4 was created to be a disruptive, innovative force in UK broadcasting. We have a unique public service remit to serve younger audiences and champion diversity, whilst our publicly-owned, entirely commercially-funded publisher broadcaster model means that we have always acted differently to other broadcasters. We also play a hugely important role in the success of the UK's creative industries, acting as a world-leading accelerator, investing in and stimulating the production sector, taking risks that others wouldn't and pioneering innovation in digital.
- 2.2 Channel 4's detailed statutory public service remit includes requirements to produce high quality news and current affairs; to support and stimulate well-informed debate on a wide range of issues, including by providing access to information and views from around the world; as well as requirements to challenge established views. At this time of unique national need, it is important that we adapt to the challenge while maintaining that fundamental role of bringing the nation together.
- 2.3 As the media landscape has changed beyond recognition over recent years, we have acted quickly to re-invent and transform Channel 4. We are now a digital first business, with a strong presence across the Nations and Regions of the UK and have supercharged our offer to young people by making sure we reach them with the right content in new ways, both through All 4 and on social platforms. This strategy is already delivering results. Despite increased competition from Subscription Video On Demand (SVOD) platforms, All 4 has continued to grow, with record digital revenues in 2019. Our

powerful resonance with young and diverse audiences continues to remain strong, with Channel 4's 16-34 share increasing in peak time on the main channel in 2019 and BAME peak time viewing up 9% year-on-year.

### **3. Why Public Service Broadcasting is an important antidote to the disinformation on social media platforms about COVID-19**

3.1 Whilst the internet has unquestionably transformed how people around the world communicate, gather information and consume educational and entertaining content, the scale and pace of this technological change has also presented many challenges due to the lack of regulation compared to traditional media. As the committee is already aware, there are a multitude of online harms of significant societal concern which have the potential to threaten our way of life in the UK. This has been evidenced by the proliferation of false or misleading information about COVID-19 that has spread on social media during the pandemic – which over half of UK adults have been exposed to<sup>1</sup>.

#### Online harms and news

3.2 One of the key concerns is the impact this could have on young people, who are increasingly consuming news through online platforms. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism has shown that increasingly vast quantities of people are also accessing news and information through social messaging software such as WhatsApp alongside the social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter<sup>2</sup>. Millennials are also more likely than previous generations to use digital devices to access news which gives them the freedom to 'snack' on small but frequent bits of news throughout the day that are integrated with their daily activities<sup>3</sup>. This is particularly concerning during the current crisis as Ofcom research highlights that not only are young people more likely to come across false or misleading information about Covid-19, 58% of 18-24's compared to 33% of those 65+<sup>4</sup>. Those aged 18-24 (52%) were more likely to agree that they are finding it hard to know what's true and what's false compared to those aged 65+ (30%) and are less likely to follow official advice<sup>5</sup>.

3.3 Despite this, there is currently no regulation in place to ensure that the news they consume is accurate. We welcome the Government's proposals which they outlined in the Online Harms White Paper last year for tech companies to take proportionate and proactive measures to help users understand the reliability of the content they receive, to minimise the spread of disinformation and increase the accessibility of trusted sources.

3.4 Indeed, spurred on by a consumer appetite for tailored content, social media has become increasingly influential in how people access news. Yet social media platforms are able to use algorithms to tailor this content for what they believe users would like to see.<sup>6</sup> On sites such as Facebook and Twitter, this content can be based on information such as their interests, location and past-click behaviour or what is 'trending'. This has led to the creation of "filter bubbles" where news feeds use algorithms that direct users to content that echoes and reinforces their own views.

3.5 This contrasts with the UK public service broadcasters which have best in class regulation and set a benchmark in terms of trust and standards. PSBs play a vital role at the heart of British culture – helping to deliver and shape social cohesion, strengthening democracy by creating a public (and transparent) space where national conversations take place and where people are exposed to

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Ofcom, 2020 [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0031/193747/covid-19-news-consumption-week-one-findings.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0031/193747/covid-19-news-consumption-week-one-findings.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018

<sup>3</sup> Source: Newsworks, 2015: [http://www.newsworks.org.uk/Topics-themes/generation\\_news/78136](http://www.newsworks.org.uk/Topics-themes/generation_news/78136)

<sup>4</sup> Source: Ofcom, 2020 [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0031/193747/covid-19-news-consumption-week-one-findings.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0031/193747/covid-19-news-consumption-week-one-findings.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Source: Ofcom, 2020 [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0031/193747/covid-19-news-consumption-week-one-findings.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0031/193747/covid-19-news-consumption-week-one-findings.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Source: John Nicolson Report for Channel 4, 2017

different views and experiences. There is a need for national broadcasters with specific remits to provide trusted, accurate information – this is particularly important during this emergency.

#### Importance of trusted PSB content during the pandemic

- 3.6 In the current context, we believe that the need for reliable and trusted news is more important now than it has been for many decades, and this makes the PSBs more important than ever as trusted sources of news. The UK is a case in point for highlighting the benefits of a sophisticated broadcasting ecology that provides trusted news. The UK system is underpinned by a strong public service broadcasting core comprising a variety of organisations with different models, missions and purposes which serve the British public with a wide range of public service programming – from the publicly owned and publicly funded BBC, through to commercial providers such as ITV and Channel 5.
- 3.7 Two other elements of the UK’s public service broadcasting system underpin its world- renowned status for high-quality and trusted news. Firstly, an independent system of regulation overseen by Ofcom, with strict rules on accuracy and due impartiality and other detailed content standards as set out in Ofcom’s Broadcast Code. As broadcasters are licensed, this means that regulators have real powers to sanction those broadcasters behaving inappropriately – and indeed Ofcom have utilised this power in the past through fines and even the ultimate sanction of removing a licence to broadcast, as was the case with Press TV. Secondly, a clear set of quotas and requirements for the provision of high quality news and current affairs.
- 3.8 Viewers recognise the value of the PSBs’ news services: Channel 4’s long-running audience survey of viewer perceptions of the independence of TV news (reported each year in its Annual Report) shows that, in 2018, the main news programmes on the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky all registered substantial increases in their scores for being independent from the government and from the influence of big businesses. Channel 4 News was the most highly regarded TV news provider across the two metrics: 84% of its regular viewers regarded it as being independent from the government, and 77% of regular viewers agreed that it is independent from the influence of big businesses.
- 3.9 It is therefore not surprising that audiences are relying heavily on broadcast television to keep up to date on the COVID-19 pandemic. Average daily news viewing across broadcast was up by 92% in March 2020 compared to March 2019. According to Ofcom data, 65% of people say they are using UK media organisations more than they were before the outbreak of the virus and traditional broadcasters are the most trusted source of information on the crisis outside of official sources<sup>7</sup>. They found that 83% of people trust coverage on BBC TV and Channel 4 the most, followed by ITV (82%) and Sky (75%). On the other hand, social media and closed messaging groups were the least trusted sources of news about the pandemic (21% and 26% respectively).<sup>8</sup> This sentiment has been underlined by our own in-depth research that we conducted in late March 2020, which showed that there had been an upsurge in trust in TV particularly amongst youth audiences<sup>9</sup>. 82% of the 16-34’s surveyed said they trust TV compared to 63% for newspapers and just 41% for social media, where 64% say they have read or seen fake news about Covid-19. The study also revealed that young people understand TV channels are heavily regulated and must adhere to strict reporting guidelines and they praise TV channels for being well-established mediums, having successfully built a strong reputation for accurate and unbiased news reporting.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Source: Ofcom, 2020 [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0031/193747/covid-19-news-consumption-week-one-findings.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0031/193747/covid-19-news-consumption-week-one-findings.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Source: Ofcom, 2020 [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0031/193747/covid-19-news-consumption-week-one-findings.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0031/193747/covid-19-news-consumption-week-one-findings.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Source: Channel 4, 2020 [https://www.4sales.com/\\_flysystem/s3filesystem/2020-04/The%20Impact%20of%20Covid-19%20in%20the%20UK.pdf](https://www.4sales.com/_flysystem/s3filesystem/2020-04/The%20Impact%20of%20Covid-19%20in%20the%20UK.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Source: Channel 4, 2020 [https://www.4sales.com/\\_flysystem/s3filesystem/2020-04/The%20Impact%20of%20Covid-19%20in%20the%20UK.pdf](https://www.4sales.com/_flysystem/s3filesystem/2020-04/The%20Impact%20of%20Covid-19%20in%20the%20UK.pdf)

#### Channel 4's focus on truth and facts

- 3.10 Channel 4's distinctive public service remit, outlined above, ensures that we are playing our important role in keeping everyone up to date with the latest news and information and providing insight, education and support to help navigate through the crisis. This is exemplified by the 'Stay at Home' digital on-screen graphic – which will be on screen during all our programming, across all our channels – to help deliver the Government's vital public health message<sup>11</sup>. Clearly at this time, Channel 4 can bring mass audiences to the big societal issue affecting people in the UK and provide a safe, trusted space for a diverse range of perspectives to engage, challenge and debate in a common forum. Indeed, one of the many virtues of the PSB model is its focus on producing content that engages mass audiences on particular UK issues in a way that global content providers cannot.
- 3.11 Within this Channel 4 News takes a different approach to news coverage than other broadcasters and is known for its risk-taking, high-impact, agenda-setting journalism. Channel 4 News has been helping our audience - particularly young, BAME and hard to reach viewers - navigate through these challenging times. Channel 4 News has been broadcasting nightly reporting on the crisis, including regularly extended programmes, with the show reaching record audiences – particularly young viewers where viewing is up 44% across the year, and over 200 million views of Channel 4 News content on social media. In March alone, Channel 4 News reached 14.7m people (equating to just over 24% of the UK population), which is 66% higher than the 8.9m that watched Channel 4 News in March last year. Furthermore Channel 4 News is also reaching almost one million more 16-34s in comparison to last year.
- 3.12 In order to address disinformation directly, Channel 4 News' Coronavirus FactCheck - which has its own website<sup>12</sup> and a presence on social media<sup>13</sup> - has been addressing the key COVID-19 questions that the British public need the answer to. The website answers popular questions e.g.; when a vaccine will be ready, whether we'll have enough ventilators and whether chloroquine is a miracle treatment needed. Instead of amplifying misinformation about miracle-cures or WhatsApp rumours, FactCheck hones in on the most important policy decisions and announcements. Therefore, in order to be most effective FactCheck's focus is on explaining the science and the statistics<sup>14</sup> if these are being misunderstood or point out inconsistencies in official advice<sup>15</sup>. As a result, our FactCheck website has had over 1,015,000 page visitors looking for verified, reliable information in the six weeks of March and April page and Channel 4 News' videos on COVID-19 has had 141 million viewers on YouTube since the pandemic began.
- 3.13 The crisis has also highlighted Channel 4's unique ability to adapt quickly to the agenda of the day outside of our news coverage. We have commissioned a series of documentaries on different aspects of COVID-19 looking at issues in the UK including the NHS, supermarket supplies and home cleanliness.
- 3.14 The nine COVID-19-related documentaries we've shown so far have reached 9.9 million people (which equates to 16.3% of the UK). These documentaries have also reached 1.5 million 16-34s (10.3% of all 16-34s in the UK), and 1.3m BAME viewers (15.3% of all BAME people in the UK). Notably, we aired a Dispatches special "How To Isolate Yourself", a no-nonsense guide full of tips and advice on how to

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<sup>11</sup> This graphic has reached a potential audience of 42m people (69% of whole UK population, 58% of 16-34s and 55% of BAME viewers), seeing the message on average seven times.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck>

<sup>13</sup> [FactCheck Twitter](#); [FactCheck YouTube](#); [FactCheck Facebook](#)

<sup>14</sup> Source: Channel 4 News Factcheck, 2020 <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-caution-advised-on-covid-19-death-toll>; <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-chloroquine-death-shows-why-people-should-not-self-medicate>

<sup>15</sup> Source: Channel 4 News Factcheck, 2020 <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-scottish-government-shelves-confusing-advice-on-social-distancing>; <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-uk-health-minister-contradicts-who-on-testing>

self-isolate successfully. We have since recorded more than 20 million views for the four clips posted across social platforms talking about the importance of social distancing. Channel 4 also hosted a one-off special debate “Can Science Beat the Virus” with only experts on the panel as they provided scientific answers to the most difficult questions about the crisis. Furthermore, we have more titles in the pipeline including special access documentaries following the human stories of those on the frontline.

#### Bringing the Nation together

- 3.15 In addition to providing authoritative information to combat online harms and disinformation about the pandemic, Channel 4 recognises our responsibility to bring the nation together through our wider output. In a crisis, it is important to have a sense of shared national solidarity, and we want to help bring this about through our Lockdown Academy content which includes art with Grayson Perry, crafts with Kirstie Allsopp and cooking with Jamie Oliver. Additionally, the Steph Show which launched in March live from her home in Yorkshire has covered items such as what support people can get from Government schemes, suggested exercise routines to do at home as well as shout outs to ‘everyday heroes’ working through the crisis such as NHS workers.
- 3.16 Channel 4 has been supporting the wider public health community’s work to keep people safe including our #StayAtHome campaign. Here, Channel 4 are living up to our legacy of disruptive branding with a new ‘we need your buttocks’<sup>16</sup> 20-second advert by our in house agency 4Creative which debuted during an episode of "Gogglebox." Aimed at young male viewers, one of the most likely demographics to disobey the lockdown, the advert accompanied by a series of 10-second clips starring news broadcaster Jon Snow ironing his ties, comedian Katherine Ryan apparently painting a self-portrait, news presenter Krishnan Guru-Murthy sharpening pencils and comic actor Big Narstie mowing the lawn.
- 3.17 Furthermore, Channel 4 has also put marketing support behind the #ClapForCarers initiative including running marketing trails, social content, continuity announcements and a special creative break happening with a number of brands taking part in the clap and showing their support for the NHS alongside C4. We have now updated with a new rainbow ident on Thursdays, and newly recorded continuity pieces with staff of St George’s Hospital in Tooting (home to 24 Hours in A&E) to play all day.

#### **4. Areas to address**

- 4.1 Television is one of the most regulated mediums in the world, and this regulation has been put in place precisely because of the influential role TV plays in shaping opinions. Channel 4 believes that this regulation is entirely appropriate, has been carefully considered and is evidence based. It ensures that British Television offers a gold standard and a safe environment for audiences to access trusted content, clearly evidenced with the COVID-19 crisis. However, the same cannot be said for the online world where legislation has failed to keep pace as digital online platforms have grown rapidly, unchecked, despite their increasing importance and influence in our everyday lives. This is coupled with platforms failing to take responsibility even where there is evidence of clear societal harm.
- 4.2 Channel 4 believes that policymakers should take a multi-pronged approach to addressing these issues:
- 4.2.1 Policymakers should consider what options it has available to strengthen areas of the UK’s creative industries which can serve to offer trusted information and counteract disinformation. This includes safeguarding and modernising the policy framework that supports public service broadcasting and consumer access to it. In particular we urge Government to strengthen the PSB prominence regime in line with the recommendations

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<sup>16</sup> We Need your buttocks campaign [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b\\_35NA5d49I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_35NA5d49I)

from Ofcom in July 2019. We will provide further details on these issues as part of our response to the Committee's inquiry into the future of public service broadcasting.

- 4.2.2 We are supportive of the Government's ambitions to establish a new independent regulator for internet platforms aimed at providing greater protection for citizens. We believe independent statutory regulation of this kind is vital in seeking to address some of the harmful content that has proliferated on these platforms in recent years.
  - 4.2.3 We also believe it is vital that there are clear and strong sanctions for internet companies that breach the rules, akin with the sanctions faced by broadcasters, which could ultimately lose their licence to broadcast if Ofcom finds them to be in consistent breach of the Broadcasting Code. Regulatory fines cannot just be an easily-absorbed "cost of doing business", as they are often treated by the largest new tech companies.
  - 4.2.4 We welcome the current review into digital advertising from the Competition and Markets Authority<sup>17</sup> which we believe will play a crucial role in identifying the impact global players have on competition. This dominance of Facebook and Google is stifling competition. It inhibits the ability of smaller online platforms to grow and the ability of content providers to suitably monetise their content when it is carried by the digital giants. Television advertisers are competing at an inherent disadvantage to online advertisers due to the regulatory imbalance between the two sectors. This is allowing bad practice and unscrupulous behaviour to take place and is putting consumers and advertisers at risk.
  - 4.2.5 We also welcome the forthcoming DCMS review of online advertising which will explore similar issues, including this regulatory discrepancy. We believe that fundamental regulatory reform of the digital advertising market is needed to facilitate competition and adequately protect consumers.
- 4.3 Channel 4 therefore urges the Government to push forward this agenda to ensure that public service content can continue to play a vital democratic role by ensuring it is discoverable as digital technology changes. We believe the COVID-19 Pandemic has demonstrated more than ever the need for a strong public service broadcasting sector to offer trusted information and to fact-check disinformation. We look forward to working with the Sub Committee on this in the future.

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<sup>17</sup> Source: <https://www.gov.uk/cma-cases/online-platforms-and-digital-advertising-market-study>