Written evidence submitted by Amit Bhagwat

Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS Sectors

Introduction

I have made a study of evidence sought and submitted by select committees and have also provided critique to this process in the past that has resulted in a few improvements. Historically, many select committees seek evidence from individuals and institutions that have direct career/reputational interest in particular enquiries. Such evidence, while often not deliberately misleading, can be a bit one-sided/narrow. As such it can be difficult to reflect on wider public interest using information gained from interested parties only. To reduce decisions based on narrow information, select committees need to be circumspect in how they solicit information for their enquiries, and individuals & institutions that do not have narrow vested interest and can look at an issue combining understanding and regard for wider public interest should offer their time to such enquiries. As this committee has created possibility of such input into this enquiry, I am motivated to assist in the best public interest.

Even as I do not currently make a living out of any institutions/fields associated with DCMS, I should note that I bring a professional, learned and educational background across the rather fuzzy term "digital", and by extension also aspects of "media", to be able to make informed, if disinterested, statements. I have also made myself useful to enquiries of the Science and Technology Select Committee that has historically looked into ICT-Data-Digital and Electronics-Telecommunication matters. I have similarly been involved in response from learned and professional bodies to other enquiries, also playing a part in the Government Data Sharing Review. As for the other fields, I have enjoyed amateur recognition, often at national level, across a number of activities that make up culture and sports, including creative recognition in several fields of visual and performing arts, and work across several languages, though have never regarded them my profession. I can therefore claim good informed interest in these fields, coupled with high degree of independence. As editor/chair of editorial boards of professional learned content available worldwide and well versed in the authorship and editorial processes, I can also claim appreciation of the Media world, besides bringing a deeper understanding of the content management platforms.

Most importantly perhaps, I bring a significant board background in public service causes. Typically these are voluntary roles, e.g. trusteeships (and chairing boards of trustees), discharged in wider public interest. My cumulative background of such work currently stands in excess of 3 decades. While I have supported a wide range of public service causes, my greatest contribution has been in causes serving those left behind through narrow establishment thinking creating unnecessary and easily avoidable disadvantages, and causes associated with wellbeing. My board work has, in turn, resulted in my assistance being sought in reviews of governance and major change programmes, and so I hold a large body of analysis into systemic issues facing good governance of public service institutions and key barriers to their progress. As it happens, I also routinely end up being the board lead/champion for Inclusion-Diversity and Community Engagement, and evangelise on effective and safe use of information & communication, supported by resilient scalable technology to improve intelligence, engagement and reach of institutions. I am therefore also aware that too many of our public service institutions are regressive when it comes to these attributes and many are set to be ineffectual through a lack of a genuine diversity of ideas and viewpoints on their governing bodies. All too often public service institutions that form part of "the establishment" appoint quite narrow profiles – either as revolving-door appointments from similar establishment roles, or people who otherwise bring quite narrow profile – either in old established protectionist professions like accountancy and law or making living in very specific fields associated with the institutions, thereby possessing knowledge in the field but rarely an independent public service standpoint. Even words like "diversity" are very narrowly understood, if at all understood, and the focus appears to be on what I call "cosmetic diversity", rather than a genuine breadth and diversity of skills, positions and viewpoints. Appointments to public bodies are among the worst in this respect and DCMS is perhaps the worst among the government departments where independent assessments of public interest-

reach-accountability-value never appear to feature in direct patronage by the department (though the Arts Council is beginning to have some regard for this in its portfolio, if not necessarily on its governing structures).

In guidance on submitting input to such enquiries we are encouraged to be concise, and in anticipation that there will be significant evidence forthcoming from individuals who run specific institutions, I am going to try to complement such evidence by providing the select committee with a sense of the public perception of CMS, historical usage of CMS facilities, serious inclusion issues faced, and even engineered in the way the sector has been run, many problems Covid-19 has brought forth that are more severe than they need to be because of the rather narrow approach of the establishment to the sector, and a manner in which the sector could be supported where it does not look to re-emerge maintaining those disadvantages but address those disadvantages with clear plan and timescale (I suggest before end of this parliament) where CMS becomes far more participatory at the local level and what is considered the best in CMS has both breadth and ability to reach all, irrespective of audiences' abilities – to travel, to pay, etc. Genuine Digital Inclusion is going to underpin such equitable access to the best in CMS.

The Image of DCMS

Historically, "serious" government departments have existed for Health (though focussed more on 'illnesses' than 'Wellbeing'), Education (though focussed more on 'doses of knowledge' than 'critical faculties', 'thoughtfulness', 'wisdom', 'inter-disciplinary breadth', etc), Science-technology-business (though focussed more on interest of specific sectors than on maximising their long-term value to the society). It may be argued that if Health, Education, Science-technology-business were comprehensive enough then they would cover all things that make up Digital, Culture, Media and Sports. So the reason that CMS has existed as a separate department needs to be examined. The image of CMS as a separate department has tended to be "extra-curricular", "non-essential" and "self-proclaimed elitist" (without necessarily being good – think of how many towels with a dab in the middle are being exhibited as great art. Even select committee meeting rooms have had such lazy displays on their walls - not created by toddlers from a local nursery but bought at great public expense, presumably to communicate how cultured the establishment is). CMS, and culture in particular, have thus acquired the grim and undeserved reputation in the wider public of what people with "more money than sense" spend their money and time on, or at least something that not many people need, or something that may be abstracted to indulgence of the "upwardly mobile middle classes" and a way for them to get a toehold into the establishment. Perhaps this was indeed how culture was perceived – certainly going back to Roman conquest of Britain, and reinforced through succession of alien aristocracy who needed to show their blue blood by behaving peculiarly, at odds with common sense. The image of elitist culture, famously caricatured by the sitcom brothers Frasier and Niles Crane is sadly too near the truth, certainly when it comes to perception of how the establishment sees it. So, cultural activities remain more about sporting black ties and finest hats, knowing which wine goes with which cheese, and cultivating links with the people who could do one a bit of good in climbing the establishment greasy pole, than about enjoying the art and perhaps paying the greatest homage to the masters by being inspired to create something better than the old masters did, building on knowledge and facilities modern world offers that old masters did not have.

To be sure, there have been developments. For example, in the 2000s, many national centres of culture – certainly many museums and art galleries – dispensed with admission fees. The advantages of this though were far from uniformly enjoyed. Keeping quite aside the consideration about why the national Science Museum has been under the patronage of DCMS – the department of extra-curricular activities, and why many local museums associated with Science and Technology are funded through the Arts Council, let's examine if these institutions provided equitable access. The simple answer is that they did not. To begin with the main Science Museum premises are located in the "Royal Borough" in West-Central London, with highest property cost anywhere in Britain. So almost the only people who can visit the Science Museum (as also the other two nearby museums or the Albert Hall for that matter) through a quick walk, are people who least need to worry about whether they can afford to visit the museum. It may be argued that the location of the museum is historic, and indeed its foundation reflected the relatively progressive attitude, for his time, attributed to Prince Albert of Saxe, Coburg and Gotha. This though is a feeble and retrograde argument for maintaining the current form and location of Science Museum. Even before Covid-19, the Science

Museum was a place not quite designed for 21st century crowds, but rather for appropriately-dressed gentlemen of discernment of the Victorian era. Even as the Science Museum group has, for better or worse, been given management of several, but not all, national museums related to science and technology, and while many of these exist away from central London, none is as comprehensive in its coverage as the Kensington Science Museum and few are easily accessible to people from beyond key cities. When it can cost in excess of ~£300, and rising, for a peak time standard class return ticket from North England to London, not to mention half a day's travel, for the privilege to join a long line of visitors to Science Museum in Kensington, the free admission makes the visit free for few from beyond London and continues to perpetuate discrimination – based not only on financial ability but also on availability of travel time and other considerations – such as the unfriendly nature of travel facilities for the disabled/less-able, many of whom may not even care to be registered disabled.

And yet, ~75 years, or 3 generations, on from establishment of a modern welfare state, this was still how DCMS perceived discharging its responsibility. The London establishment patted itself on the back because the Science Museum was free to enter for anyone who was already in central London and the footfall was quite good. There wasn't the slightest regard for whether old edifices like these were appropriate for handling 21st century crowds with due regard to accessibility and public health. People routinely transmitted common cold, or worse, while visiting science museum and routinely took time off sick. Those with the worst of "underlying health conditions" routinely suffered the most, and regularly died. Yet until Covid-19 raised the severity level and the museum had to be shut down, DCMS did not care about the infection hotspots that many national facilities it sponsored were.

Nor did DCMS care about the geographical, accessibility and digital divides widening in the society as the rail tickets and bandwidth variability kept rising. For over five years now, I have engaged with a wide range of national museums, including speaking to their directors and also offering my services, typically in volunteer capacity, in modernising their policies, processes and reach, whether as a trustee, or in "less glamourous" roles. To be fair to the directors of our national museums, they are not all Neanderthals/luddites, though many, having progressed much of their career in the pre-digital world are more likely to be old-fashioned. The issue though is not whether they are open to digitisation of their assets (and a few DCMS-sponsored institutions, like the National Portrait Gallery, have done a decent job, though arguably portraits are perhaps the easiest to digitise) but rather what are the key influencing factors in the strategic direction of the museum/institution. This is where it is the out-of-date nature of DCMS, the powers within the Westminster village, and their chums appointed to board of many public bodies creating too much groupthink and little original thought, have done the most to disserve the society. DCMS routinely judges success of museums by "footfall", followed by high-profile, one-off, in-person activities. There is little co-ordinated cross-institution effort towards reaching the wider society, indeed the wider world, through robust scalable adoption (many platforms already exist) of mature virtual reality platforms. There is no incentive for institutions to invest in digitising existing offering, in recording routine events for long-term remote learning/enjoyment, in creating new "designed for digital" content, and doing this to the highest quality to give an experience better than physical visit, and not as a half-baked fad. It is often stated that watching a performance on one's smartphone with teeny noise leaking from its speakers is not the best way to watch the finest dramatic and musical events. While the statement is accurate as it stands, "virtual watching" does not need to be this bad. It is possible to record performing art with high quality, multi-device, multi-location recording. It is possible to digitally compensate for the peculiar sound an empty auditorium produces, it is possible to establish high standards for virtual reality, standards that are high enough to create experience no worse than physical reality, but are low enough to be met by a mid-range mobile device with decent quality VR headset. What is true of dramas and musical performances is even truer of Museums and Galleries, where there is far greater scope for augmented reality and creating content that a physical present simply would not be able to produce/deliver. It is possible not only to be inside the Mallard without visiting the National Rail Museum in York, but even possible for ordinary people to drive it and even engineer a better engine, all in cyberspace, without having to leave their town, and eventually perhaps even their house.

The so-collectively-called culture sector, including the science museum, is facing great uncertainty. The mediocre approach would be to simply dig deeper, building a heap of national debt, and hoping that one day the sector will

return to its pre-Covid-19 state, with all the inequalities and deceit around inclusion that it has always had. The sensible, progressive, forward-looking thing will be to invest in the sector in a way where it gradually digitises and becomes truly inclusive. There may still be the blind who will have very limited use of the VR headset, though working parallelly on individualised touch-tablet technology can begin to take the blind people where they have never been before and include them more in enjoyment of a busy national museum as they never could before. My recommendation to the committee on its cultural patronage would be to fund the sector in a way where it will transition to a state where, towards end of this parliament, should another pandemic close down physical locations of these national facilities, that would not make the slightest difference to their enjoyment by ordinary people.

Such transition will need to be gradual and will need to look into how many of the jobs currently associated with these facilities are actually about the core purpose and how many are more generic jobs currently performed in these premises. I certainly do not grudge visitors to our museums a decent meal nor the caterers and servers a decent living, but catering, whether in or outside the museum, is "hospitality" rather than "museum" and even as I would be happy for museums to have eateries and would look for wellbeing and, if necessary, properly supported transition for all in the hospitality sector, I would not regard hospitality as core purpose of the museum. Similarly, other museum staff, if they have an informed interest in subject of the museum, will have a role, both in the near future when museums are expected to be less crowded, even empty, increasing staff availability for content development & digitisation, and going forward when hopefully, museums will be expected to be involved in continuing research and production of high quality content for public consumption. If, on the other hand, there are museum staff members, who are essentially playing the role of a disinterested security person, then it would not worry me if they took another security position outside the museums sector, even as I would like them to be supported through any transition that becomes necessary due to changing nature of the museum. In turn, I would like the many additional artefacts that museums hold in their vaults to become more available to the world, unconstrained by limitations of a Victorian building, and I would like museums to become better at conducting and sharing wider research work, including well-coordinated "citizen science" work, across wider humanity. Once an artefact is thoroughly digitised, using tools from different scientific disciplines, liberating the learning and research potential of the artefact, it will even be possible to consider returning such artefacts to the many foreign lands from where they were often taken through less than scrupulous methods, at least where the lands today represent stable states able to make good public use of those artefacts. Those states may, in turn, loan us other such artefacts for learning and research, enriching capability of our learned institutions and our contribution to humanity.

Participatory Nature of CMS and Local CMS Facilities

Apart from the "national treasures" supported by DCMS, there are many local institutions that DCMS directly or indirectly supports, and that certainly fall within the purview of current definition of DCMS. I have, for example, enjoyed access to good performing art at local centres, even as I have also contributed freely to such art. I have similarly come across local facilities that create safe, sensible, happy cooks out of us all, or that help build physical and mental exercise into our everyday routine. These facilities too are uneven, both in their physical and financial accessibility. My recommendation to DCMS and its patronage bodies (such as the Arts Council) will be to look after viability of such facilities – which often offer far greater wider public access and far greater value for public money, in both culture and sports. There though will need to be clear minimum standards for physical and financial accessibility and level of active participation. A number of simple approaches – such as a pay-what-you-decide/afford system, rigorous accounting of physical and mental wellbeing value, and yes, digitisation of these offerings so they will be available in the long term and virtually, will be among key considerations, as will be physical accessibility and support. Here, it is important to carefully understand the role and value of CMS in enriching simple lives, informing, educating, entertaining, alleviating boredom, and keeping populations away from depression, addiction, organised crime, etc. If "health" were to include "wellbeing", no doubt there will be case for prescribing such services to many who need them badly, though it will be important to remember that just below the few who have been known to agencies – because their illness has reached a clinical level or because they have been involved in a recorded crime – there are many who are on the verge. It is the local participatory facilities for CMS that are keeping this population from spiralling into worse crisis – maintaining prevention that is so much better than cure –

and it is important that such facilities maintain the highest possible level of physical, virtual and financial accessibility for all. Our bicyclist covering a set distance a fraction of second quicker than his German counterpart may represent a triumph for his tenacity and for ingenuity of those who designed his bike, but if we have many more people with "underlying health conditions" than Germany, then gold medal of our elite cyclist is of limited value. It is rather in level of health of the population as a whole, in turn lowering our carbon footprint and creating healthier environment and physique, that true merit of investment in CMS lies.

…and finally the D word – true Digital Inclusion

Most of what I have noted so far is underpinned by our digital ability – ability of individuals, ability of instruments they have and ability of the underpinning infrastructure. The individuals are getting up to speed fast though there is a case for continuing to target training and support to those who are left behind. The instruments are becoming ubiquitous and quality has reached a point where, as I have noted earlier, currently available virtual and augmented reality technologies, coupled with a mid-range smartphone and accompanying VR accessories, can create, with the right data bandwidth, experience at least as good as the real experience, and often far better and far more personalised experience than the physical world can offer. The key bottleneck though lies with the underpinning infrastructure – is the bandwidth adequate, is the bandwidth consistent and is the bandwidth affordable. Sadly, the answers to these are in the negative for a very large cross section of the society. Even as more and more among the "settled middle classes" are contemplating access to 'fibre-optic broadband', there are too many of us who do not own homes or are certain of being at a locality for long enough to subscribe to a wired/fibred connection. Too many of us live in decrepit Victorian (and earlier) buildings not designed for wireless communication and the communication nodes available to such users need to increase, unless there is a fast housing modernisation programme that can be completed before end of this parliament. Even in core city regions, the users are too many, relative to the infrastructure available, for the infrastructure to remain resilient and guarantee a minimum maintained bandwidth. In turn, the protocols of online meetings are all too often rooted in the old physical world, intensifying the inequalities. Very often there is no value in "showing one's face" in a virtual meeting, especially when all attending the meeting have adequate corrected/assisted hearing. Yet too many virtual meetings are being conducted "showing faces", wasting bandwidth, discriminating against those without steady bandwidth, and perpetuating old stereotypes – where a man has got to wear the suit and tie and the woman apply full make up when these things have no bearing, and indeed had never had any bearing, to their contribution to the meeting.

These have been among the worst aspects of digital divide exposed by the Covid-19 crisis. Before last year's election one of the two parties offered free broadband to all paid through a small levy on online trade. It was a time to be divisive and to sneer at opponent's manifesto and the party that is now in government for very different reason – because it focussed on promising to end the parliamentary fiasco since the 2016 referendum – is no longer contemplating fighting an election this year. The C word has long displaced the B word in public consciousness and the politics of the 2019 election may have little relevance by 2021. In the Covid-19 world, the government would be wise to work to redeem pledge of the other party - of broadband for all free at the point of delivery and so meeting the person's need regardless of ability to pay. I have nothing against HS2 in an ideal world with bottomless funds, though HS2 was never going to "level the field" by getting there half an hour early, still costing a lot and taking more time travelling than the locals. The only solution that will level the field will be "zero cost and time of travel" or, in other words, "broadband – with minimum sustained guaranteed bandwidth – for all, free at the point of delivery and so meeting the person's need regardless of ability to pay". As this is built, it is also worth examining how relevant other aspects of ways of working are taking away old world practices that add no value, can be discriminatory and actually waste time and resources, perhaps beginning with how the parliament is run. I do not live in the Outer Hebrides. I can however tell this committee with confidence that the public is not interested in whether an MP travels from the remotest corner of Britain to London physically each week and, at the moment, when parts of Britain like Highlands and the Western Isles, Dorset and other Western Counties, Ceredigion, Rutland, and even places like Calderdale – located near geographic centre of Britain but out of the way of passers-by, have far lower prevalence of Covid-19 than most of the rest of Britain, the public would prefer that MPs from locations less infected from Covid-19 than Westminster should not travel to Westminster, passing through many other highly affected

localities and taking the virus back to their constituents, so long as the MPs can do their job well from their constituency. This is opportunity for the parliament to show its leadership in how this can be done well and set precedence for others. Naturally the Parliamentary Digital Service will need to be of much higher calibre and processes of appointments to key roles associated with parliamentary modernisation will need to follow far higher standards in the appointments processes and get greater freedom and authority in carrying through the modernisation work, if it is not to be a stopgap embarrassingly amateurish solution that is not even as good as physically meeting in an old crammed dangerous edifice like the Palace of Westminster that was never design even for 20th century democracy, let alone 21st century digital democracy.

Conclusion

To summarise,

- The greatest value DCMS can deliver is in
    - Creating the world's best Information, Education and Entertainment for the whole of Britain (and perhaps the wider world) unencumbered by the audience's ability to pay or travel or use specific old buildings
    - Creating equitable opportunities in all localities across Britain for participatory activities that can inform, educate, entertain and keep physically & mentally healthy; alleviating boredom and keeping populations away from depression, addiction, organised crime and many "underlying health conditions"
- Digital capability underpins DCMS's ability to deliver this value equitably. Such capability includes ability of
    - Individuals
    - Instruments
    - Underpinning Infrastructure
- The underpinning infrastructure currently forms the greatest impediment. We need bandwidth that is
    - Adequate
    - Sustained
    - Available to all irrespective of their domestic situation and financial means
- With the right digital ability, it is possible to ensure virtual experience that is at least as informing, educating, entertaining and healthy as physical experience, and usually achieve far more
- With other departments like Health, Education, Business-Science-Technology perceived to be doing the "serious" bits, DCMS has acquired rather poor reputation as an optional extra that has been perpetuating old world iniquitous practices through its patronage, rooted in inequality, even caprice, and practices that add no value to the informing, educating, entertaining and health-promoting mission of DCMS. DCMS can change this by
    - being clear about its purpose and values,
    - focussing its patronage on activities that deliver on this purpose and values, including what is expected out of national and local facilities and how this is measured
    - appointing to boards of its funded bodies through transparent rational processes where there is clarity on why specific background is sought, how it is going to be judged and why it is perceived to help the institution discharge its public responsibilities aligned to purpose and values of DCMS
- This is a good time for the parliament to create exemplars of how all services, including key democratic functions, can be equitable, through mature use of the digital paradigm, rather than going back to old iniquitous ways

In the interest of concision, I am deliberately leaving out a number of aspects of wider DCMS remit, among them the inadequate performance of Ofcom in anticipating sharp practices many providers of phone and data services indulge in and can be expected to indulge in if solely focussed on maximising short-term revenue. I would be happy to address these and many other issues through further evidence, though underlying systemic weaknesses in most bodies under DCMS's purview, as also many other bodies sponsored by many other departments are not dissimilar

to the weaknesses I have highlighted about how objects and expectations of these bodies are set, how these bodies are governed, and the poverty of breadth and diversity of ideas within the Westminster establishment.